



*Jewish Ritual Wishes  
at End of Life*

An Assessment Tool

# Contact Information

Whose wishes are being recorded here?

Does that person (we'll call them "the Recipient") have a  
Hebrew Name?\*

Street Address

City, State, Zip

Contact Name (if different from the Recipient)

Recipient or Contact Phone & E-mail

Contact Street Address

Contact City, State, Zip

\* A Hebrew name is ceremonial, and can be in Hebrew, Yiddish, or another Jewish language. It consists of the person's first name(s), the word *ben* (son of) or *bat* (daughter of), and the Hebrew names of their parents. If a Hebrew name is not known for Recipient or their parents, use the English name. Converts to Judaism usually use Abraham and Sarah as their Jewish parents. A non-binary alternative to *ben/bat* is *mibeit* (from the house of).

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**A**mong Judaism's sacred practices, those related to end of life are considered the holiest: easing the suffering of the ill, honoring the dying, treating the dead with kindness, and comforting those who mourn.

Judaism's ways of honoring death are simple and dignified, ancient and beautiful. Anyone for whom Jewish teachings or identity has value may find them comforting. No particular background or level of observance is required. To quote the 12<sup>th</sup> century Jewish philosopher Maimonides,

"He who performs a single *mitzvah* (sacred duty) inclines himself and the entire world towards merit, causing its deliverance and salvation."

*Jewish Ritual Wishes at End of Life: An Assessment Tool* has been developed to assist those who wish to consider end-of-life ritual options, for themselves or for a loved one (whom we'll call "the Recipient"). Terms and concepts are explained so that decision-makers can weigh their options in light of strict Jewish tradition and other approaches.

Once this document is completed, copies should be given to everyone who will be part of the Recipient's care community, including health and financial decision-makers; caregivers, friends and family; clergy; and legal and medical professionals.

**Please note: This is not a legal document** and has no legally binding effect. It is our hope that it helps put all parties on the same page as to how they can bring solace at a crucial and sensitive time.

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## Before Death

# The Final Prayer (*Viddui*)

The prayer said before death is called the *Viddui*, meaning “confession.” It is a fixed prayer recited by individuals for themselves, or for them by someone else. It seeks to give dying people and their families peace of mind by releasing conflicts and asking forgiveness, from each other and from The Divine.

The *Viddui* can be said whenever one is seriously ill, such as at every hospitalization, or saved until the last days of life. Anyone who can read the prayer can lead it for themselves or another, but families may want to reach out to a rabbi or Jewish chaplain to do support them at this time. The traditional prayer is at right; a modern version appears on page 4.

The *Sh'ma*, the statement of monotheism at the center of Jewish worship, may also be said. According to tradition, Jewish people ideally should say this short prayer as they die, so that the Hebrew name for God is on their lips:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל, יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יְיָ אֶחָד.

*Sh'ma Yisra-el, Adonai Elohaynu, Adonai Echaḏ.*

Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.

## Prayer Wishes

*Check Here If Wished*

We wish to have the *Viddui* said for Recipient,  
when the time is right.

☐

Contact a rabbi or Jewish chaplain about this.

☐

Who will ensure that the *Viddui* is said?

Before reciting the Viddui, ask forgiveness from those you may have caused pain or trouble in your life, whether they are alive or deceased. Ritually wash hands. Stand if you are able..

If it is your custom when you pray, wear a head covering and a prayer shawl.

As on Yom Kippur, tap the right fist on the breastbone with each sentence of the third paragraph.

## Traditional Viddui

Modeh (male) Modah (female) ani lifanecha,  
Adonai Elohai veylohei avotai,  
she-r'fuati b'yadecha u-mitati  
b'yadecha. Y'hi ratzon milfanecha,  
shetirpa-eini r'fu-ah shlemah.  
V'im amut, t'hi mitati chapara al  
kol chatati v'avonot u-f'sha-im  
shechatati, v'sh'aviti v'shepashati  
lifanecha, b'ten chelki b'gan eden,  
v'zakeini l'olam habah  
hatzafun l'tzadikim.

Eloheinu v'Elohei avoteinu,  
tavo lifanecha t'filateinu,  
v'al titaleim mit-chinateinu,  
she-ain anu azei fanim uk'shei oref,  
lomar l'faneicha Adonai Eloheinu  
v'Elohei avoteinu,  
tzadikim anachnu v'lo chatanu,  
aval anachnu v'avoteinu chatanu.

Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, dibarnu dofi.  
He-evinu, v'hirshanu, zadnu,  
khamasnu, tafalnu sheker.  
Ya-atznu ra, kizavnu, latznu, maradnu,  
ni-atznu, sararnu, avinu, pashanu,  
tzararnu, kishinu oref. Rashanu,  
shikhatnu, ti-avnu, ta-inu, tita'nu.

Sarnu mimitzvotcha u-mimishpatecha ha-  
tovim, v'lo shavah lanu.  
V'Atah tzadik al kol haba aleinu,  
ki emet asitah v'anachnu hirshanu.

מודהמודה אני לפניך,  
יי אלהי, ואלהי אבותי,  
שרפואתי בידיך ומייתי  
בידיך. יהי רצון מלפניך,  
שתרפאני רפואה שלמה.  
ואם אמות, תהא מתיתי כפרה על  
כל חטאתי ועונות ופשעים  
שחטאתי ושעויתי ושפשעתי  
לפניך, ותן חלקי בגן עדן,  
וזכני לעולם הבא  
הצפון לצדיקים.

אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו,  
תבא לפניך תפלתנו,  
ואל תתעלם מתחנונתנו,  
שאין אנו עצי פנים וקשי ערף,  
לומר לפניך יי אלהינו  
ואלהי אבותינו,  
צדיקים אנחנו ולא חטאנו,  
אבל אנחנו ואבותינו חטאנו.

אשמינו, בגדנו, גזלנו, דברנו דפי.  
העוינו, והרשענו, זדנו,  
חמסנו, טפלנו שקר.  
נעצנו רע, כזבנו, לצנו, מרדנו,  
נאצנו, סררנו, עוינו, פשענו,  
צברנו, קשינו ערף. רשענו,  
שחתנו, תעבנו, תעינו, תעתענו.

סרנו ממצוותיך וממשפטיך  
הטובים, ולא שנוה לנו.  
ואתה צדיק על כל הבא עלינו,  
כי אמת עשית ואנחנו הרשענו.

## *Viddui, The Final Confession*

An interpretive translation by Rabbi Rami Shapiro

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 way of all things.

May my death be honorable.  
And may my life be a healing memory  
for those who know me.  
May my loved ones think well of me  
and may my memory bring them joy.  
From all those 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 Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad,*  
Hear, O 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 was blessed with the one,  
So now am I blessed with the other.  
*Shalom. Shalom. Shalom.*

# The Quiet Time

Judaism teaches that the last moments of life are precious, and should be treated with sensitivity, so as to ensure that the soul is neither hurried from this world, nor delayed, prolonging suffering.

When patients are “transitioning” — that is, they have only a few days or hours to live according to their medical team, Jewish tradition considers them a *goses* (rhymes with “no less”), like a candle flame flickering out.

From that point forward, physical contact and sensory stimulation are to be kept to a minimum. Souls need to be free to move on in their journey, without distraction or interruption. The only exception would be an act required to bring immediate comfort and relief, such as giving pain medication.

Visitors may gently hold and stroke dying individuals, but ideally should refrain from:

- **Jarring movement:** Relocating, moving or washing them.
- **Sudden or loud noise:** If possible, medical equipment and televisions should be silenced.
- **Distracting contact:** Cold washcloths, blood pressure cuffs and needles should be avoided, if possible.
- **Verbal intervention:** Telling patients to resist death. Rather, they should be told that all is well, and they can relax and surrender to the natural order of life.

## Wishes for the Final Hours

*Check Here If Wished*

Please create a low-stimulation Quiet Time, to ease the Recipient’s departure from this world.



Who will enforce the Quiet Time?

## Customs of Transition

Once it is clear that death has occurred, after a hug or kiss goodbye, those present may wish to perform a Jewish custom:

- **Say *Baruch Dayan HaEmet*** (Blessed is the True Judge).
- **Open a window.** It allows the spirit to move freely.
- **Light a candle.** It shows that the soul is still nearby.
- **Rend a garment.** The decedent's partner, siblings, parent or children may want to express their heartache by tearing the collar of their shirt (starting the rip with scissors). Decedent's children tear on the left; others on the right. Another option is to wait for the black *kri'ah* (tearing) ribbon distributed at the funeral.

