

# **WHAT DO I DO NOW?**

What To Do When There Is A Death In The Family

*prepared by Rabbi Andrew Jacobs for the members of Ramat Shalom  
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## PART 1: Things We All Should Do Right Now

1. Prepare a Living Will. Make certain it is legally binding (best to check with an attorney). Share it with your loved ones and your doctors. I highly recommend “Five Wishes” which you can learn more about at [www.agingwithdignity.org/five-wishes.php](http://www.agingwithdignity.org/five-wishes.php). I have extra copies in my office.
2. Insure that your Last Will and Testament is up to date. If you do not have one, now is the time to have one prepared. It is best to contact an attorney to do this.
3. Make certain that you have an appropriate amount of life insurance. Contact a life insurance agent that you trust.
4. Let key family members know where you keep important documents and share relevant passwords and security information with them.
5. Make burial arrangements. In addition to the fact that the funeral industry charges significantly more money for a burial that is planned *after* a person has died, planning a burial *before* a person dies is much easier emotionally. The last thing you will want to do after losing a loved one is begin purchasing funeral plots, etc. Get this out of the way now. The idea of going out and purchasing cemetery plots while everybody is alive and well is not something that anyone wants to do...but, it will benefit those who are left behind in the future. It is an incredible “gift” to leave your children. Please note: *Ramat Shalom has our own sections at Menorah Gardens in Southwest Ranches. Ramat Shalom members receive a significant discount when making pre-arrangements and purchasing plots through the synagogue. If you would like to learn more about this, are interested in working with another funeral home/cemetery or would like to discuss other options, please contact me directly.* Oftentimes, people choose to be buried out of the area. In these cases, a local funeral home can still help you make arrangements, including transporting the body.

## PART 2: Things To Do When You Visit The Funeral Home

1. Make sure that you are comfortable with the funeral home and the people who you are working with. This is an incredibly important relationship. Do not compromise.
2. Select a plot/s. When you do so, think about how many plots you will need. In addition to a spouse, will other family members want to be buried at this location? Talk about this openly with your loved ones. If you do purchase additional plots, make sure you understand the cemetery's policy when it comes to your right to sell the plots if they go unused. Ask to see a few plots and pick the one/s you like the most. If you purchase more than one plot, you will need to determine who goes where. I suggest that spouses pick plots based upon what side of the bed they sleep on. As for the placement of other family members, it is best to discuss this sooner rather than later.

*Mausoleums: While this is not considered a "traditional" Jewish burial, many Jewish cemeteries do offer this option. While I prefer traditional burial in the earth, I will officiate at a mausoleum funeral. Obviously, mausoleum funerals do not involve burial, although we still sprinkle soil from Israel on the coffin. Some choose to watch the casket placed into the wall. If you choose to do so, I will stay with you.*

*Cremation: Even though this option is not at all "Jewish", many Jewish funeral homes offer cremation services. While I do officiate at funerals where the deceased has chosen to be cremated, I do discourage people from choosing this option as it is not a process that respects the sanctity of the body. In addition to this, in the post-Holocaust era in which we live, choosing to be cremated does not honor the memory of those who did not have this choice. If you do insist upon cremation, I urge you to still purchase a burial plot as those left behind will need a place to visit.*

3. Do yourself and your pocketbook a favor: stick to traditional Jewish funeral practices. Keep it simple. A simple, pine casket is completely appropriate and what our tradition calls for. Mausoleum burials will require metal coffins.
4. In most cases, you will not want to embalm the body. It is to be allowed to return to the earth naturally. Mausoleum burials usually require embalming. In addition, if the body needs to be flown to its place of burial, embalming is often required.
5. Consider *Tahara* and a *Shomer* – these are two beautiful rituals that are often overlooked in the liberal Jewish world. *Tahara* is the ritual washing of the body that is performed lovingly by a *Chevrah Kaddisha*, a burial society, made up of individuals trained to respectfully prepare the body for burial. *Tahara* includes dressing the body in simple, traditional burial shrouds (which include the deceased's tallit). It is truly an incredible ritual that provides tremendous comfort to families who know that their loved one's body is literally in good hands. A *Shomer* is a person who is hired by the family to sit with the body and literally guard it from the moment it is taken from its deathbed until burial. The *Shomer* is another way we express our love and respect for the deceased, insuring that s/he is never alone. Many of our Ramat Shalom families will volunteer to serve as a *Shomer* for your loved one.
6. If you have specific requests regarding the actual burial process, discuss this with the funeral home. As Jews, we symbolically take part in the actual burial by placing soil (including soil from Israel) on the casket. Many like to go beyond the symbolic act and completely bury the deceased. In Florida, this is complicated by the fact that we are required to bury our dead in underground "liners" or "vaults". Many families choose to fill in the vault and watch as the cemetery workers put the lid of the vault in place. Some families continue to fill in the grave after this process is completed. Understand what your options are and tell the funeral home if you want to fill in the grave completely.

