

## BET AM SHALOM GUIDE TO MOURNING AND COMFORTING

Members of Bet Am Shalom, like members of any vibrant religious community, provide each other with both ritual structure and, even more important, practical and emotional support when a family member dies. This convenient guide summarizes our practices and the options available to our members, which many find helpful to consider in advance, when not under the pressures of the moment.

You will note our frequent references to “recommended” traditional practices. As Reconstructionists, we often take a functional approach to ritual, asking ourselves how a particular practice may enrich our spiritual lives even though, from our modern theological perspective, we question the assumptions upon which it was originally based. Generally speaking (although there are exceptions), in the area of death and mourning many of us find that traditional practices function quite well, and our Rabbi and congregation recommend them. That said, we also appreciate that, in a liberal congregation, our members are in various places along the ritual spectrum. We respect the value of personal autonomy and choice, particularly in dealing with such intensely personal decisions.

### A. Purchasing Graves

Graves can be purchased quickly upon a death, but many of us prefer to provide for this in advance.

Some prefer to make their own arrangements, particularly if family members have already been buried in a particular cemetery.

BAS members may also purchase individual or group plots through the Synagogue. The congregation owns a few remaining graves at Sharon Gardens in Valhalla and many more at Rose Hills Memorial Park, Putnam Valley, New York. Contact the office if you wish to purchase graves through BAS. Payment must be made before burial.

### B. The Basic Services BAS provides:

There are two distinct situations to which we typically need to respond: (1) where the *deceased* was a member of BAS at the time of death; and (2) where, although the deceased was not a member, a spouse, child, sibling, or, God forbid, parent (the “traditional mourners”) is a member.

For a deceased member, BAS provides a rabbi for a funeral conducted in the New York metropolitan area. Usually, Rabbi Bronstein will perform the funeral, but he has a network of covering rabbis for scheduling conflicts that cannot be resolved (*e.g.*, if he is on vacation or a family matter at a distance from New York). There is no separate charge for this service, but at your discretion, you are encouraged to give a contribution to the Rabbi’s Good Works Fund or the BAS General Fund.

If the deceased was not a member of BAS, but one of the “traditional mourners” is a member, then although BAS is not obligated to provide rabbinic supervision of the funeral, the Rabbi tries to be available to perform it or to recommend a covering rabbi for scheduling conflicts that cannot be resolved. In that event, there is a modest charge for Rabbi Bronstein, currently \$250

(please make your check payable to “Rabbi Lester Bronstein”). When scheduling does not permit Rabbi Bronstein to perform the funeral, a covering Rabbi can be provided, for whom there is a standard \$500 charge (payable directly to him or her). And, of course, a voluntary donation to the Rabbi’s Good Works Fund or the BAS general fund is also encouraged.

If either the deceased was or a traditional mourner is a member, then BAS provides post-funeral assistance, including prayer books, shiva chairs and services leaders, for shivas conducted in the area (generally, Westchester County or immediately adjacent areas, where it is practical for our members to tend to the mourners).

### **C. When there is a Death**

The first thing to do when there is a death is to call the office at (914) 946-8851. BAS will put you in contact with the Rabbi.

If you think you will want the Rabbi to officiate or participate, call *before* you make funeral arrangements to avoid scheduling problems.

If the death occurs at a time when the office is closed, follow the instructions on the synagogue voice mail for reaching the Rabbi, President, or Executive Director directly.

If you own a BAS grave plot, tell that to the office, since BAS will have to authorize the cemetery to open the grave.

The Rabbi will promptly meet with you. He will talk with you about the basic rituals and choices (many of which are summarized below). Topics to be discussed with the Rabbi will include:

1. When and where will the funeral service be?
2. Where will the burial be?
3. When and where will shiva be held?
4. Who would like to speak at the funeral? If the Rabbi is performing the funeral, he will talk with you about the eulogy.
5. How and where will the body be attended to in the interim?

The Rabbi will give you a book from the Synagogue entitled *Prayers for a House of Mourning*, published by the Reconstructionist Movement. This is an excellent resource. It contains not only the home prayers but numerous helpful guides and essays.

Unless you prefer otherwise, a notice will go out by email to the membership. This notice will advise the whole congregation of the death, the date, time and place of the funeral and the dates, times and places of shiva.

Once that notice goes out, you will also be contacted by a congregant who is on duty as a volunteer “shiva captain” for the month. The shiva captain is responsible for arranging, in

accordance with your particular needs, leaders for evening services and the delivery to your home of prayerbooks, yarmulkes and up to four low mourners' chairs. Your discussion of these issues with the Rabbi should help you have a clearer picture of what you will require, so you can let the shiva captain know.