## Guardian (*Shomer*)

As a comfort to the soul of the deceased, which is believed to be present until the body rests in the earth, it is customary to designate a guardian (called a *shomer*) to sit in the vicinity of the body continually until the funeral, studying Psalms. Some families want coverage around the clock; others just at night. *Shomrim* can include friends, fellow congregants, or scholars provided by the funeral home.

### Wishes for Guarding

Check Here If Wished

Arrangements should be made for a *shomer*.

☐

The funeral home should be asked to provide this.

☐

Who will arrange for *shomer* coverage?



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# Cleansing Ceremony

The ceremony known as *taharah* (purification) prepares the decedent for entry into the World to Come, body and soul. For the body, it's like a day at the spa, getting washed, anointed and dressed with the utmost kindness and respect. The soul receives the spiritual equivalent of full military honors, in the form of a centuries-old liturgy heralding its splendor and purity as it prepares to meet with God, face to face.

## The Ritual

The *taharah* ceremony consists of these sections:

- **A sponge bath** to remove obstacles to purification;
- **Ablution** by water poured over the decedent, to simulate a visit to the *mikvah* (ritual bath);
- **Dressing** in traditional burial and prayer garments (see p. 8);
- **Anointing** with materials of religious significance, such as earth from Israel;
- **Enclosing** in a sheet and a plain wooden casket.

## Different Approaches

Taharah is most often performed in a mortuary preparation room by a team of three to six Jewish participants, men washing men and women washing women. A team that provides Taharah (called a *chevrah kaddishah*) strives to attain a high level of concentration during the ceremony. Thus, some may decline to deviate from custom in any way, while others are more flexible. To find the right team for your family, ask your rabbi or Jewish mortuary, or contact *Kavod v'Nichum* (Honor and Comfort), a non-profit that teaches about taharah and supports the creation of *chevra kadishah* groups in communities across North America ([www.Jewish-Funerals.org](http://www.Jewish-Funerals.org)).

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# Why Taharah?

Interest in both receiving and participating in taharah is on the rise among Jews of all backgrounds. Reasons include its powerful liturgy; its link to Jewish history, community and faith; and the opportunity it provides to fulfill a sacred duty while expressing love and beginning healing. Ritual participants often call it one of the most intensely spiritual experiences of their lives.

## Preparations

When taharah is desired, advanced planning can be helpful. Organ and tissue donations are permitted by many of even the strictest Jewish authorities today, on the basis of “saving a life.” These can complicate taharah, however, as can an autopsy. Consult with a rabbi or taharah expert if these will occur. Embalming, cosmetics and public viewing are discouraged as they violate Jewish law. Funeral homes may ask a family member to identify the loved one prior to the funeral, however.

### Ritual & Mortuary Wishes

*Check Here If Wished*

We decline embalming, cosmetics and public viewing. ☐

We wish to have a *taharah* ritual performed. ☐

The team that performs the ceremony should contain:

Only Men ☐      Only Women ☐      Other ☐

If legally possible, we decline to permit autopsy,  
as it can complicate *taharah*. ☐

*Additional wishes & notes detailed on p. 14.*

# Humble Raiment

Ecology and equality have long been at the center of Jewish funeral practices. All Jews are traditionally buried in identical white garments, and placed in a simple wooden casket. Every element is biodegradable.

The custom of dressing in white shroud garments, called *tachrichim*, dates back 2,000 years, to the Talmudic elder Rabban Gamliel. He felt that all Jews, rich or poor, should be buried humbly, making a dignified funeral accessible to all.

Tachrichim are made of bleached cotton or linen. A set includes pants, a shirt, a robe (*kittel*) and a head covering. It is sewn without knots, hems, pockets or metal closures. A skull cap (*yarmulke* or *kippah*) and a prayer shawl (*tallit*), rendered un-kosher by cutting off a tassel, are standard additions for men. A winding sheet follows for all. While some want to use their own tallit, kippah, and/or kittel, others prefer to pass these down to relatives, and have new items provided for burial.



A kittel

## Garment Wishes

Check If Wished

Dress recipient in traditional Jewish burial garments ☐

Add a *tallit*:      New ☐      Recipient's Own ☐

Add a *yarmulke*:      New ☐      Recipient's Own ☐

Add Recipient's Own *kittel* ☐

Other garment wishes:

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# Funeral & Disposition

Jewish funerals are traditionally held within 24 hours of death, although delays of a day or two have become common.