7. Talk about the funeral service. Where will it be? A Ramat Shalom member can have his/her funeral service at the synagogue at no cost. Funeral homes usually have a chapel and they can discuss their rental fees with you. The synagogue can be rented as well for \$500. Some choose to simply have a graveside service and forgo the chapel service. This is absolutely acceptable.
8. Before you pre-pay for a rabbi consider the following: *if you are a member of Ramat Shalom, I will officiate at the funeral of a member and a member's immediate family (parent, spouse, sibling, child) at no cost.* In these cases, you should not pre-pay for a rabbi. For the funeral of *extended family and friends*, I do have to charge the standard rabbinic rate established by the Broward County Board of Rabbis. The funeral home will collect this fee directly from you.
9. If the deceased was a member of the military or other special organization, share this information with the funeral home. The military and other organizations attend funeral services of deceased veterans. The funeral home will contact them.
10. Discuss the limousine and car service options the funeral home has for family members of the deceased.
11. Talk about perpetual care.
12. Understand additional costs. Don't be afraid to ask. Please note that in the State of Florida, you will be required by law to purchase a cement liner that protects the coffin.
13. The gravestone can be planned after the funeral takes place.
14. Find out the funeral home's telephone number that is to be called upon death and write it down in a safe place.

## PART 3: Things To Do Before A Loved One Dies

1. Insure that your loved one has prepared a living will. Make sure you know what his/her wishes are and make certain that those who are in charge of your loved one's healthcare know these wishes as well. Research local hospices. If hospice is an option, embrace it! Hospice is incredible.
2. Spend lots of time with your loved one. Try to resolve unfinished business. Express your feelings. Love, kiss, hug them. As things progress, make sure you give them permission to go. Appreciate the fact that even when you think they can't hear you – they can. I am happy to visit your loved ones at any time. Please call me to make these arrangements.
3. Put together lists of people who can help you before and after the death occurs. Talk to the people on these lists and let them know how you will need them to help you. Also, put together a list of people to contact once the death takes place. **Make sure that the funeral home's number is at the top of the list.**
4. Determine the *Shivah* plan. Sitting *Shivah* is an important part of the Jewish mourning process. Traditionally, mourners sit in their homes for 7 days, including the day of the funeral. Some shorten the *Shivah* period to 3 days. I discourage you from making it any shorter. During *Shivah*, mourners are not to cook, clean, work, etc. Others are to take care of you. Extended family and friends visit the home, offer words of comfort, bring food, and help make a *minyan* (a group of 10 people) so that the mourners can say *Kaddish*. Where will *Shivah* be held? For how many days? Who can help you get food for *Shivah*, clean the house, organize things? *For members who pass away or for members who lose an immediate family member (parent, spouse, sibling, child) Ramat Shalom will provide prayer books and service leaders who will lead an evening service where Kaddish will be said.* These leaders include me, the Cantor and congregants who have been trained to lead a *minyan*. The leaders will work very hard to insure that at least 10 people will be present at a service. Ramat Shalom members will come to your home to help with this and support your family. *For members who lose an extended family member or friend, the funeral home can provide you with prayer books.* In all cases, the funeral home will provide you with a *Shivah* candle, which you light when you return home from the funeral. It burns for seven day. Note: we do not "mourn" on Shabbat and certain holidays. Easier said than done. There is not a *minyan* at your home on Shabbat and certain holidays. If you attend a Kabbalat Shabbat service (Friday night) while you are a mourner, it is customary to arrive late (about 20 minutes) so that you avoid the festive singing at the beginning of the service. I will talk to you about this.
5. Consider putting together an obituary. The funeral home will help you get the obituary to the papers when the time comes. Don't forget to determine where people can make donations in your loved one's name. Jews don't usually do flowers.

## PART 4: When Death Comes

### Step One: Call The Funeral Home

Feel whatever it is that you need to feel. Spend time with the body if you are comfortable doing this. Sing or talk to them. Touch, kiss, and hug them. It is okay.

Someone in the house/hospital should be given the job to call the funeral home right after the death takes place.

