

# What to Do When Death Occurs

## What to Do Immediately

It is traditional for all those present to recite *Baruch Dayan Ha-Emet* (Praised is the True Judge) immediately upon death (or, if not present, upon learning of the death).

Primary mourners (son, daughter, brother, sister, father, mother, and spouse) also perform *kri'ah* ("tearing" of a piece of clothing), though it is common practice today for this to be done instead immediately before the funeral or burial.

In addition, any of those present may assist with these steps:

- Close the eyes and mouth of the deceased and straighten the limbs.
- Cover the deceased with a sheet.
- Open the windows in the room where the deceased is lying. (If weather is an issue, open a window, then close it as needed.)
- Place a lighted candle near the head of the deceased.
- Cover the mirrors in the room where the deceased is lying (if the death takes place at home).

Before the body is picked up (usually by the funeral home), take time to say goodbye to the deceased, as much time as you need. Don't let yourself be rushed.

The deceased should not be left unattended, so right after death, one begins *shmirah* ("guarding" or accompanying of the body) immediately.

## Whom to Call

If you have made pre-need arrangements, you will likely have a handy list of phone numbers for final arrangements.

In any case, here is a simple list of steps to be taken:

- If the family is affiliated with a synagogue, contact the rabbi. Ask if there is a preferred way to contact the funeral home.
- If the family is unaffiliated, contact a local funeral home that works with the Jewish community.
- If a traditional burial is desired, contact (or have the rabbi or funeral home contact) the appropriate synagogue or community *Chevrah Kadisha*, the sacred burial team who prepares the body for burial.

- Contact the important family members of the deceased to inform them of the death. As appropriate, let them know that arrangements are still being determined and that you will keep them informed.

The funeral home will likely make arrangements for the body of the deceased to be picked up.

*Note:* If this is not a natural death (such as a violent death), or if the deceased is an organ or tissue donor, the pattern may differ in some respects.

## The Role of the Rabbi or Synagogue

The rabbi or synagogue representative can help in many ways. They know whom to contact to take care of what needs attention, such as contacting the funeral home that is most appropriate; contacting the *Chevrah Kadisha* (team who prepares the body for burial); notifying the caring committee of the community to help the family; assisting with arrangements for burial and the funeral service and transportation of the body as needed; providing *shiva* candles; making *shiva minyan* arrangements; and other things that help the family at this vulnerable time. The rabbi can also help counsel the family in a number of ways, including but not limited to helping them understand Jewish mourning practices, providing emotional support and guidance, and offering spiritual leadership.

## Candles in the House of Mourning

A seven-day candle is often provided by the funeral home, in memory of the deceased, to be kept burning for the seven-day period of *shiva*. The candle flame is the symbol of the human soul. One candle is sufficient for the household.

## Covering the Mirrors

It has been a time-honored tradition to cover the mirrors in the *shiva* home from the moment of death to the end of *shiva*. While the custom is of uncertain origin, its practice is appropriate to the pattern of *aveilut* (the mourning period following burial).

The mirror is the means of enhancing the appearance. When we are in mourning, our focus is not on how we look, but rather, our feelings and remembering the deceased. Hence, we cover mirrors to support this time of reflection.

## Friends and Family

Friends and family who are not primary mourners can support those mourners in a number of ways. First and foremost is by just being there, silently, lovingly present. In addition, the following two topics are of interest here, namely, the meal of condolence (*se'udat havra'ah*), and

how one should greet and interact with mourners during this sensitive time. For more on how one participates in this sensitive time, see [When Death Visits a Jewish Home](#), by Rabbi Mel Glazer, and [Nihum Aveilim](#), by Rabbi Stuart Kelman and Dan Fendel.

## The Meal of Condolence

The meal of condolence, the first full meal that the mourners eat upon returning from the interment, is traditionally provided by the community and friends of the bereaved. This beautiful custom supports the mourners and facilitates interaction with the community.