Jewish tradition considers burial in the earth the only acceptable manner of disposition. It allows the body to gently return to the dust from which it was formed. Crypt interment qualifies as ground burial for many Jewish legal authorities. Cremation falls outside Jewish law, as does full-body donation to science, because it is followed by cremation. Many Jews see willfully choosing these as anathema because of the history of Jews being cremated against their will. Tradition holds that a soul without its body in the ground will wander for all eternity. Some rabbis decline to officiate funerals that involve cremation, and may ask families to override the decedent's request and bury anyway.

Still, L.A. Jewish families today are choosing cremation at nearly the same rates as their non-Jewish neighbors.

Casketless burial, popular in Israel, is gaining interest in the U.S. as part of the growing "green burial" movement. Cemeteries with this option may also offer wicker caskets, graves without concrete vaults, engraved rocks instead of plaques, and maintenance-free ground cover. For more information go to [www.GreenBurialCouncil.org](http://www.GreenBurialCouncil.org).

## Disposition Preferences *(Check All That Are Desired)*

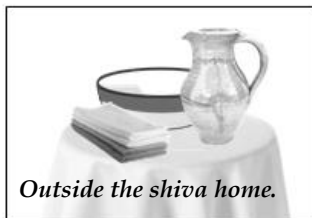
- |                |                          |               |                          |
|----------------|--------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| Ground Burial  | <input type="checkbox"/> | Green Burial  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Mausoleum      | <input type="checkbox"/> | Cremation     | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Organ Donation | <input type="checkbox"/> | Body Donation | <input type="checkbox"/> |

*Additional wishes and notes can be added on p. 14.*

# Mourning

One thing that Judaism does extraordinarily well is comfort mourners, with a detailed system of time-tested practices that normalize sadness and enable gradual, healthy healing.

This “mourner’s path” begins after the funeral, when a family arrives home. A long-burning candle is lit, and friends deliver a “meal of consolation” consisting of round foods (hard-boiled eggs, lentils, bagels) to remind them of the “circle of life.” A table with a pitcher of water, a bowl and towels is set at the door for guests to rinse their hands after their cemetery visit.



The first week after the funeral is called *shiva* (meaning seven, as in days). Mourners are encouraged to stay home, sit on low chairs, wear slippers, cover mirrors and abstain from shaving and wearing make-up, to de-emphasize the physical and turn to the spirit. Guests visit daily to enable community prayer (*shiva minyans*). Shiva ends with the family being escorted around the block, and back into the world.

For the first month after the funeral, family members observe the rules of *shloshim* (meaning 30). They may work, but avoid parties and public entertainment, and continue to wear the *kri'ah* ribbon or torn garment (*see p. 5*). They also attend synagogue daily to say the *Kaddish* prayer. This requirement continues for 11 months when mourning a parent.

Each year thereafter, mourners observe *yahrzeit* (commemoration) on the Hebrew calendar date of the death. They light a candle in the home, say special prayers in synagogue, and give *tzedakah*, a donation to charity, in honor of the deceased.

*Check Here If Wished*

Please ensure that the Kaddish is said in the Recipient’s honor.



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# Decision-makers

Some rituals cannot be performed without the consent of the Recipient's decision-making agents, as indicated in the Advanced Healthcare Directive. Please copy these here.

*If more space is needed, continue on page 14.*

## Financial Decision-Makers (Durable Power of Attorney)

1.

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Medical Decision-Makers (Healthcare Proxy)

Name

Phone

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

## Religious Advisors (Family, Clergy)

Name

Phone

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

# Preplanning

The following arrangements are already in place for services to be provided at the time of death and thereafter.

## Service Provider, Contact Details

Pre-arranged Casket	
Mortuary/ Crematory/ Body Donation	
<i>Taharah</i> Provider	
Cemetery/ Plot Location	
Funeral Officiant	
Shiva Minyan Support	

## Additional Wishes & Notes

*By Rabbi Avivah Erlick, BCC*  
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**For More Information**

[www.Jewish-Funerals.org](http://www.Jewish-Funerals.org), the website of *Kavod v'Nichum* (Honor and Comfort), offers a library of information, and online training, to further the organization's mission of supporting Jewish community-based funeral, burial and mourning practices.

[www.GreenBurialCouncil.org](http://www.GreenBurialCouncil.org), the website of the Green Burial Council, lists cemeteries offering natural approaches.