

WHEN DEATH HAPPENS

This pamphlet was written by RSNS members, with assistance from our clergy. Being familiar with Jewish rituals and observances will help you during this difficult time. The following pages outline ancient and recent practices. Our clergy will help you decide which steps meet the needs of your family.

The RSNS community is committed to supporting you. Our clergy: Rabbi Lee Rabbi Friedlander, Rabbi Jodie Siff, Cantor Eric Schulmiller and Sylvia Jacobs, Executive Director encourage you to turn to them for support and guidance. You may want to ask the clergy to contact the RSNS Mutual Support Committee or you may choose to contact committee members directly.

AT THE TIME OF DEATH

If the death occurs at home or in an assisted living facility, call the doctor to pronounce death. If death occurs at a nursing facility, the administration will contact the doctor in charge. If the death occurs at home and the patient has hospice services, call the hospice and they will assist you with this process. If you wish to make an organ donation notify the doctor immediately. Organ donation is considered a mitzvah.

1. Call the synagogue office at 516-627-6274.

Speak with Sylvia Jacobs, the Executive Director of RSNS. She will contact the clergy who will then call you. Sylvia will guide you through the steps of making funeral arrangements and you are encouraged to turn to her for support and guidance in the selection of a funeral director, location for the funeral service and burial. If the office is closed a message will tell you who to call.

2. A member of our clergy will contact you and arrange an immediate meeting.

3. Arrange for a burial plot. (Many members purchase graves early in their membership) RSNS has plots available at its grounds at the New Montefiore Cemetery in Pine Lawn, NY.

4. Select a funeral director.

Sylvia and the clergy can provide names and phone numbers of chapels.

5. Talk with the funeral director either in person or on the phone.

The RSNS clergy, Executive Director and funeral director help mourners make decisions.

The funeral director arranges to pick up the body and to bring it to the funeral chapel. The chapel prepares the body for burial. If the service is not held at the chapel, the funeral director arranges to transport the coffin to the funeral service and to the burial site. Death certificates are purchased from the funeral chapel.

The funeral director will ask you which of the follow traditions you wish to follow. You may want to discuss this with our clergy before you make a decision. Traditional Jewish funeral rituals include *tahara* (a respectful washing of the body, the dressing of the body in a shroud and sometimes *tallit*), and *shmira* (arranging for *shomrim* to watch over the body at the funeral home at all times). A *tahara* group recites prayers to honor the body that held the spirit in life. Jewish tradition does not permit embalming and the public display of the body.

According to Jewish tradition the coffin is a simple one, made of wood without nails or decoration.

You may also be asked if you want to place an order for a grave stone. There is no need to do so at the time of the burial.

6. With assistance from the clergy select a date, time and location for the funeral service.

Traditionally burial takes place within 24 hours to three days after death. The service may be delayed to accommodate family members and close friends who live far away. Funerals can take place anytime except on Shabbat and Jewish holidays. The period from death until burial is known as *aninut* and traditionally during this time the mourner's only obligation is to make funeral arrangements. Close friends and other family members may visit to offer comfort.

The funeral service may be held at our synagogue, at the funeral chapel or at graveside. The clergy will help you determine which location best meets your needs.

7. Notification That a Death Occurred

You and your family may want to place a notice in a newspaper to let others know a death occurred and to inform them of the place, date and time of the funeral. The funeral director can assist you with this. At your request, the synagogue will send an email to the congregation with all appropriate information. If the deceased is a congregant you may also request that the synagogue send the same information through our automatic phone dialer. As some members may wish to notify non-synagogue friends and colleagues about the death of a loved one, mourners should feel comfortable asking a friend, congregant or relative to call/email people on their behalf.

8. The Funeral Service

The clergy will meet with you and your immediate family to participate in the custom of *k'ria* (tearing). As a symbol of mourning the clergy tears a garment, or a black ribbon as its substitute, for each mourner to wear throughout the *shiva* observance. A prayer acknowledging the inevitability of death is recited.

Before the service, mourners may choose to gather with other family members, friends and members of the congregation to receive consolation and comfort. The funeral home has a room where this happens. If the funeral service takes place at our synagogue the social hall is used for this purpose.

