



BOARD OF RABBIS of Greater Philadelphia

Updated Guidelines for Funerals during the COVID-19 Public Health Crisis: May 2020

Board of Rabbis of Greater Philadelphia

We hope that this update finds you well – healthy, and taking care of yourselves, your families, and your communities and institutions. These challenging times have certainly reminded us how critical our work is as rabbis.

Since we initially distributed funeral guidelines in late March, medical experts and public-health officials have learned much, and societal norms in combating COVID-19 have evolved. Logistical concerns, knowledge of the disease, and outlooks on the duration of this crisis have changed – and so this document serves as an update of resources, best practices, and realities “on the ground.” Some of it simply may be a report of what is happening, so that our prior guidelines were not the “last word,” as so much has changed.

Once again, we emphasize that while we consulted with rabbinic colleagues of various streams of Judaism, as well as funeral directors and public-health experts, this document is not intended as *p’sak halachah*, nor does it claim to be expert medical directive (as colleagues’ circumstances and individual considerations may vary widely). Also, though the funeral directors intend to be in conversation with us as the situation develops, we know that circumstances and knowledge can rapidly change in this fluid, uncertain environment. Nonetheless, we hope this document helps as a guide to serving families and individuals in this crisis.

Funeral and Shiva Practices:

The vast majority of services are being held graveside (though some directors have allowed chapel services with distancing between attendees, with decontamination after use of the chapel). All services are strictly limited to ten (10) attendees, *including the funeral director and the clergy*. Masks, social distancing between households, and similar precautions must be respected.

- Some clergy have opted to officiate by Zoom, FaceTime, or other remote means, and families are also joining via these platforms. Other clergy have been physically present, though with all precautions of social distancing, masks, etc.
- Often for a funeral, the mechanics of burial as fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *k’vod ha-met* is completed quickly, and then afterward, services and eulogies are gatherings on Zoom.
- Similarly, gatherings for shiva have been almost exclusively on Zoom.
- Ribbons for *kriyah* are given by directors to the families, who pin them on themselves and tear them themselves, while the clergy can help with the liturgy, from a distance.
- Placing earth is mostly symbolic, as the filling of a grave requires people exerting themselves in close proximity to one another for some time. Families have brought plastic cups or used their hands to place earth, to avoid passing shovels or trowels.

Taharah and Shmirah:

- Given concerns over safety of the *chevra kaddisha* volunteers, many funeral homes have temporarily suspended or limited *taharah* and *shmirah*. Specific practices vary, given individual considerations of the facility layout at funeral homes (such as separate entrances and isolated rooms for *taharah*), availability of PPE, etc.
- Jewish tradition dictates concern for the living *chevra kaddisha* volunteers over that of the dead body (*pikuach nefesh*). In many cases, typical, long-standing volunteers are in vulnerable groups. Some funeral homes have designated staff to be *shomrim* or a one-person *chevra kaddisha*.
- State regulations dictate that for deceased individuals who were COVID-19 cases (confirmed and in some cases suspected), the sealed body containment cannot be re-opened. In such cases, prayers can be said as the body is placed in the *aron*, with the *tallit* pre-placed and then draped and/or *tachrichin* placed above the body. Such minimal practices allow for a measure of *k'vod ha-met* while sustaining the state health regulations and preserving health considerations for the living.

Other Best Practices and Guides for End-of-Life Care:

- Health-care workers have been heroic, compassionate, and accommodating in arranging FaceTime *vidui* or other end-of-life family gatherings, in cases where (due to facility policies in effect forbidding visitors, or due to the suspicion or confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19, the *goses* is alone). These are heart-breaking cases, but such gatherings have given some measure of comfort to families and dying loved ones. Our colleague Rabbi Tsurah August has written about pastoral strategies for being present from afar; her counsel can be found [here](#).
- We imagine that unveilings will take on new meaning and importance, when circumstances allow gathering at the *kever* of a loved one.

We understand the emotional pain of disallowing a community or family to gather in full numbers, physically. Online gatherings do not fully compensate for this hole, and our temporary inability to gather speaks to the wisdom of our tradition with respect to both *k'vod ha-met* and *nichum aveilim*. However, given the continued scarcity of PPE and the importance that the Jewish community be viewed as “team players” in the communal requirements of governmental leaders and public-health experts, we implore our colleagues to counsel our communities to honor the general practices at this time. Perceptions of the Jewish community flaunting the general guidelines could result in a *chillul ha-Shem*, however well-intentioned our efforts at respecting tradition, honoring the deceased, and comforting the bereaved may be.

It has also been brought to our attention that striving to find ways to honor the tradition to some extent is advisable, as well. If we abandon all efforts to follow Jewish guidelines in the name of the health crisis, then this may inadvertently lead our people concerned about fulfilling their obligations to eschew all precautions. We must balance these considerations.

That said, we embrace the often-heroic and selfless efforts of colleagues to honor our traditions, while taking precautions for ourselves, and promoting communal efforts to stem the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. This moment is certainly *sha'at ha-d'chak*, and we hope this update will aid individual rabbis as we interpret Jewish tradition and balance health concerns appropriately.

Bikhvod Rav,

Rabbis Annie Lewis and Eric Yanoff

Co-Presidents, Board of Rabbis of Greater Philadelphia