



Melbourne
Chevra Kadisha
מלבורן חברה קדישא

Attending a Jewish Funeral

According to traditional Jewish burial customs, burial should take place as soon as possible, before nightfall or at latest within 24 hours after the death. However, there are always exceptions. Perhaps the burial must be delayed because close relatives need travel time; or the death occurred on “Shabbat” (the Sabbath) or another holy day in the Hebrew calendar.

A few basics tips

- Jewish funerals usually begin on time, so do your best to arrive early.
- Dress conservatively and comfortably. For men, wearing a suit or a nice pair of slacks and a button-down shirt is suitable. For women, a modest skirt and top or a dress is perfect. It is customary for men to wear a “kippah”, yarmulke, during the funeral and burial. One is usually provided at the “shtiebel”, chapel entrance if you don’t have one.
- Because idle conversation is generally discouraged during a Jewish funeral, it’s probably best to remain silent or only participate in the prayers during the service.
- Sending flowers to a funeral or a mourner’s home is strongly discouraged in Judaism. Instead, simply offer your presence. It is customary to give charity in memory of the one who has passed away.
- You will notice that the coffin remains closed. In Jewish tradition, it is not considered proper to gaze at the dead.

What to Expect at a Jewish Funeral

Jewish funeral services organised by the Melbourne Chevra Kadisha are generally held in the “shtiebel”, chapel, located within the Cemetery grounds. A typical Jewish funeral ceremony includes the recitation of psalms, followed by a “Hesped” eulogy, the traditional closing memorial prayer known as the “El Moley Rachamim” and finally concluding with the procession to graveside, the lowering of the coffin, the covering of the coffin with earth and the recitation of the “Kaddish”. Usually this will all take approx 45 minutes to one hour in total.

Depending on the wishes of the family, you may witness any or all of the following activities at a Jewish funeral service:

- The tradition of “K’riah”, which is the tearing of mourner's clothing, normally the shirt or blouse. Traditionally, mourners stand during the “K’riah” ceremony, to symbolize a sense of strength in the adversity of their grief. The place of the cut can be as important as the act itself. When mourning the loss of a parent, the cut is made on the left side; symbolic of the close heart-driven connection between the deceased parent and their child. When the funeral is for someone other than a parent, the “K’riah” occurs on the right side.
- Once all are seated, the Jewish funeral ceremony commonly continues with psalms and prayer, read or chanted aloud by the Rabbi or officiant.
- A “Hesped”, or eulogy, may be read; which may afford mourning family members an opportunity to stand and share their thoughts and feelings with others attending the service.
- At the close of the Jewish funeral service, a final prayer, the “El Moley Rachamim” is recited. Attendees are usually asked to stand during this time. After the recitation of the “El Moley Rachamim”, the family will follow behind the coffin in the funeral procession to the gravesite.
- The procession from “Shtiebel” to gravesite is called the “Levaya”, accompanying the dead to his or her final resting place. This element of the funeral is so important that the entire funeral is called a “Levaya” (“accompaniment” in Hebrew).
- The procession of the coffin to the grave may involve pall bearers selected by the family. Even if you are not a pallbearer, following the coffin on its final journey is of great significance. Accompanying the deceased to their place of interment is seen as a very important commandment, or mitzvah.
- In Orthodox tradition the pall bearers are asked to pause a number of times (usually seven) during this procession.
- Upon arrival at the grave, the funeral continues with the “kevurah”, interment, during which we return the dead to the nourishing and living earth from which Adam, the first man, was formed. It is considered an honor to participate in the burial by taking a turn to shovel soil onto the coffin.
- You will notice that it is customary not to pass the shovel from one person to another. Rather, when one person is finished, he will stick the shovel into the dirt, and the next person will take it from there.
- Perhaps the most famous prayer in Judaism is the “Kaddish” recited by mourners. The surviving relatives bring solace to the soul of their loved one when they publicly praise G-d. In this age-old Aramaic prayer, we express our wish for the manifestation of G-d’s sovereignty on earth.

- Once the graveside service is over, the guests will form two parallel lines facing each other, and the mourners pass between them as they walk away from the gravesite.
- As they walk by, the traditional words of consolation may be offered. Tradition dictates that it be said in Hebrew,

“Hamakom y'nachem etchem b'toch sh'ar availai tziyon ee yerushalayim”,

or in English:

"May the Almighty comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

Do not approach the mourners; simply recite the words as they pass.

- Wash your hands before leaving the cemetery.

Here is how it's done: Take a cup of water in your left hand and pour it over the entire right hand—all the way to the wrist. Then, take the cup in your right hand, and pour it over your left hand in exactly the same way. Repeat two times. Place the cup upside down, and do not dry your hands. This is symbolic of the lingering memory of the deceased.