

Jewish Funeral Traditions on Film

By Gail Rubin, CT, Certified Celebrant, author, and TV/Radio Host
A Good Goodbye: Funeral Planning for Those Who Don't Plan to Die

***Nora's Will* (2008 – Mexican film, no rating)**

This award-winning Mexican film with comedic overtones begins when Jose finds out that Nora, the woman he'd been married to for 30 years and then divorced, has committed suicide. It turns out that before she died, Nora devised a Machiavellian plan to get him to take care of her funeral and bring the family together.

***My Mexican Shivah* (2007 – Mexican film, no rating)**

With the unexpected death of Moishe, his family and friends gather in Mexico City to sit *shivah*, the seven-day Jewish mourning ritual. The spirit angels of light and darkness, Aleph and Bet, divine accountants, watch over the family and calculate which angel will accompany Moishe's soul to the afterlife. The film illustrates many traditional Jewish funeral rituals, while family dysfunction and Moishe's conniving friends make for great comedy.

***This Is Sodom* (2010 – Israeli film, no rating)**

A comedy that recounts the story of the birth of the Jewish people and the advent of monotheism on the backdrop of the last week in history of the infamous city of Sodom, the entertainment, gambling, sex and corruption capital of biblical times. The opening scene illustrates the practical reasons for quick burial in Jewish and Muslim funeral traditions.

***The Cemetery Club* (1993 – PG-13)**

This comedy with much Jewish humor is about three widows - Doris, Ester and Lucille - whose husbands die within the span of a few years. The three friends in their 50s react quite differently to the deaths. They meet every year at the graves of their husbands to talk about their lives and gain perspective.

50 Things for Jews To Do When a Death Occurs

By Gail Rubin, The Doyenne of Death®

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(www.AGoodGoodbye.com)

NOTIFY:

1. The family's rabbi, cantor, synagogue administrator, or community chaplain
2. The funeral director
3. The cemetery
4. The deceased's doctor
5. The local *Chevra Kaddisha* (to utilize Jewish burial rituals)
6. All the relatives
7. All the friends
8. Employers
9. Pallbearers
10. Insurance agents
11. Unions, fraternal, professional and veterans organizations
12. Newspapers (with information for the obituary)

SELECT & DECIDE:

13. A cemetery plot (if no plot was pre-purchased)
14. Casket (soft wood i.e. pine or poplar)
15. Partial grave liner
16. Time for funeral and burial
17. Funeral place (graveside, temple, home or funeral home chapel)
18. Who will speak at the funeral
19. Transportation (hearse, motor escort)
20. *Shiva* observance (how many days and where)
21. Clothing (if no *Chevra Kaddisha*)
22. Charitable contribution to be made in lieu of flowers
23. Funeral program design and content
24. Card of thanks
25. A memorial marker (this can wait: usually 6-18 months)

IN ADDITION TO:

26. Providing vital statistics about the deceased, including Hebrew names
27. Preparing and signing necessary papers
28. Providing addresses for all interested parties who must be notified
29. Answering sympathetic phone calls and messages
30. Meeting and talking with everyone about the details
31. Greeting friends and relatives who call
32. Cleaning home for visitors
33. Arranging lodging for out-of-town guests
34. Planning funeral car list

AND CONSIDER THE EXPENSES FOR SOME OR ALL OF THE FOLLOWING:

35. Hospital or nursing home
36. Doctors and nurses
37. Medicine and drugs
38. Funeral home services
39. Cemetery interment service fees
40. Burial rights (cemetery plot)
41. Casket and grave liner
42. Death certificates and permits
43. Clergy honoraria
44. *Chevra Kaddisha* honoraria
45. Obituary placements
46. Transportation costs
47. Telephone long distance calls
48. Food for *Shiva*
49. Memorial marker (later)
50. Memorial plaque at synagogue (optional)

***Viddui* – The Confessional Prayer**

Many Jews are surprised to learn there is a Jewish final confessional prayer that the dying may say, or someone may say on the person's behalf. In Hebrew, it is called *Viddui*. One version in English, written by Rabbi Rami Shapiro, goes like this:

“I acknowledge before the source of all that life and death are not in my hands. Just as I did not choose to be born, so I do not choose to die. May it come to pass that I may be healed, but if death is my fate, then I accept it with dignity and the loving calm of one who knows the ways of all things.

May my death be honorable and my life be a healing memory for those who know me. May my loved ones think well of me and my memory bring them joy. From all I may have hurt, I ask forgiveness, upon all who have hurt me, I bestow forgiveness. As a wave returns to the ocean, so I return to the source from which I came.

Shema, Israel, Adonai Elohainu, Adonai Echad – Hear, oh Israel, that which we call God is oneness itself. Blessed is the way of God, the way of life and death, of coming and going, of meeting and loving, now and forever. As I am blessed with the one, so now I am blessed with the other. *Shalom, Shalom, Shalom.*”

Traditional prayer upon hearing news of a death:

Baruch atah Adonai eloheinu melech ha-olam, dayan ha-emet – Blessed are you *Adonai* our God, ruler of the universe and the Judge of Truth (or the True Judge)

The Mourner's Kaddish

This prayer is in ancient Aramaic, predating the Hebrew language. It makes no mention of death, and focuses on reaffirming life, so that in spite of loss, the mourner still praises God. A *minyan*, a group of at least ten adults, must be present to say this prayer.

