NORTH EASTERN HEBREW CONGREGATION

CONCISE GUIDE FOR MOURNERS

For your immediate attention

Please read this important information now. If the mourner is not in a position to do so, whoever will be organizing things should read this before making any arrangements.

IMPORTANT TELEPHONE NUMBERS

Shul Office: 640-3101/2
(After Hours: Rabbi Gerson - 485-1513)
Chevrah Kadisha: 673-2058 (After Hours: 321-0000, Code 4284) Att. Harold or Laurie.

Dear Friend,

We at Pine Street, are saddened to learn of your loss. We want you to know that we will be with you during this difficult and painful period and will always be available to offer support through your grief and anguish.

The first responsibility at this moment, though, is to make all the necessary arrangements so that the deceased may be respectfully brought to eternal rest as soon as possible and in the most dignified manner, in accordance with our sacred traditions. It is for this reason that we share with you the following important information and guidelines. Should there arise any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Office or the Rabbi.

SCHEDULING THE FUNERAL - The most pressing, initial requirement is to arrange the time of the Funeral. This must be done with the Chevrah Kadisha. The Funeral Director will propose a time. This time should NOT be confirmed, however, until the "Rabbi has been consulted as to his availability. Thereafter, relatives and friends may be notified and (if time allows) an advert placed in the press.

MINIMIZING ANY DELAY - It is a very important Mitzvah to bury the deceased as soon as humanly possible, preferably on the very same day.
When children live overseas and express their desire to come for the Funeral, it must be emphasized to them that it is imperative to get here at the earliest possible time. Heroic efforts on their parts are required. This may entail a less direct routing, etc. In the event of an unavoidable delay, this should never exceed 72 hours. Obviously, the less delay, the better.

Under no circumstances should a Funeral be delayed for inconsequential reasons; such as waiting for a Sunday or for grandchildren writing exams. Etc.

PRAYERS - Ideally, these should take place in the home of the deceased. A person's spirit is more tangible in the place where he/she has lived their life. If this is not possible, other arrangements may be made.

Prayers are held in the evening at Mincha and Maariv time. (6:00 PM in Summer, 5:45PM in Spring and Autumn and 5:30 PM in winter). Mourners are not expected to play host and hostess in their time of grief. Tea should NOT be served. Thankfully, the old "Tea Party" Prayers are a thing of the past in our community.

How many evenings of Prayers is, of course, a family choice. Remember though, that the principal purpose of Prayers is not merely to hold a Memorial Service, but to obviate the need for the male mourner to leave the House of Mourning during Shiva. When there are no Prayers at home, the mourner is advised to attend Shul Services in order to recite Kaddish.

Where the deceased, or the family, have lived devout lives, week-long Prayers are entirely appropriate. The Shul can provide a Sefer Torah for Shachris, as well. However, assembling a Minyan will be the family's responsibility.

YAHRTZEIT CANDLES - You will need a seven-day supply to last throughout Shiva. No Blessing is recited. The first light may be kindled immediately or, alternatively, upon returning from the cemetery.

ARRANGING THE HOME FOR PRAYERS - We daven facing North (Jerusalem). Separate areas should be designated for men and women. A small table is placed on the North wall with two candles for the Service (Shabbat candlesticks are fine) and the Yahrtzeit candle.

Female mourners should be on the Women's side of the room but closest to the Men so that can participate meaningfully and hear what is being said. Contrary to popular myth, there is no reason why female mourners should be made to feel awkward and uncomfortable by sitting alone amongst the men. In fact, it is inappropriate.

PRAYER BOOKS - These should, preferably, be collected from the Shul by a family member or friend. The Office is open 8:30 AM to 1-00 PM. Remember to ask for a copy of "The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning" which you may borrow for the week. It contains important information, explanations and is also very soothing - highly recommended reading.

MOURNERS' SEATING - A famous fallacy in our community is that one needs to sit on a "hard bench." Not so! The requirement is to sit on something low, close to the floor, thus showing that we've been "grounded" by our loss. Any seat less than 30cm (12 inches) off the ground is adequate. It may be a soft seat. The Halacha does not expect us to break our backs. If the cushions of one's couch are removable, this is the simplest option. Should you require it, the Shul does have a three-seat bench available.

WHO IS A MOURNER? - Although the entire family is, emotionally, in mourning, halachically, not everyone is considered a mourner. Principal mourners are those who have lost a father, mother, brother, sister, spouse, son or daughter. All other family members are not required to sit Shiva. Obviously, they will grieve with you, but their main obligation is not to do anything which might offend the sensitivities of the principal mourners.

MIRRORS - Mirrors and all reflective glass (e.g. T.V.) should be covered, Photographs, portraits and any artwork with faces should be covered, removed or turned inside out. There is no need to place wall-hangings at an angle.

Should the Rabbi not have known the deceased personally, then at some stage before the funeral an articulate family member should give him a brief outline of his/her positive character traits and noteworthy achievements to enable the Rabbi to personalize the Service in a meaningful way.

VIEWING THE BODY - This is a non-Jewish practice. We Jews do not view the body out of respect to the dignity of the deceased. Psychologically too, it is far better to remember our loved ones in good times, rather than be haunted by a deathly image. When, for legal reasons, a body must be identified, this should be done by a close friend or relative rather than by an immediate family member.

KRIYAH - RENDING THE GARMENTS - This is the traditional manner in which we can appropriately give vent to our grief. By tearing the clothing over the heart, we show that our heart is truly torn by this traumatic loss. This Mitzvah, therefore, applies to both men and women equally. It is only that, for women, it is done privately, before the Service begins. For this reason, female mourners must dress accordingly. Wear a blouse that you won't mind tearing and have a T-shirt or spencer on underneath to ensure that there is no exposure.