*Note: When there is a medical emergency, such as a heart attack, stroke, or serious accident, call 911 immediately. **But if a person is dying at home and does not want “heroic measures” at the end of life (such as CPR), you do not need to call 911.** In fact, a call to 911 could cause confusion as many places require EMTs (emergency medical technicians) who respond to 911 calls to perform CPR if someone’s heart has stopped.*

Determine what time the funeral home will be coming to pick up the body. Making this call is a very important job and should be done by someone who can compose themselves for a few crucial minutes. If death occurs in a hospital, you should be permitted to stay with the body until the funeral home arrives.

If I am officiating at the funeral, whoever speaks to the funeral home should make it clear that they should **NOT** set the time of the funeral until they speak directly with me. This insures that my schedule allows me to be there for you. Most of the funeral homes know how to reach me directly.

Out of respect to the body, Judaism does not support the concept of autopsy unless absolutely necessary.

### Step Two: Waiting For The Funeral Home’s Arrival

This is often an emotional time. The more organized you are before the death, the “easier” it will be when the moment arrives. ***Unfortunately, there are times when a death is unexpected. In these cases call upon your closest friends to take over for a bit. I will also help you organize and plan.***

This would be a good time to notify immediate family members and close friends of the death. Pull out that list of immediate family and close friends that you prepared *well before* the death took place. Call the people on that list or give this job to a few people you assigned *before* the death took place.

If your loved did **not** choose *tahara*, make certain that the clothing you want your loved one to wear and any items you want to be put in the coffin are ready for pickup (in a bag) along with the body. If you do not have these items ready, they can be dropped off at a later time. Please make certain that you will not regret placing any sentimental items in the casket. Will you want them later? Will a grandchild want these items later in his/her life? Please ask yourselves these questions *before* the death takes place. Traditionally, one is buried with their talit.

Insure that items you want to keep or items of great value that you want to have placed in the coffin right before the funeral (jewelry, special blanket) are not transported to the funeral home at this time. Hold on to them. They can be placed in the coffin when you arrive at the funeral. It is best to make certain that someone is assigned to bring these special items to the funeral.

Once the body is picked up, rest assured, that it is safe and being taken care of with the utmost respect. For your own comfort and out of respect for your loved one, I do suggest that you follow up with the funeral home a few hours after pickup to confirm that your loved one arrived and is being prepared as you had discussed with them. Also, insure that the items you sent with the body (clothing, etc) arrived and are being used as you wish.

### **Step Three: Calling Ramat Shalom – 954-472-3600**

Once you have called the funeral home and contacted your immediate family and friends, it is time to call the synagogue and let the office know that your loved one has passed away. If death occurs after synagogue business hours (usually anytime after Friday at 4:00PM through Monday morning at 9:00AM), call the synagogue and enter **extension 250** for our emergency contact number that will put you in touch with me.

**If the death is expected and takes place in the middle of the night, you can wait to call the synagogue until the morning.** However, if you do need to speak with me, call the emergency number at any time. If you do speak to me first, someone from the synagogue will check in with you on the next business day.

**If the death is unexpected please call me as soon as you possibly can.**

When you speak with a member of the synagogue office staff, they will want to know the name of your loved one and the time of death so that they can enter this information into our computer system which will send you a reminder every year on your loved one's *yahrtzeit* (anniversary of death).

### **Step Four: Setting The Time Of The Funeral**

When we speak, I will talk to you about funeral times that work for you and your family. I will also speak to the funeral home. Together, we will set the time. This process is usually quite simple. We cannot do any scheduling until the funeral home office is open for business. It is the Jewish custom to bury the dead within 24 hours after death. Most of the time, the funeral homes are able to do just this. I will be your advocate, helping to secure a good time. Some families need a day or two before the funeral so that people can fly in from out of town. This is fine as long as we do not wait too long. Judaism teaches us that waiting for an extended period of time is disrespectful to the deceased. It is also hard on you and your family.

### **Step Five: Setting *Shivah* Dates And Times**

When we speak, I will need to know what your *Shivah* plans will be.

Remember: During *Shivah*, it is the custom that people come to your home to comfort you. Caterers or friends should provide food, set up, and clean up. This is not your responsibility. Synagogue members are available to help you at this time and will be calling to see how they can assist you. **Do not be afraid to ask for help!**

During *Shivah*, some families invite people into their home at any time. Others choose to limit the amount of time that people are encouraged to visit. This is something I will speak to you about and help you decide upon.

