

A Guide to the Orthodox Jewish End of Life Issues



**MAKING A
DIFFERENCE
FOR SERIOUSLY
ILL CHILDREN**

1. **As a general maxim, all Jewish life is paramount.** Individuals, whether a few days old or elderly, have as much right to life as each other. The smallest part of any life is still of infinite value. Consequently, orthodox Jews will go to extreme lengths to **preserve and prolong** life, often at great personal or financial cost.
2. **Even when extremely ill, orthodox Jewish patients or their parents/guardians on their behalf will do all they can to continue to observe religious obligations.** For example, relatives will want to ensure that the patient keeps kosher and follows *Shabbat* and *Yom-tov* (festival) Laws. A male patient (over the age of 3) should continue to wear *tsit tsit* if possible and a male over 13 would want to continue to put on tefillin daily even if he needs help to do so.
3. **Informing patient of a terminal diagnosis.** Most orthodox Jews would not want to tell the patient that they have a terminal diagnosis so that the patient does not give up hope. This should be borne in mind by healthcare professionals.
4. **Especially near the end, prayer is of extreme importance.** Relatives will want to recite prayers (*tehillim*) by the bedside and the patient might do this too where possible. If so, care should be given to ensure that the patient is fully clothed and in as dignified a state as possible. In such a situation, families may wish to stay with the patient constantly and to arrange a round-the-clock bedside rota.
5. If we consider what it means to do all you can to prolong life, it can be said that ANY form of 'assisted death' is forbidden and that families may request measures to prolong life for just a **little** longer for example the putting up of a fluid drip in a patient who is in a coma, so that he does not die of dehydration. In almost all cases, the **basic needs** of life - water, food and air, should be provided. Whether to go beyond that, as in the giving of active heroic treatments, will be a matter to be discussed sensitively with all concerned. Resuscitation plans and policies for example should be sensitively handled and should always involve relatives and carers who will probably want to involve a rabbi in these major decisions.
6. **Where death is anticipated,** it is considered an honour if a quorum of ten Jewish men (*a minyan*) is present at or around the moment of death. Ideally, where possible, every effort should be made to try and help, such as by providing a side room. The minyan may well include members of the *Chevra Kadisha* (Burial Society – see later.)
7. **Jewish Law forbids mutilation of the human body.** Post-mortem examinations are not allowed unless a coroner insists on it. Relatives may go to great lengths to prevent one being performed. Where it is deemed necessary, the autopsy must be carried out as soon as possible so as not to delay the funeral. MRI scans, due to their more non-invasive nature are more acceptable under Jewish Law.
8. **Organ donation.** Although theoretically permissible, by the time they become available (once the criteria for confirmation of death are met), they are no longer suitable for use. Jews may receive organs and bone marrow as well as blood transfusions and they may donate blood, bone marrow and live donor organs such as kidneys. Doing so is considered a great *mitzvah* or meritorious act.

9. **Burial.** This should be done as soon as possible after death and a funeral may take place within hours. Needlessly delaying a funeral is considered disrespectful to the departed (except where death has occurred on a Shabbat). In areas with significant Jewish populations, the Registrar for Deaths may arrange to be available on Sundays and Bank Holidays for this reason.
10. **A body should not be left alone, unattended, from the time of death until the funeral.** Family members or volunteers from the *Chevra Kadisha* will want to arrange a rota to sit with the body (known as *shemirah* – ‘guarding’ or ‘watching’). Where possible, hospitals and mortuaries should allow someone to be in near to a body at all times whether by sitting in the same room or outside the door of a cold room in the mortuary.
11. **Jewish funerals are relatively modest.** Coffins are basic, made of wood and unadorned. There are no flowers and the service is short and simple. In very orthodox communities, the service is attended only by men. Cremation is not permitted by orthodox Jews.
12. **The burial society (*Chevra Kadisha*)** – Most orthodox Jews are paid up members of a *Chevra Kadisha*, an organization made up mainly of volunteers who make all the arrangements for the final rites for the dead and for burial. Sometimes bodies are transported to Israel; in this situation the *Chevra Kadisha* will handle the arrangements and details.
13. **When no relatives are present at death.** When an orthodox Jew dies with no relative present, the body should be touched as little as possible. Relatives should be informed so that they can contact the *Chevra Kadisha*. Tubes in place at the time of death should remain in place and only be removed by the *Chevra Kadisha*. Where there are no relatives, ward staff should contact the *Chevra Kadisha* themselves whatever the time of day or night.
14. **Amputated limbs.** These should be given to the members of the *Chevra Kadisha* for a dignified funeral. They will also arrange to collect stillbirths and the products of miscarriages (where large enough to be identifiable), which according to Jewish Law should be buried.
15. **The Shiva Period.** Following the funeral, the departed’s immediate family begin a period of mourning called *Shiva* which literally means seven days and which lasts for a week. During this time mourners do not go to work but stay at home and sit on low chairs as a symbol of mourning and receive condolence visits from family and friends. Daily prayer services are held at the *Shiva* house. The *Shiva* has a comforting effect and helps the grieving process.
16. **Extended mourning period.** Following the *Shiva*, there is an extended period of mourning during which time the special *Kaddish* prayers are recited daily by the children of the deceased or in the case of a child, by their siblings and parents. Mourners cannot attend joyous communal festivities at this time. Children of deceased must continue this period of mourning for twelve months but for other relatives, this lasts for only thirty days.
17. **Anniversary of the death.** This is called a *Yahrzeit* and is marked by the saying of *Kaddish* in the synagogue and the lighting of a candle at home which lasts for twenty-four hours.

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