Once all guests are seated, the mourners enter and all rise to show their respect. The immediate family usually sits in the front row. Jewish tradition mandates that the coffin be closed. It remains in the front of the chapel or sanctuary, often covered with a special cloth called a pall. The traditional service includes the chanting of psalms, a eulogy by the clergy based on previous discussion with the family and the clergy's memories of the deceased, and *El Maley Rahamim* (the traditional memorial prayer) asking for eternal peace for the deceased. Some families choose to recite poetry, others to offer eulogies read or spoken by family members, colleagues or friends. Still others ask the clergy to speak for them. The clergy will help you develop a service in keeping with your needs. At the end of the service, the clergy announces your plans for *shiva* and if there will be *minyanim*. You may want to ask the clergy to mention that the family would appreciate donations to a specific charity or charities in memory of the deceased.

The coffin is then taken to the hearse and then to the gravesite. When the coffin is removed from the sanctuary, all stand as a sign of respect. Staff of the funeral home will assist with moving the coffin, or the family may ask those closest to serve as pall bearers.

Family and close friends may choose to go to the cemetery. It is best not to try to seek out the mourners at the end of the funeral since they are in transition to the cemetery. Condolences can be offered during a *shiva* call.

If the decision is for cremation the funeral director makes those arrangements. The coffin is taken by the funeral director to the funeral home after the funeral service. Family members and close friends return home to begin the *shiva*.

9. The Burial

Family and friends who plan to attend the burial form a line with their car lights lit and follow the hearse to the cemetery. The chapel provides written directions to the cemetery. At a graveside funeral a member of the family identifies the body as that of the deceased and signs the necessary papers. The clergy and funeral director (or representative) make certain all is ready for the burial. The procession follows the casket to the gravesite.

The burial service is usually quite short. It includes the repetition of the *El Maley Rahamim* prayer and the mourner's burial *Kaddish*. According to the tradition of our congregation the rabbi may speak about the deceased or offer some other words of comfort to the mourners. The coffin is lowered and first the mourners and then others assembled are encouraged to cover the coffin with earth. This is considered to be an act of *chesed* (loving kindness). In our congregation the mourners leave the gravesite by walking between two parallel lines formed by family and friends. This marks the transition to a new state of mourning, from honoring the deceased to comforting the survivors.

10. *Shiva* and Mourning

Close friends and family return from the cemetery to the *shiva* home. It is traditional to provide a pitcher of water and basin for those entering the house of mourning for a ritual washing of their hands. Usually a special *yahrzeit* candle, provided by the funeral home, is lit as soon as possible upon return to the *shiva* home and burns for seven days. There are other traditions such as the covering of mirrors and walking around the block to end *shiva*, that may have been practiced within your family. Speak with our clergy who will help you decide which traditions to follow to give you comfort.

Tradition not only recommends, but requires, that the mourners be served a meal as a sign of their recommitment to life, and of the necessity of beginning to resume normal activities. A few relatives, friends or congregants may be asked not to go to the cemetery in order to organize this meal. Friends and family may want to prepare food for the family. The Executive Director of RSNS can provide names of places that supply and deliver food platters.

The clergy will have spoken with you about how long you wish to sit *shiva*, the hours of the day you will sit, and if you would like to have *shiva minyanim*. Traditionally *shiva* lasts for seven days and the first day begins when the burial is completed. On Shabbat and certain Jewish holidays, public observances of *shiva* such as the wearing of the *k'ria* are suspended, but Shabbat is counted as one of the *shiva* days. Traditionally *shiva* took place in the home of the deceased, but any residence may be chosen. During *shiva*, mourners refrain from all work and restrict themselves to the *shiva* home or their home and eliminate recreation and other activities. Turn to the clergy for guidance.

Some families assemble photographs of the deceased and other family members. Others enjoy telling stories about their loved one. *Shiva* is an opportunity to honor the deceased by sharing their life stories with others.

Visiting a *shiva* house is considered a *mitzvah*, a good and holy thing to do. The door is kept unlocked or open so visitors can enter without ringing the bell. Visitors to the home of mourners are there to express sympathy and offer condolences. This is a time of grieving and the sharing of grief. There is no need for the mourner(s) to engage in general conversation or to serve as host - in fact this is a time for visitors to meet the needs of the mourners.

Although traditionally Jews have felt a need to serve food and drink to guests in their home, *shiva* is not a time for mourners to "entertain" visitors. You may want to consider if coffee and cake will be made available to those visiting your *shiva* house. If so you may want to ask a friend or relative to make the arrangements.

