

A Brief Guide for Managing a Death in the Family

Congregation Dor Hadash, Pittsburgh, PA

“Teach us to treasure each day, that we may open our hearts to Your wisdom.”

Psalm 90

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1. INTRODUCTION

This is a guide for those in our Dor Hadash community who are encountering the inevitable, yet often unpredictable event of mortality. Each of us will die and each of us will experience the death of someone who is deeply special to us. The Jewish tradition is rich and sensitive in its response to death, but this does not change the fact that this is a time that is difficult in many ways; one that tends to isolate and confuse us. It is a time when we need the support of a caring community.

This guide does not pretend to cover the enormous territory opened up by such an event. Yet you need to know some simple things and how to begin to proceed through this stressful time.

2. FACING A LIFE LIMITING ILLNESS

When you or someone you love is faced with a life limiting illness, the support of the community can be important. Here are some suggestions:

~ Contact the congregation's **life events chairperson** and inform her/him of your situation and needs. Although all needs may not be reasonably managed by the congregational community, there are many which can. The life events chairperson can contact people in our congregation who may be able to help. Your name or the name of your loved one can be recited during congregational prayers for healing and support (misheberach). You may find that visits from members of the community provide comfort. Practical, emotional, and spiritual support are available. Sometimes you will know clearly what you need. And sometimes you may not be aware of your needs until you have the opportunity to talk in the presence of someone else who cares to be present with you during this time.

~ If death is close, consider asking someone, perhaps a **person in the congregation with whom you feel a spiritually nourishing affinity** to come and be with you. There are prayers of confession (viduy), the recitation of the sh'ma and psalms that may provide comfort as death comes near.

~ Consider **hospice services**. Hospice services can help to relieve pain, provide additional physical support and assistance, and help to coordinate an otherwise potentially chaotic time.

~ Review your arrangements. These may include:

- Living will (who acts on your behalf to make your wishes known)

- Ethical will (what values you want to pass on to those you love)
- Funeral and burial arrangements (refer to the next section)
- Physical / financial legacy (what material possessions / money you wish to pass along after you die)

3. AT THE TIME OF DEATH

When someone whom we love dies, even if we anticipate their death, we are filled with many intense and unpredictable emotions. There are many things which need to be done in a very short period of time. The congregational community is an essential support during this difficult time.

~ Call someone to be with you so that you are not alone. It is a long-standing custom to be present for the dying and those who are caring for someone who is dying, and to continue that presence for the dead and his/her surviving caregiver/family following the death. Ask that person to contact a representative of the congregation who will inform the community of the death so that the tasks ahead can be coordinated and set in motion. A representative of the congregation will meet with you and cover the items in the **checklist**. (see section #6)

Suggested people to contact: (contact one)

- **Life Events Chairperson (412-926-4289)**
- **Lay Cantor**
- **Chevra Kadisha representative**
- **Congregational Manager**
- **Congregational President**

*Funeral Home / Mortuary

If you have not already made arrangements with a mortuary, you will need to do so immediately. The mortuary will take the body of the deceased from the place of death and you will meet with them within the next few hours to complete arrangements. Any mortuary can assist you. Keep in mind that the role of the funeral home is:

- Provide a place for the chevra kadisha to prepare the dead for burial
- Provide transportation for you and the deceased to the cemetery
- Obtain death certificate copies for you and the cemetery
- Provide or coordinate a place for a funeral service
- Assist in composing an obituary for the press
- Obtain a coffin and shrouds for the deceased
- Contact the chevra kadisha who will prepare the dead for burial
- Contact and coordinate with the cemetery for burial

As you meet with the mortuary staff you will discuss the items below. Although any mortuary can provide you with services, some are more familiar with Jewish practice. Those funeral homes in the Pittsburgh area most familiar with Jewish funeral and burial customs are:

- Daniel D'Alessandro, 4522 Butler Street, 412- 682-6500
- Ralph Schugar, 5509 Center Avenue, 412-621-8282
- William Slater, 1650 Greentree Rd, 412-563-2800

*Chevra Kadisha

The Chevra Kadisha is a group of volunteers who prepare the dead for burial. Although the mortuary may charge a fee for this service, no member of this "holy society" receives any money. They remain anonymous. Their task consists of respectfully washing the body, ritually purifying the body with water and prayer (tahara), maintaining total respect through silence and modesty, dressing the deceased in simple white shrouds (tachrihim), and gently placing the body in a simple wooden coffin. It is also a custom that the body of the deceased (meit/meitah) be attended (sh'mirah) respectfully from the time of death until the time of the funeral. Congregation Dor Hadash recommends use of **The New Community Chevra Kadisha of Greater Pittsburgh**. This chevra is composed of a pluralistic group of dedicated Jewish volunteers from Pittsburgh's Conservative, Orthodox, Reform, Reconstructionist, and unaffiliated communities most similar in orientation to our own community. (Note: Certain cemeteries in the Pittsburgh area require that tahara be performed for burial in their plots. Some of the cemeteries owned and operated by orthodox congregations may require that a chevra kadisha under the authority of the orthodox rabbinate prepare the deceased for burial in their cemeteries. A member of the New Community Chevra Kadisha or sometimes the funeral home can assist you in this regard.)