Whether you have seen kriyah performed on women previously or not, please be assured that this is a time-honoured tradition which should most definitely be observed by all mourners.

THE PROCESSION - Historically, in Johannesburg, lists would be drawn up of all gentlemen present and they would all be called up by name to act as Pallbearers. Should you so desire, this may still be done. However, these days, more and more families are indicting a preference for an alternative approach which has much merit.

A very short list of family (and/or the very closest friends) is compiled at home. These are people you know for a fact will be present at the funeral. This short list may range from 8 to 20 gentlemen. Kohanim and principal mourners are not called. Grandsons of mature age should be called, as should sons-in-law. After these men have carried the coffin, the Funeral Director will call for a further eight friends to come forward - without calling anyone else by name. The advantage of this system is that it avoids faribels when an individual's name was mistakenly omitted, or he didn't hear his name called. Also, long, drawn-out processions only prolong the agony for the family.

Whichever option you choose, do ensure that it is not a principal mourner who stands in the lobby at the cemetery compiling lists. Mourners should be preoccupied with more important thoughts at this time.

KADDISH - This most sacred prayer, expressing our faith in G-d even during this time of sorrowful loss, is the obligation of the sons of the deceased. Where there is no son, other principal mourners or next of kin should recite Kaddish. Bear in mind that this Mitzvah applies not only to the Funeral and Prayers, but also for the duration of the year on a daily basis (actually, 11 months to be exact). The Kaddish is available in English phonetics from the Shul or the Chevra Kadisha.

Even if one was not previously a Shul-goer, this is an excellent and opportune time to become one. Countless Jews have become more knowledgeable, more enriched and more comfortable in Shul by attending daily services during the year of mourning. It is the finest memorial a son can do for his father or mother. The Rabbi will be happy to help anyone who feels awkward about this. Our Daily Minyannaires are famous for their friendliness. Please, don't be bashful. You will feel absolutely at home, morning and evening, within a matter of days. If you don't have Tefillin for the morning service, don't worry. There are spare sets at Shul just for you and someone will be happy to "show you the ropes."

Women who would like to do something as meaningful as Kaddish are invited to consult the Rabbi. He will have many suitable suggestions that are as appropriate for a woman as Kaddish is for a man.

THE MOURNERS' MEAL - Upon returning from the cemetery, the first meal the family partakes of is, traditionally, provided by neighbours or friends. Round foods are the custom, usually bagels and hard-boiled eggs. These symbolize the Cycle of life. At the moment, we are feeling at the very bottom of the wheel of fortune; but, please G-d, soon, the wheel will turn for the good and we will again be on top of things.

SITTING SHIVA - There are three excellent reasons for sitting Shiva. 1) Out of respect for our loved one. By taking the week off, we indicate that it's not "business as usual." We've lost a near and dear one and so we 'stop the world' for a while to mark this most significant event in our lives. 2) The seven-day Shiva period corresponds to the spiritual journey the departed soul is currently experiencing. The transition from this world to the next is neither simple nor instantaneous; it is a process. By the family observing Shiva properly, we assist the Neshoma (soul) in this difficult transition. 3) It is psychologically advisable for the bereaved to sit shiva because it helps us work through the grief process. Spending these early days together helps a family cope infinitely better now and in the long term. Sitting together and remembering, shedding a tear, supporting one another is all part of an important rite of passage. From a mental health perspective, sitting Shiva is positively therapeutic.

Family members, who live elsewhere, may go home at night but should still spend the day with the family in the House of Mourning.

Shiva is observed for seven days or part thereof. The day of the Funeral is counted as the first day and on the seventh day, Shiva ends early, just after the morning service. On the seventh day, people may return to work. Thus, if the funeral was at any time on Wednesday, Shiva would end on Tuesday morning.

PERSONAL GROOMING - From AFTER the funeral, until the end of Shiva (with the exception of Shabbat) mourners should not wear leather shoes. Any non-leather footwear of your choice is acceptable.

From the time of death and throughout Shiva, male mourners may not shave and female mourners should not wear make-up. (To find out when shaving and haircuts become permitted, please consult the Rabbi.)

As for bathing, Jewish Law distinguishes between hygiene and pleasure. While we must keep clean, we may not enjoy luxuriating sensation of sinking into a hot bath. Neither may we stand under a hot shower and wash our whole body simultaneously. A few inches of bath water to allow us to clean ourselves limb by limb is permissible. Remember, we are focusing our attention on the life and death of a loved one. The usual pleasures and vanities of life are, therefore, dispensed with during the concentrated mourning period.

FRIDAY NIGHT IN SHUL - The male mourners should be in Shul for Mincha (5:30 in Winter, 5:40 in Summer) in order to say Kaddish. Thereafter, they step outside the corridor on the Rabbi's left. The Shammas will bring them back in after L'cha Dodi when the Rabbi and Gaboim will come down and extend the traditional wishes of consolation. The family then returns to its seats. On Shabbat, mourners should NOT wear the torn shirt or non-leather shoes. You may sit on regular chairs and leave the home.

SHABBAT - On Fridays, one sits Shiva until the late afternoon and gets up in time to change and prepare for Shabbos.

We wish you long life and may you enjoy Simchas soon, please G-d.

HAMAKOM YINACHEM ETCHEM B'TOCH SHAAR AVEILEI TZIYON V'YIRUSHALAYIM.

MAY HASHEM COMFORT YOU TOGETHER WITH ALL THE OTHER MOURNERS FOR ZION AND JERUSALEM.