11. *Sheloshim* (thirty days)

Some continue to observe mourning restrictions during the thirty days following the funeral. Some mourners recite *Kaddish*, avoid parties, celebrations and public entertainment. Mourners

may decide to attend life cycle events such as weddings and *b'nai mitzvah*, but may decide not attend the party.

Although during this time the estate of the deceased may be settled, a house or apartment sold or closed, and personal effects offered to family members, sold or given to charity the mourners may not feel competent to make wise decisions at this time. Sometimes it is best to postpone major life decisions.

It is especially important for friends, family members and congregants to support mourners during the month and next few months of mourning. Phone calls, visits, invitations to walk, talk, lunch and dinner are especially meaningful. Letters and even short notes are helpful.

12. The Unveiling

You may schedule the unveiling any time after the 30 days of mourning up to the end of the first year after the death. When you are ready to schedule the unveiling contact the RSNS Executive Director who will guide you in the process. The cemetery personnel must be notified to make sure that the gravesite is ready.

Arrangements for a grave marker (stone) for the grave site are made at least three months prior to the unveiling, but after the end of *sheloshim* (the first 30 days of mourning) so that the stone can be made ready. You may choose to purchase the stone from the funeral chapel or from a monument maker. Only foot stones are permitted at the RSNS grave site.

The unveiling service itself is simple. A veil or covering is placed over the stone prior to the service. It is removed in the presence of the immediate family and sometimes a few close friends, who then dedicate the gravestone. A few prayers and poems may be recited, and some words spoken about the deceased. In our congregation some congregants conduct their own ceremony with no clergy present. Some members contact the office to arrange for the unveiling to be on a date when clergy can be present to conduct the service.

According to Jewish tradition the stone is simple. The marker includes the name of the deceased and the secular date of birth and death. Some congregants choose to include the name and dates in Hebrew. There may be a few Hebrew words and/or a Hebrew symbol such as the Star of David. Some add a few words in English to describe the deceased or perhaps simply "Beloved wife/husband, parent, child, friend." There is no right or wrong wording as long as it is simply stated.

13. *Yahrtzeit*

The first anniversary of the death is the first observance of the *yahrtzeit*. Traditionally mourners come to the synagogue to recite *Kaddish*. Our congregation will send a notice approximately a month before the *yahrtzeit* date. Although traditionally *yahrtzeit* is observed according to the Hebrew calendar, congregants may decide to observe the secular calendar death date. If so, call the synagogue office and arrange to be sent a notice according to your wishes. Our tradition is

for loved ones to recite *Kaddish* during the Friday night services preceding the *yahrtzeit* date. Some families may choose another date close to the anniversary.

A special 24 hour memorial candle is lit on the eve of the anniversary date of the death. Enclosed with your *yahrtzeit* notification you will receive prayers to recite when the candle is lit. or many people think about the deceased, recite a poem that evokes the memory of the deceased, or speak about the deceased with family member or friends.

Members may wish to purchase a memorial plaque to be hung on the synagogue memorial board with the Hebrew and English name of the deceased and the date of death. This purchase is made before the *yahrtzeit* date so that it can be in place for the *yahrtzeit*. Call the RSNS office if you wish to arrange for the purchase.

In our congregation the name of the deceased is listed in the Shabbat services flier and our Rabbi announces the name of the deceased at the Shabbat service before *Kaddish* is recited. It is customary to make a contribution of tzedaka in honor of the memory of the deceased. Members may also want to sponsor the Friday night oneg in memory of the deceased or sponsor the flowers for the service. Call the RSNS office if you want to arrange to do so.

The *yahrtzeit* continues to be observed each year on the chosen anniversary date.

14. *Yizkor* Service

Relatives and close friends who are deceased are remembered during *Yizkor* services*. Congregants remember those who have died, and our community joins together to support those who experienced a recent loss and those who lost loved ones long ago. Congregational reminders are sent when *Yizkor* will be recited. **Yizkor* prayers are recited on the holidays of *Yom Kippur*, *Shemini Atzeret*, *Pesah* and *Shavuot*, as part of the holiday service. On these holidays you may also choose to light a memorial candle at home.

Our clergy and congregational community remain with you for support and caring.