*Coffin

The coffin (aron) in which the dead is buried is to be simple. A plain pine box is in no way disrespectful of the high stature of any member of the community. "We come from dust and to dust we return". The coffin should have no metal parts so that it can return to the earth along with the body of the deceased.

*Cemetery

Congregation Dor Hadash has its own section within the Star of David area which is located itself within the Homewood Cemetery. Plots may be purchased by contacting the congregational **Life Events Chairperson**. (Note: The cost of a cemetery plot does not include the purchase of a concrete burial liner which is required by most cemeteries, nor the cost of opening a grave. These costs are separate items to be negotiated with the cemetery.)

There are a number of cemeteries in the Pittsburgh area available for Jewish burial. There are also some options beginning to evolve for “green burial” about which more information will be available in the future.

*A Note on Cremation

Disposition of our Jewish dead by burning is not considered normative practice. There are many evolving and sometimes conflicting opinions concerning the practice of cremation which has become more popular in recent years. Although cremation is discouraged, our caring community is committed to providing comfort to the bereaved.

*Funeral

The funeral consists of psalms, a eulogy summarizing the life of the deceased, and the recitation of *El Maley Rachamim*. The funeral service can be augmented by reflections on the life of the deceased by family and / or friends or readings of certain passages which resonate with the life of the dead person. The funeral service can take place completely at the graveside or it can take place in the mortuary or at the synagogue followed by the burial at the cemetery during which further prayers, psalms, or readings take place. The burial also includes the placing of earth into the grave after the coffin has been lowered into the grave. The *Mourners' Kaddish* is recited by the family after which they are escorted to their car to be taken home. (See the section to follow on shiva.)

You will need to determine the following:

- Who you want to lead the funeral service.
- If you want the funeral to take place in the mortuary, at the synagogue, or completely at the graveside.
- Who you want to act as pall bearers (minimum of six needed)
- Jewish tradition does not incline towards cosmetically preparing the dead for display. There is no “formal viewing” of the deceased. In certain circumstances, however, it may be important for some family to look at the face of the deceased one last time before the funeral commences. The person leading the funeral or the mortuary staff will assist with this if requested. Be aware that the body will have been prepared ritually and will appear very different than when the person was alive. Traditionally there will be a covering over the face with earth from the land of Israel placed over the eyes as well as shards of pottery to close the eyes of the deceased. This can be a very emotional experience for the mourners.

*Meal of Comfort

After leaving the cemetery the focus shifts from respectfully burying the dead to comforting the mourners. Extended family, friends, and neighbors will be in the best position to assure that you have some food to eat as you return home after the burial. It has been customary for members of the congregation to also bring some food and drink to the home following the burial and during the shiva period. It is also a custom

to wash one's hands outside the house before coming in after the burial. The mortuary will provide you with a memorial candle which is lit upon arriving home. This candle will burn throughout the seven days of intense mourning following the death of your loved one. This time and the next several days to come are a time during which you are not expected to play a hostess or host role to those who come to comfort you. You should be free at this time to allow yourself to fully engage with your feelings of loss and accept the comfort of your community as they provide assistance to you.

*Shiva

During the time of bereavement following the burial, the family is comforted by having prayer services provided in the home. Although some families may choose to have services morning and evening for seven days (with the exception of Shabbat and/or Yom Tov), the usual practice of our community is to have evening services from one to seven days following the burial. The congregation can assist in arranging for service leaders, prayer books, visitors, and some food during this time.

4. WHEN A DEATH TAKES PLACE IN ANOTHER CITY

When a loved one dies in another city, the funeral and burial may take place outside the community of Dor Hadash. When the mourners return to Pittsburgh arrangements can be made for shiva services for the remainder of the immediate mourning period.

5. WHEN THE PERSON WHO DIES IS NOT JEWISH

Our diverse community can present challenges to those who experience the death of a person whom they loved. Although in most cases the deceased will be buried in the tradition of her/his faith community, Congregation Dor Hadash is committed to providing comfort and support to all the bereaved in our community. Attendance at a local funeral, assistance with a meal of comfort, shiva services, and in some cases the funeral and burial (if the non-Jewish deceased was a member of Congregation Dor Hadash) can be arranged.

6. CHECKLIST

- Funeral Home
- Chevra Kadisha
- Coffin
- Cemetery (including liner and opening costs)
- Death Certificates

- [] Funeral (including leader, pall bearers, eulogy, chapel / synagogue /
Graveside)
- [] Shiva (including leaders, number of days, times)

7. Resources / Bibliography

- ~ Kavod v'Nichum (Honor and Comfort) www.jewish-funerals.org
- ~ Five Wishes (living will) call 1-888-5-WISHES for copies
- ~ Handbook For Mortals, Lynn & Harrold, Oxford University Press
- ~ Kol Haneshamah: Prayers for a House of Mourning and a Guide to
Mourning Practices, Reconstructionist Press
- ~ Treasure Each Day: A Guide to Jewish Rituals of Death and Mourning, the
Chevra Kadisha of the Columbia Jewish Congregation, Howard County,
Maryland
- ~ When Death Visits a Jewish Home: 99 Actions for Mourners, Rabbi Mel
Glazer
- ~ The New Community Chevra Kadisha of Greater Pittsburgh 412-422-9078
Or 412-422-8044 or email NewCommunityCK@verizon.net

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