Because your house will be, for the most part, empty during the funeral, I will urge you to have someone in the house preparing the *Shivah* food, etc while the funeral is going on. Unfortunately, many burglars like to take advantage of Jewish families while they are away at a funeral. Please note, whoever prepares the *Shivah* house (this should not be you!), should cover mirrors (we do not want to concern ourselves with our own appearance during mourning) and place a bowl and a pitcher of water and towel outside the house (this is the ritual that allows those who attended the funeral to ritually "purify" themselves before entering the *Shivah* house).

Please note that traditionally, certain holidays cut *Shivah* short or affect it in some other way. I will talk to you about this if it is necessary. This is nothing to worry about.

### **Step Six: Donations**

People will want to make a donation in memory of your loved one. When we speak, I will want to know what organization you will want family and friends to support. Remember, flowers are not traditionally a part of Jewish funerals. It is best to pick a charity that was special to your loved one and encourage people to use the money for flowers to make a difference in your loved one's name.

### **Step Seven: Synagogue Announcement**

It is our custom to send out a synagogue-wide email if a congregant dies or if a member of a congregant's immediate family dies – (remember: this includes a parent, spouse, sibling, child). In this announcement we will list your loved one's name, the time and location of the funeral and the Shivah schedule. For your security, we do **not** list the location of the Shivah house. We will instruct people to call the office to receive directions. We would appreciate it if directions could be emailed to [Barbara@ramatshalom.org](mailto:Barbara@ramatshalom.org). *PLEASE NOTE: we can only send out an announcement if we get permission from you. No one can give permission on your behalf.*

In addition to sending out an email, if you give us permission, your loved one's death will be listed in our Shabbat supplement for 30 days and read at services before we say Kaddish together as a community.

### **Step Eight: Delegate**

You need to make sure that there are people to do the following:

1. Arrange for food to be in the house for you and your immediate family to eat for the next several days. Not just snacks, but prepared breakfast, lunch, and dinner foods. Also, I want you to have a lot of bottled water with you on the day of the funeral. The funeral home provides tissues.
2. Arrange for food to be in the house for guests who come to *Shivah*. Have a "guesstimate" of how many people will attend and get food that you will eat. Extras will go in the fridge for next week and in the freezer for the week after. Don't forget paper goods.
3. Stay at home during the funeral to greet caterers, set up house for you and the visitors who will be returning from funeral, be there to keep watch.
4. Clean the house before, during, and after funeral. If you expect a lot of people – this means a lot of mess to clean up. This is not for you to worry about.
5. Call people who need to know about the funeral.
6. Cancel your upcoming appointments.
7. Run errands for you – do not attempt to do simple things. You are not focused. It is not safe.
8. Have your back – who is your support system? Who will be there at any time, for any reason? Who is bold enough to tell those people who unintentionally overstay their welcome to leave your house because you need some downtime? Who can tell someone to go buy more food....You need to know this information and tell these people you are counting on them. Now is not the time to be shy.
9. Take care of your pets.
10. Set aside a private room that is for you, your immediate family and others who make you feel safe. This private room should always have food and drinks. It is a place to escape to if needed. Your house will be a busy place.

### **Step Nine: Work With Me To Prepare The Funeral**

At some point, we will sit and talk, either in person or on the phone, about what you want the funeral to look like. I will have lots of questions for you and you will have lots of things to ask me. I will need to know the names of people you want me to mention. I will need to know the deceased's Hebrew name. And, most importantly, I will need to know what was special and/or challenging about the deceased. I invite as many people as you want to join us as we have this discussion. It is a great opportunity to reminisce and it helps me understand your loss.

If you or anyone else is going to speak at the funeral, let me know and begin preparing your thoughts. You need to speak from the heart and not worry if you will be able to make it through your eulogy. If you can't, I will read your words. You will want to limit the number people who speak at the funeral. I suggest 3-5 speakers. More than this makes the service very long and you do not want a funeral to be longer than 45 minutes.

You will also need to determine if you want to assign important people to serve as pallbearers to carry the casket to the grave. If so, you must let the funeral home know this information.