## **D. The Funeral and Shiva**

As discussed at the outset, the Rabbi and BAS *encourage* most traditional observances. We all recognize, however, that this is not the time to pressure mourners to “ramp up” their observance. We are very sensitive to that issue. Nevertheless, many of us have found these practices to be quite comforting, even if they are unfamiliar.

### **1. Attention to the body before the funeral.**

Perhaps the practice least familiar to many of us is the way in which the body of the deceased is cared for before the burial, that is, with very loving and devoted attention and great respect for the body.

First, the body is traditionally not left alone at any time prior to burial. “*Shomrim*” (literally “guards”) remain with the body, in a meditative and prayerful manner, at all times between death and burial.

Family members and friends can volunteer to be *shomrim*, in shifts, and the Rabbi can help you arrange this. BAS congregants who are close to the family may also be willing to serve. BAS does not institutionally provide *shomrim*.

Second, the body is prepared for burial through “*tahara*” (purity): a traditional preparation for burial, involving a ritual washing and dressing the body in shrouds. (Jewish funeral practices do not include embalming.) BAS does not institutionally provide *tahara*, but the Rabbi strongly encourages this and recommends using a funeral home that provides it or that accommodates this service by a local *Chevra Kadisha* (burial society). The shroud (“*tachrichin*”) creates a sense of social and economic equality at the time of death. Shrouding is part and parcel of the traditional *tahara* procedure.

A funeral home is needed for keeping the body until the funeral. Several of the local funeral homes provide *tahara* and *shomrim*. The Rabbi or the office can recommend a funeral home.

### **2. Choosing a casket.**

You will purchase a casket through the funeral home. The Rabbi strongly recommends following the tradition of obtaining a very simple casket, the “plain pine box” or something similar to it. This is consistent with longstanding custom designed to avoid distinguishing the affluent from the needy, and also minimizes what can be very exorbitant charges.

### **3. Preparing the home**

The Rabbi strongly encourages that the home be prepared in the traditional manner. This is normally done by friends and family.

Traditionally, a pitcher of water and basin is left outside the front door to allow those who were at the cemetery to wash their hands ritually before entering the shiva home. Reconstructionists think of this not so much as removing taint but as drawing a line of demarcation between death and life.

Also, mirrors are generally covered (or at least those in common areas), as a sign that this is an inward time, not focused on outward appearance.

Typically, the special mourners' chairs are set up together, flanked by a semicircle of visitors' chairs. This arrangement can encourage visitors to gather around the mourners and offer comfort, rather than to socialize among themselves.

A light, dairy "meal of consolation" for those who will return from the cemetery to the shiva house, is normally set out by friends and family. Simplicity here is best. In unusual circumstances, where there are no friends or family to prepare a meal for those immediately returning from a local funeral, a BAS committee can arrange for it. If at all possible, the family should then make a contribution to the Synagogue to defray the cost of this meal.

As will be discussed below, this is *only* time to be concerned about meals for *visitors*. Except on the day of the funeral itself, food and meals should be brought only for the mourners and their family, so that they can attend to their healing. It is a common misconception that it is necessary, or even appropriate, to lay out spreads of food for shiva visitors later in the week.

#### **4. Preparing oneself physically**

At the funeral, a small part of the mourner's garment is torn or he or she wears a separate ribbon that is torn. The torn garment/ribbon is worn through shiva.

Traditionally, mourners do not wear leather shoes or fully bathe, especially in hot water, and men customarily do not shave during shiva. Such activities were viewed as connoting pleasurable, out-of-the-ordinary luxury. In our times, however, where these activities have become commonplace and have lost that connotation, many will follow this custom more in spirit than in its particulars – for example, by washing for hygiene but avoiding long, luxurious bathing. Mourners do not engage in sexual relations during shiva.

While shiva continues during Shabbat, the outward manifestations of mourning, such as wearing a torn garment, are suspended in deference to the spirit of the day.

#### **5. The Funeral Service**

Prior to the availability of refrigeration, burials were conducted very quickly, even on the day of the death. While tradition accommodates a reasonable period to prepare for the funeral and allow for family members and friends to arrive, Jewish funerals are generally conducted within a very few days of death. A funeral may be conducted on any date except Shabbat or holidays. The funeral is conducted during daylight hours.

The funeral home is a common place for conducting the funeral. The Synagogue may be available, but because the notice is short there may be scheduling conflicts. There is no charge

for the use of the Synagogue building if the deceased was a member. There is a \$350 charge for the use of any room if the deceased was not a member but one of the traditional mourners is a member. (The Synagogue is not available for rent by outsiders for this purpose, and the Rabbi will typically not perform funerals where neither the deceased nor a mourner is a member.)

A graveside service is also an option, particularly if there is a reason to be pressed for time or attendance is expected to be small. A graveside service is in lieu of a funeral chapel or synagogue service.

