

Dear friends,

I hope you are all healthy and hanging in there. I have now officiated at 3 funerals over the past two weeks and I wanted to share some guidelines and tips below. I welcome your additions, etc. Part of this depends on your local funeral homes and cemeteries, and their respective protocols. My recent funerals have been at Cedar Park Cemetery in New Jersey.

### **Guidelines and tips for Officiating Clergy at Funerals and Shiva during COVID-19 Crisis**

- 1. Prep for Virtual funerals and shivas:** Set up a zoom link for the funeral in advance so family members and others can access zoom and not have that be an additional concern. I then host the zoom and record the funeral over my phone. For shiva, there are google sites which have been set up for zooming and other sharing of memories. These can be critical and meaningful.
- 2. Who Attends the Funeral:**
  - **COVID-19 Family Members:** Make sure that any family members who are symptomatic do not attend. Attending is against government orders. You should ask if any family member is symptomatic/subject to isolation. Then you should respond that you cannot officiate if there is anyone present who should not be outside their home at this time. Do not wait to show up at the cemetery to have this discussion. Tell them in advance that they can participate via zoom. No exceptions. Not even inside cars.
  - **Total # of People:** New Jersey is currently allowing only the funeral director, clergy member and a few family members to stand at the graveside funeral. In other locales without restrictions, the funeral should be restricted to immediate family and a few male friends/ family to form a minyan. Only do this if you are confident you can enforce social distancing strictly. If not, have just mourners. Do not send out the exact time and place of funeral to a shul list if you are worried about the crowd.
- 3. Keriah:** I have asked the funeral homes to bring multiple blades and to give them directly to mourners. I direct the mourners and a family member who is available to assist with the initial keriah prior to making the bracha of dayan haemet together as a family (including those on zoom). New Jersey cemeteries are not allowing the family members to be at the grave when the workers lower the coffin. So I have been doing keriah in the parking lot with the back of the hearse open- **שעת חימום**. I zoom it and coordinate keriah with family members who are on zoom.  
**Important Halakhic note:** Aveilim on Zoom must stand up for Keriah. This is **מעכב** and people are not used to standing when watching on zoom.
- 4. Mechilah:** I also suggest that the family members present and those on zoom ask for mechilah at that point with the back hearse door open. I leave the zoom on for the mourners who are not present and give time for each of the mourners alone and for all of them together.
- 5. Levayat HaMeit:** In New Jersey, officiating rabbis and funeral directors are allowed to accompany the *Aron* and then watch the workers lower the *Aron* from a distance. I have been zooming this too while reciting *yoshev b'seter*. While awaiting the mourners' arrival at the grave, I recite tehillim over zoom. At this time, I would not be comfortable asking attendees to transport the body, even if the cemetery allows it. It is impossible to carry the *Aron* and comply with social distancing.
- 6. Participating in Burial:** New Jersey cemeteries are not providing shovels. I have told mourners to bring large cups so that they can scoop up earth and participate in the kevarah. I bring a cup as well. I suppose people could bring their own shovels, but I have not asked. I leave it up to the family members if they want to watch the vehicle fill in the grave. No formal shurot when there is no minyan.
- 7. Funeral Services in Nisan:** no malehs, no tzidduk hadin, no burial kaddish (no kaddish at all if no minyan present), no formal eulogies. I have used a perek of tehillim, which I read and translate verse by verse, and then use the pesukim to reflect on the individual's life, lessons and legacy. I have also asked family members to share lessons as opposed to formal eulogies. This is not strictly covid-19 related, but it has been particularly

helpful during this turbulent time to have a standard routine which can be individualized and tailored for each person. When there is no kaddish, I have been saying a short tefillah which allows me to say the person's full Hebrew name in the context of the burial.

8. **Precautions:** I have been driving home and washing my hands at home. Safer than getting out of the car multiple times and touching sinks, etc. I have been wearing a mask which I lower when I speak. I have made sure to remind the mourners to maintain social distance. I am very strict about this.
9. **Seudat Havra'ah and Shiva meals:** We are having a very basic *seudat havra'ah* delivered from our local store. Nothing prepared in people's homes. We have not been coordinating meals for shiva as we usually do, though close friends have been purchasing and delivering food without going into shiva homes.
10. **In Lieu of Shiva Minyanim:** I learn mishnayot each day at a time that corresponds to between Mincha and ma'ariv and during the shiva we dedicate the mishnah learning to the deceased and I or a family member says a few words about them.

**11. Additional Pastoral Reminders/Suggestions:**

- **Acknowledging the circumstances:** it is very important to acknowledge that a funeral and shiva at this time compounds the sense of loss as there is not a proper public paying of respect. Assure the family that there will be a time that we will gather to give that proper, communal tribute.
- **Dying Alone:** Additionally, many individuals- especially those with COVID-19, are dying alone. It is critical to acknowledge that tragedy/sadness/guilt and to emphasize how loved ones were supportive and took care of the person who passed away to the best of their abilities given the situation.
- **Zoom Shiva:** Mourners are not able to sit shiva together, so that also brings pastoral challenges. Please make sure that family members who are in isolation have time with other family members without other people on the zoom (set up multiple zooms, eg. zooms for mourners only -or mourners and their immediate family- to spend together, aside from zoom times for friends and extended family.). Like you would at a regular shiva, set up separate zoom rooms or breakout rooms for different mourners when appropriate. I have zoomed with one family to conclude shiva together with a final Hamakom and then a symbolic walk outside (for those not in quarantine).

**12. Burial in Israel/ Burial *Al Tenai*:**

- At this time there is one Cargo plane a week going to Israel- leaving Mondays.
- Israel will not receive any bodies without a Doctor's note stating that the deceased did not have COVID-19.
- Any family member who travels with the body would be subject to quarantine in Israel, so you need to have a relative or friend receive the body in Israel.
- If the delay is too long, or the deceased died of COVID-19, or the family has no one to receive the body in Israel, one may conduct burial *al tenai* given the circumstances. Reassure the family that this is what is being done by many people at this time and that reinterment to bury in Israel has a long history in Jewish tradition.
- One may use another family plot temporarily for the purposes of this burial *al tenai*.

בלע המות לנצח ומחה אדני יקוק דמעה מעל כל פנים וחרפת עמו יסיר מעל כל הארץ כי יקוק דבר

That's it for now.  
Hope it is helpful,  
Shmuel  
646-734-6543  
shmuelhain@gmail.com