### **Step Ten: Waiting And Coming To Terms With Your Loss**

After the death of your loved one and before the funeral, you are in a state of limbo. Judaism refers to you as an *onen* – one who is bereaved. You are still focused on insuring that your loved one is given an honorable burial. You are not yet a mourner in that a mourner is expected to focus on his or her own grief. You cannot really do this until the funeral is over. *Please note: if you choose to come to the synagogue before the funeral service takes place, you do not yet say Kaddish. Kaddish is said only after burial takes place.*

## PART 5: Things To Know About The Day Of The Funeral

1. Don't think you know how you will feel today. Just feel what you feel. Put tissues in your pocket and carry a bottle of water.
2. You will be told to arrive early to the funeral so that the funeral director (the person in charge of the entire process) can complete paperwork and payment information. I will meet with you when the funeral director is done with you.
3. Someone will need to identify the body. This is standard practice. Determine who will do this before you arrive. Immediate family members should not do this.
4. Everyone will have the option to see the body if you want to. I do not encourage this but understand that some people will want to. It is at this point that you may put notes or other items in the coffin (Remember: do not put anything in the coffin that you might regret giving up). The coffin will be closed before the guests enter the sanctuary.
5. You have the option of greeting people as they arrive or spending time with your immediate family in private. You should decide what you want to do beforehand and let the funeral director know.
6. About 5 minutes before the funeral service begins, I will gather immediate family and place the *kriyah* ribbon (mourner's ribbon) on your clothing. We will tear it as a sign of mourning and have some quiet time together.
7. The funeral director will bring us all into the sanctuary/chapel where you will find the first row reserved for you and your family. The casket will be in front of you. Tissues will be on the chairs.
8. At the end of the service, pallbearers will be called upon if you selected some and they will escort the coffin out of the sanctuary along with you. I will be right behind you. You will go straight to your car/limo and/or to the gravesite.
9. At the gravesite, the pallbearers will once again be called upon to help with the coffin. Everyone should come immediately to the coffin. Do not stay by your cars. We will walk together to the gravesite. There will be chairs for you to sit on and a tent to give you shade. Please watch your step! The ground is unsteady. Once everyone arrives, the service begins and the coffin is lowered. This can be difficult for some. Hold on to each other.
10. At some point I will present the immediate family with soil from Israel. You will be asked to sprinkle the soil on the coffin – taking part in the burial. I will also ask immediate family members who want to place a shovel full of soil on the coffin to do so at this time. This is an uncomfortable ritual for some, but a tremendous mitzvah. Please watch your step if you choose to do this. We use the shovel backwards as a sign that we really do not want to do this. In addition, we are not in a rush to do this, so we do not hand the shovel to each other. Rather, we leave the shovel in the pile of dirt for the next person.
11. When the coffin is covered by a symbolic blanket of soil, we say the Mourner's *Kaddish* together. You will receive cards containing the *Kaddish* in Hebrew and in transliteration (the Hebrew spelled out in English).
12. After we say the *Kaddish*, the funeral director will ask extended family and friends to create two lines facing each other. You will stand with me and I will have you walk through the two lines. This ritual helps you see the people who have come to support you. Lean on them in the days ahead.
13. Anyone who wants to stay to fill in the grave may do so at the end of the service.
14. Let others take care of you now – go home and begin the *Shivah* process.

## PART 6: After *Shivah*

- On the morning after your last *Shivah* minyan, take a walk around the block with your immediate family. This is a beautiful tradition that allows you to reconnect with your surroundings.
- Our tradition discourages us from returning to the grave until the unveiling which takes place about 11-12 months after the funeral. This tradition helps us focus on life and not death.
- Don't expect to feel "better" once *Shivah* ends. This is just the beginning of the mourning process. *Shloshim* is the next step. *Shloshim*, which means 30, refers to the 30 day period that follows the funeral and, actually includes the *Shivah* period. However, *Shloshim* technically begins on the eighth day after the funeral. During *Shloshim*, we are still in mourning, thus we should not be engaged in overly joyful activities. However, we can leave our homes, return to our jobs and the activities that make up everyday life. Many choose to continue wearing their *kriyah* ribbon until the end of *Shloshim*. After this 30-day period, the mourning period ends for all but children who are obligated to say *Kaddish* for their parents for 11 months. An unveiling of the gravestone usually takes place about a year after a funeral.
- You should be in touch with the funeral home after *Shloshim* to discuss the gravestone.
- Every year, on the anniversary of your loved one's death, you will observe his/her *yarzeit* by coming to the synagogue and saying *Kaddish* for them. You will receive a letter reminding you about the *yarzeit* and informing you that your loved one's name will be read at a specific Friday night service.
- On *Yom Kippur*, during *Sukkot* and *Pesah*, and on *Shavuot*, if you have lost a parent or close relative, you will attend the *Yizkor* service, a powerful service that gives us a chance to remember our loved ones in a meaningful way.