There is considerable flexibility as to the content of the funeral service. The traditional psalms and prayers are quite brief. The Rabbi will work with you to make the service appropriate and personal. Family members and friends are encouraged to deliver eulogies. The Rabbi will speak if the family wishes, and in any case will offer a brief Torah lesson in honor of the deceased. The service concludes with the chanting of the beautiful memorial prayer, *El Malei Rachamim* (God of Compassion).

The casket is kept closed at Jewish funerals.

Following the funeral service, the deceased is escorted by friends and family to the gravesite. This mitzvah of *halvayat ha-met* (escorting the deceased) is considered a great act of *chesed* (kindness).

The escorting begins by a procession of cars to the cemetery. Upon arrival, the casket is escorted slowly and reverentially, with seven traditional stops for psalms, demonstrating reluctance to part from the deceased. (These stops are not performed on Rosh Chodesh, Chanukah, the intermediate days of Passover and Sukkot, or in the month of Nisan.) *El Malei Rachamim* is chanted again.

It is traditional for the participants personally to cover the casket with earth, to provide this personally to the deceased. We do not subcontract out this intimate, deeply personal final act of kindness.

Following the burial, the mourners recited Mourner's Kaddish for the first of many times over the next several months (see below).

The burial ends with the mourners and their close family members passing through two lines of families and friends, who recite "May you be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

## **6. Shiva**

Shiva, named for the seven days following the burial, is traditionally conceived of as a way to allow the mourners a period to remain together at home before transitioning back to their usual activities. So that they do not need to venture out, even the community's regular worship services, normally conducted in synagogue, are brought to them, where they recite Mourner's Kaddish. "Sitting shiva" refers to the custom of sitting lower than the visitors as a sign of mourning, on benches or chairs designed for this.

Traditionally, shiva has been held at the deceased's home. Today, it is frequently held at the home of a mourner.

As described above, friends and family are encouraged to prepare the house for shiva.

The Synagogue has an assigned member acting as a "shiva captain" for each month. The shiva captain will contact you. He or she will arrange with you certain parts of the shiva. He or she will arrange to deliver to the shiva house (and retrieve at the end of shiva), prayerbooks for services, low chairs for up to four mourners, yarmulkes (*kippot*; skullcaps), and a candle holder for the shiva candle. The candle is usually provided by the funeral home. It traditionally burns in the shiva house during the entire shiva.

The shiva captain will arrange leaders for each evening service conducted during a shiva in the area (*i.e.* within reasonable driving distance of the Synagogue, usually Westchester and immediately adjacent areas). Evening services are usually at 7:30 pm. (earlier or later on Saturday evenings, depending on the time of year). If the mourners or family members know how to lead the services, they are encouraged to do so. We do not provide leaders or *minyanim* for morning and afternoon services except by special arrangement.

The traditional seven-day period of shiva is not really as long as it sounds. The first and last days both count, even though the observance on those days is abbreviated. The intervening Shabbat also counts, although the actual sitting and receiving guests is suspended from Friday afternoon until Saturday night. There are actually five evening services. The Rabbi strongly encourages observance for the traditional "seven" days, or at least a bare minimum of three days (which really means two evenings).

The most common question asked is "How do I feed all those guests"? The best answer is that you do not. The function of visiting mourners is to provide comfort, not to become guests. Because it is so deeply ingrained in our culture to provide food and drink to visitors in our homes – and in more-than-ample quantity – there is a common misconception that this is appropriate in a shiva house, at least so long as friends are "helping" and the mourner is not personally attending to the preparations. Actually, though, the traditional custom is to provide meals *only for the mourners*, so that they don't have to attend to that themselves. Indeed, tradition discourages visitors from eating and drinking *at all* in a shiva house. Thus, the laying out of spreads for visitors is quite unnecessary, a modern distortion that tends to create a festive atmosphere unsuitable for shiva. While it will likely be difficult to be a purist about this, "less is more." By putting out just light snacks in small quantities at a time, you may be able to maintain the desired, muted atmosphere for the shiva.

When paying a shiva call, one should remember the purpose of the visit: to offer support and comfort to the mourners, rather than to socialize. Before bringing food, you might check with the family members to see what *they* will need for the week. Since the purpose is not feed the *guests*, we recommend against bringing cakes and other baked products.

Visitors should be encouraged to gather around the mourners in the part of the house that has been arranged for that purpose (see D.3 above). It is traditional to let the mourners take the lead as to the tenor and tone of the conversation. Of course, fond reminiscences about the deceased

are most appropriate. The focus should be on the deceased and the mourners. Visitors should be careful not to exhaust the mourners with unduly lengthy stays.

The last day of shiva is short. After sitting for a couple of hours, it is customary to take a walk to mark the transition out of shiva, traditionally understood as “walking the soul” of the deceased out into the world, but also as a way of indicating our willingness to walk *ourselves* back into the routines of life.

