



Funeral Guidelines in an Era of COVID-19

April 7, 2020; Nisan 13, 5780

Dear Jewish Community,

No words can express the depth of pain felt by our grieving families during this unprecedented period. As rabbis **we seek to bring the spiritual strength** and support families so deeply need.

We also recognize that the principle of *pikuach nefesh*, of **saving a life, requires us to make exceptions to our time-honored funeral practices**. While it hurts us to see mourners denied the comforts that ritual proximity affords, we must work together to find meaningful alternative ways to show comfort and condolence in these times.

Out of a deep sense of love for our colleagues and our constituents' wellbeing, we call on one another to **conduct funerals according to the most cautious and prudent standards** possible while the COVID-19 pandemic persists. This includes the following:

1. Ideally, clergy will conduct **funeral services online** using Zoom or a similar platform. This will allow all mourners and guests who wish to participate virtually. It can be followed or preceded by a **simple burial at which no clergy or mourners are present**.* If this ideal is not possible, then:

1. If both the family and the clergy person agree, the **officiating clergy may attend the burial** to foster a sense of the sacred.
 2. If both the family and the clergy person agree, the officiating clergy will conduct burials with **one (1) healthy family representative at graveside** to witness this sacred moment on behalf of all the mourners. If the clergy person is present (see 1a), s/he will practice extreme caution (social distancing, masks and gloves, etc.).
2. **Clergy should not feel pressured** by mourners, directors, cemetery staff, synagogue leadership or colleagues to abrogate these guidelines. They are for everyone's benefit and safety and in accordance with Jewish law's emphasis on preservation of life above all else.

Diverging from these guidelines puts clergy at risk, puts mourners at risk, and endangers public health. Indeed, deviating from them may make it impossible for a clergy person to officiate.

We also recognize that evolving logistical, public health, legal, and regulatory changes may render this guidance moot and **we yield to any more stringent guidance** that may come from the proper authorities.

May The One who "heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" (Ps. 147:3) **give us the courage and stamina to weather this storm together.** May we in turn give our communities the support they need to remain hopeful and healthy.

L'Shalom u'vracha,

The Westchester Board of Rabbis

*Funeral liturgy and eulogies bring comfort in the time of mourning. Difficult acoustics, bad weather, and unpredictable internet bandwidth of cemeteries make video conferencing from the graveside difficult and distracts from the meaning and holiness of the moment.

