



# BOARD OF RABBIS of Greater Philadelphia

Chevra,

As your Board of Rabbis, we have received a number of questions regarding funeral practices in this most difficult time. The Board of Rabbis represents a broad range of Jewish practices, movements, and approaches, and so we do not presume to offer *p'sak halachah*.

However, we did consult with representatives of the funeral directors and chevra kaddisha organizations, as well as rabbis in different streams of Judaism, to propose the following guidelines. We also consulted with infectious disease medical experts and public health professionals. We hope these guidelines are helpful. Much of it is in line with what the funeral homes are saying, as well. Know that the public health guidelines are evolving rapidly – so use your judgment, and consult experts in the funeral, rabbinic, and health fields as things progress.

Wishing you health, in these fraught times,  
Your BOR

## **FUNERAL RITUALS AND CUSTOMS:**

- Small, graveside services with immediate family only are strongly recommended. We urge you to avoid chapel/synagogue services.
- People/nuclear-family households should sit spaced per CDC guidelines of distancing.
- Avoid reception lines. These are not Jewishly necessary, and are a Philadelphia-specific custom.
- Passing a pen for a sign-in book is not Jewishly necessary. Such books should be suspended – especially since attendance should be low enough to know who was there.
- Kippot, if distributed, should be discarded and not recollected. People should be encouraged to bring their own to wear, and signs or announcements should

make clear that kippot will not be collected.

- Ribbon-pins for kriyah should be placed and torn by the individual mourner (or a family member already within contact in the same home, so as to avoid another vector of transmission).
- Of course, those exposed, symptomatic, pending testing, and/or in a vulnerable risk group should not attend.

### **SHIVA:**

- The seven days following a burial *are* shiva, regardless of whether large groups congregate in tight quarters of one's home. While the desire for a minyan in which to say kaddish is understandable, our colleague R. Avraham Shmidman shared that the most essential mitzvah was to sustain the legacy of goodness, the example set by their deceased loved one (*Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, Siman 26, Se'if 22*):

אף - על - פי שאמירת הקדיש והתפלות מועילות להאבות, מכל - מקום אין אלו העיקר, אלא העיקר הוא שהבנים ילכו באורח מישור, כי בזה הם מזכים האבות.

- Shivas should be limited to immediate family, and make use of livestream and other online minyan options if possible.
- Since we are asking people to limit attendance, coat racks and chairs taken out and brought back by the funeral directors should not be necessary.
- Funeral directors expressed concern about distributing siddurim. This is not necessary and currently discouraged. Funeral homes were encouraged to post liturgy for services online (pdfs, printable, etc) so that individuals/homes could access the liturgy.

### **TAHARAH:**

- For ALL taharot, regardless of COVID-19, universal precautions (gloves/gowns/mask) should be taken. For COVID-19, the deceased is not a likely vector of transmission.
- However, there is concern among the members of the chevra kaddisha itself. Those in the chevra kaddisha should take precautions and should not come out if exposed/symptomatic/in a vulnerable (age, immune-compromised) category.
- It is unclear whether we can populate enough chevrot kaddisha with these restrictions. That is a concern. But risk mitigation should be practiced, per CDC and other public health guidelines.
- The Reconstructionist chevra kaddisha of Philadelphia has suspended operations for the moment based on concerns of pikuach nefesh because they could not guarantee the prevention of transmission among members while performing the taharah. Some but not all funeral homes expect to continue providing taharah services, but please consult the specific funeral home for guidance.

We are mindful that the Jewish response to death – indeed, the words of the *kaddish* itself – affirm life. This value might guide us in these difficult times, as we

offer counsel to those beset by loss, in this difficult time.

Wishing you strength,

Rabbis Eric Yanoff and Annie Lewis, *on behalf of the Board of Rabbis of Greater Philadelphia*



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