

Summary of Jewish Mourning Customs

By Rabbi Barry Leff

Jerusalem, Israel

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Jewish mourning goes in stages: Aninut (before burial), Shiva (the week after burial), Shloshim (the month after burial), Yud Bet Chodesh (the year after death, only for those mourning for parents).

You mourn for your immediate relatives: parents, children, spouse, brothers or sisters (including half brothers or sisters). You may choose to observe some mourning rituals for others (for example a grandparent) although it is not obligatory.

Aninut: the mourner is exempt from performing most mitzvot because it is assumed he/she is engaged in the mitzvah of burying his/her dead. For example, even though traditionally Jews recite the Shema twice a day, the person in the stage of aninut is exempt from this mitzvah.

Shiva: you observe shiva for any of your immediate relatives. The Shiva period extends seven days from the day of burial. Shiva customs include:

a candle that burns for 7 days is lit

sit low as a symbol of "being brought low" in grief.

no "luxurious" bathing or cutting hair. These are signs of vanity.

remove leather shoes and wear cloth slippers or sandals.

covering mirrors for the same reason as not bathing.

sexual relations are forbidden.

mourners should not transact business.

mourners may clean and cook for themselves.

wherever possible morning and evening services should be held in the home.

There is no mourning on the Sabbath (from Friday afternoon until Saturday night after dark) or Festivals. These days are still counted as part of the seven days of Shiva.

If a mourner's livelihood is at risk if he or she is away for the full seven days, three days of Shiva may be observed.

The arrival of any Festival annuls the remainder of Shiva no matter how minimal a period of mourning was observed. If a burial took place in the midst of a Festival, since Shiva is not permitted, it begins after the festival.

Shiva ends on the morning of the seventh day. The candle is blown out in silence. The mourners take a walk around the block, as a way of taking a first step back into the world. There are those who suggest that the soul of the deceased abides with the mourners. The soul is there to comfort the family. This first walk is for the mourners to escort the soul out of the house, indicating that they are going to be all right.

Shloshim: The second period of mourning is less intense. Shloshim means "thirty". This period continues until 30 days after the burial. The mourners return to their "normal" routine and activities. It is customary to attend services every day to recite Kaddish. During Shloshim mourners should not go to casual parties, especially if there will be music and entertainment. It is permissible for mourners to attend a "mitzvah celebration," for example a bris or a bar mitzvah. Mourners may attend a wedding, but should avoid going to the reception afterwards. Unless there are extenuating circumstances, a mourner should not get married during the Shloshim period.

Some follow the custom of not visiting the grave until after Sheloshim, others after the Shiva period.

Yud Bet Chodesh (12 months): Acknowledging the special status of one's parents ("Honor your father and mother is one of the Ten Commandments), the mourning rituals of Shloshim are extended for a year (counted from the day of death, not burial) for one's parents. Kaddish, however, is only recited for 11 months minus one day from the date of burial.

Unveiling: it is customary to have the unveiling of the monument after a year.

Yahrtzeit: The Yahrtzeit is observed on the anniversary of the day of death. A Yahrzeit candle is lit on the eve of the date in the home, symbolic of the soul and spirit of the deceased. It burns for 24 hours.

It is customary for mourners to attend synagogue beginning with the evening Ma'ariv the night before, followed by the morning service and concluding with the Mincha afternoon service. Here the Kaddish is recited. One may attend services on the closest Shabbat before the anniversary date, to receive an Aliyah to the Torah (the El Maley Rachamim, the special memorial prayer, may be recited at this time), or other honor.

Tzedakah, "charity" is appropriate to be given in memory of the deceased.

If one forgets to observe the Yahrzeit, it should be observed when remembered.

We also remember our loved ones at the Yizkor memorial service held on Yom Kippur, at the end of Sukkot, Passover and Shavuot. Communal and individual prayers of memory are read. The central prayer begins with Yizkor Elohim, "May God remember" the souls of the deceased.

A note on Kaddish:

Our tradition teaches that saying Kaddish is a benefit for both the person saying it, and for the deceased. It is a sign of honor for the deceased.

Everyone who has lost an immediate family member recites Kaddish during Shloshim, and should try to attend a synagogue every day to say Kaddish.

Traditionally, sons are obligated to say Kaddish for 11 months for their parents. I consider daughters to be equally obligated for 11 months.

If there is no child willing or able to say Kaddish for 11 months, another relative (or a friend) can take on the obligation. There should be at least one person saying Kaddish for the full 11 months. While it is preferable for the same person to say it for 11 months, splitting the 11 months up is better than not having someone say it at all.

The practice of paying someone, a non-family member, to say Kaddish is strongly discouraged as not being very meaningful.

Kaddish should be recited every day—ideally three times a day, at Shacharit, Mincha, and Ma'ariv. In the event you are unable to attend services on a particular day, it is possible to study a chapter of Tanakh or Mishnah in honor of the deceased instead, although this is not really a substitute for saying Kaddish. Part of the “point” of Kaddish is to get the mourner out of the house and into a house of prayer, into the community.