

Coronavirus: Guidelines for Attendance at Funerals and Shivas
United Synagogue Burial Society
Update as of Tuesday, 17th March, 2020

One of our sacred tasks as a community is *chesed shel emet*, (the most truthful kindness), the rabbinic term for the mitzvah of assisting in the dignified burial of a deceased person. When one is able to, one performs this mitzvah in person.

It is coupled with the mitzvah of *nichum aveilim*, offering comfort, solace and support to mourners. This particular mitzvah is usually carried out in person but can also be observed by a telephone call or electronic means such as Facetime.

At this time, however, a priority must be the protection of those who are vulnerable from the spread of the virus even if this means that you cannot fulfil *chesed shel emet* or *nichum aveilim* in person. We ask therefore that the following guidelines are shared with members.

If you are medically vulnerable or aged over 70 please refrain from attending funerals and shivas. Instead choose to offer comfort in other ways, such as by telephone and in writing. Even if you are not in these 'at risk' groups please give serious consideration as to whether to attend.

Over the coming days the United Synagogue will be placing limits on the number of people who can attend a funeral. In accordance with social distancing guidance, mourners should have very small gatherings of invited family members and friends at a funeral in order to avoid the potential spread of the virus. The same guidance would also apply at a Shiva house. Attendees should not spend unnecessary time together to interact socially. These limits or family wishes will be communicated to members. It would be helpful if this message were shared to those outside your community.

If you attend a funeral or shiva, please refrain from shaking hands, kissing and hugging. At a funeral, only mourners will be asked to put in earth. We will not be supplying any transport at our cemeteries and, in some cases, funerals will be held outside of the prayer hall. Individuals or community representatives might consider livestreaming funerals or shivas in order to allow those who are at risk or self-isolating to be included.

Every day in our prayers, we recite two paragraphs which begin with the Hebrew words 'Elu Devarim' (p.14 and 16 in the green siddur). These paragraphs, which include reference to helping at a time of bereavement, were one of the ways our Talmudic rabbis set out a daily summary for us of the values which typify a Jew.

This is one of the reasons we say these paragraphs daily. By living up to these values to the best of our ability, may we find strength, inspiration, kindness and community even at this difficult time.

May God bless us and the whole world. We wish you well.

United Synagogue Burial Society

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