Transliterated Hebrew

*Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei raba.
B'alma di v'ra chirutei, v'yamlich malchutei,
b'chayeichon uv'yomeichon uv'chayei d'chol beit Yisrael,
baagala uviz'man kariv. V'im'ru: Amen.
Y'hei sh'mei raba m'varach l'alam ul'almei almaya.
Yitbarach v'yishtabach v'yitpaar v'yitromam v'yitnasei,
v'yit'hadar v'yitaleh v'yit'halal sh'mei d'kud'sha b'rich hu,
l'eila min kol birchata v'shirata, tushb'chata v'nechemata,
daamiran b'alma. V'imru: Amen.
Y'hei sh'lama raba min sh'maya, v'chayim aleinu v'al kol Yisrael.
V'imru: Amen.
Oseh shalom bimromav,
Hu yaaseh shalom aleinu, v'al kol Yisrael. V'imru: Amen.*

English Translation (Reform Judaism)

Exalted and hallowed be God's great name
in the world which God created, according to plan.
May God's majesty be revealed in the days of our lifetime
and the life of all Israel -- speedily, imminently, to which we say Amen.
Blessed be God's great name to all eternity.
Blessed, praised, honored, exalted, extolled, glorified, adored, and lauded
be the name of the Holy Blessed One, beyond all earthly words and songs of
blessing, praise, and comfort.
To which we say Amen.
May there be abundant peace from heaven, and life, for us and all Israel.
To which we say Amen.
May the One who creates harmony on high, bring peace to us and to all Israel.
To which we say Amen.

Glossary of Jewish Funeral Terms

(Note: The exact spelling of these Hebrew names in English varies. Also, there are varying levels of observance based on the different branches of Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform and Renewal)

Chevra Kaddisha – Translated as “sacred society” or “holy friends,” these are volunteers who wash and dress the body with ritual and prayers, finishing by placing the body in the casket and closing the lid.

El Malei Rachamim – A memorial prayer said by a rabbi or sung by a cantor at the funeral. This prayer for the soul of the departed is also recited in the synagogue during *Yizkor* services of remembrance on the Jewish holidays of *Yom Kippur*, Passover, *Shavuot*, and *Shemini Atzeret*, the holiday after *Sukkot*.

Keriah – A ceremony where the mourners traditionally tore their clothes just before the funeral starts, to mark the transition from focusing on the preparations for the deceased to supporting the survivors. Most families now tear a black ribbon and pin the ribbon to their clothing.

Mikva – A body of natural water used for ritual cleansing of impurity. During the *tahara* ceremony, the *Chevra Kaddisha* pours pitchers or buckets of water over the body to ritually cleanse the deceased and make them pure.

Minyan – A quorum of ten adults that must be present for the recitation of the Mourner’s *Kaddish* and other prayers.

Mitzvah – Commandments or good deeds Jews are reminded to do. To bury the dead is considered a great *mitzvah*, as it is a favor the deceased cannot repay.

Mourner’s Kaddish – This ancient Aramaic poem recited during services is an expression of faith despite grief and loss. The *Kaddish* is traditionally recited for members of the immediate family: parents, spouses, brothers, sisters, sons or daughters, but it can be recited for anyone to whom the mourner was close.

Sheloshim – The 30-day period after a Jewish funeral that gives the mourner more time to adjust to their loss.

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Shiva – The initial seven-day period of intense mourning after a Jewish funeral when the community supports mourners in their home with visits, prayer services and food. There are a number of traditions associated with mourners “sitting *shiva*,” including sitting low to the ground, covering mirrors, and refraining from bathing for pleasure and shaving.

Shomer – Translated as “one who watches,” this is a person who stays by the side of the deceased, standing guard and reciting Psalms. Leaving the body unattended was considered a sign of disrespect.

Tachrichim (shrouds) – Simple garments of white cotton, linen or muslin material in which the deceased is clothed. White is a symbol of purity.

Tahara – The Jewish ritual of washing and dressing the body and placing it in a casket, performed by volunteers of the *Chevra Kaddisha*.

Viddui – The confessional prayer a Jew may recite before death or another person may recite on his or her behalf.

Yahrzeit – The annual observance of a death, marked by the lighting of a 24-hour candle and the recitation of the Mourner’s *Kaddish*.

About Gail Rubin



Gail Rubin, CT, The Doyenne of Death[®], is author of the award-winning book *A Good Goodbye: Funeral Planning for Those Who Don't Plan to Die*. She also hosts a TV/DVD interview series and an Internet radio show also called **A Good Goodbye**. She serves on the cemetery committee for Congregation Albert and volunteers with the local *Chevra Kaddisha*, which ritually prepares bodies for Jewish burial.

A Certified Celebrant with a license to use films in her talks, she speaks regularly to groups on getting the funeral planning conversation started. Rubin is a member of the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association and the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC). Ms. Rubin holds ADEC’s Certified in Thanatology (CT) designation, documenting professional and educational achievements in knowledge of Death, Dying and Bereavement.