### **E. Saying Kaddish**

Starting at the burial, mourners attending a service in the presence of a minyan (quorum of ten) stand and lead the congregation in the well-known Kaddish prayer in honor of their departed loved ones. This continues for thirty days, except in the case of the death of a parent, in which case it continues for eleven months.

Kaddish is an ancient Aramaic prayer in which a leader summons the assembled to call for God’s “great name to be blessed forever and ever.” It was not written for funerals or mourners, and it makes no reference to death. It serves many different liturgical functions in a Jewish service. In the Middle Ages, the custom developed for one version of the prayer, the Mourner’s Kaddish, to be set aside at the end of a service to be led by those in mourning. Jews in Europe, like their Catholic neighbors, had notions of purgatory in those days, and the idea was for the mourner to summon praises of God to assist the deceased, who was in the process of being judged for eternity. While most Reconstructionists do not share this theological perspective, the ritual recitation of Kaddish has proved to be a meaningful way to honor loved ones and good “therapy” for mourners.

Many will follow the practice of making special effort to be in a minyan three times a day (the regular Jewish prayer cycle) for the whole prescribed period. BAS does not conduct three services a day. We hold regular Sabbath services on Friday nights and Saturday mornings, and we have a morning minyan on Sundays. Daily services are available at other synagogues in White Plains, including an egalitarian service at our neighboring Temple Israel Center, where our members are graciously welcomed. Some may find services near their workplaces but, unfortunately, regular daily egalitarian services are not abundant. Others will attend a service at least once a week, and some will simply rise for and recite the Kaddish when, in the normal course, they are present in the Synagogue.

### **F. Beyond Shiva: Returning to Normal Life**

Once shiva ends, Jewish tradition provides for mourners gradually to resume their normal activities while remaining mindful and respectful of the experience of loss.

After shiva and until thirty days from the burial (*shloshim*), while one returns to work and begins to resume regular activities, it is customary to avoid festive settings, dancing and dance music. Many will avoid haircuts, and some men will avoid shaving unless it is felt necessary to do so for business reasons. It is typical not to take an *aliyah* in synagogue during *shloshim*.

In the case of the death of a parent, after the thirty days and until a year from the burial, most normal activities are resumed, but it remains customary to avoid public dancing and open rejoicing. Life resumes, but in a somewhat muted form.

Following the one year period, mourners are expected to fully resume their regular activities. Jewish tradition discourages the impulse to “sign on” for continued restrictions as a sign of yet greater love and devotion. However, many find that the traditional “stages” of mourning practice correspond roughly to their emotional readiness at different stages to return to normal activities.

### **G. The unveiling**

At approximately a year from the burial (although traditions greatly vary), it is customary to have a graveside ceremony in which the headstone of the deceased is “unveiled.” Close friends and family gather for this ceremony. This is an excellent way to “turn the page” around the time of the completion of the mourning process.

The family should contact the cemetery in advance to arrange the placement of a veil which can be removed.

There are no formal requirements for this service. There are just a couple of traditional Hebrew readings, which the Rabbi will provide at your request, and a final Kaddish. Thus, there is ample room for modern readings, reflections, and sharing of memories. The Rabbi generally does not perform unveilings but will meet with members to help plan a ceremony.

### **H. Observing *Yahrzeits***

It is customary to commemorate the anniversary (on the Jewish calendar) of the death of a loved one. If you give the date of death to the BAS office, you will receive an annual reminder of the equivalent date on the secular calendar.

It is customary to receive an *aliyah* at the Synagogue on the Shabbat following the anniversary of the death (or thereabouts if it is not possible precisely on that Shabbat). If you would like to do that, contact members Debbie Weiner or Joel Crystal, who will reserve a spot for you. As you approach the first anniversary, you will receive a letter from the Rabbi and Synagogue President inviting you to arrange for an aliyah if you would like to do so.

It is also customary to light a *Yahrzeit* candle for the deceased the evening before the anniversary of the death on the Hebrew calendar. The *Yahrzeit* candle, which can be purchased at most grocery stores, will burn for the entire twenty-four hour period.

*Yahrzeit* candles are also lit for loved ones four other times each year: immediately before Yom Kippur and immediately before the last day of Sukkot, Pesach and Shavuot. On those same four days each year, synagogue services include the well-known *Yizkor* (memorial) service.



## **I. Finally**

Rabbi Bronstein is available to discuss with you any questions you may have about the practices and recommendations discussed in this guide. On behalf of the congregation, the Ritual Committee notes that supporting each other during the sad and difficult days following a death in the family is one of the most important and precious *mitzvot* we perform for each other, emblematic of the importance and value of being part of the Bet Am Shalom community.

Bet Am Shalom Synagogue

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