JUDAISM 101

Judaism is one of the Abrahamic religions and includes rituals, beliefs and a code of ethics. It includes the history of a people who believe themselves to be chosen for a covenant with God.

Today Judaism includes adherents (called Jews) of most races and nations. The foundational document of Judaism is the Torah (which is also the first five books of the Christian Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). The Torah teaches there is only one God. Beginning with their first three patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God made a covenant with the Jewish people that still stands today.

The covenant includes God's blessing for the Jewish people, both in terms of numbers of people and in terms of a gift of the "promised land." The covenant also calls Jews to live by a wide-ranging code of ethics. Despite their deep connection with God, Jews have been persecuted through the ages in several ways and times.

Today there are four major Jewish movements in the United States and Canada: Reform Judaism, Reconstructionist Judaism, Conservative Judaism and Orthodox Judaism. Hebrew is the traditional language of Jewish worship and is used in varying degrees in each movement.

As of 2015 there were over 4 million Jews from all four movements in the United States of America, and there were over 2,500 houses of worship, known as synagogues or temples.
WHAT CHRISTIAN CLERGY NEED TO KNOW ABOUT JEWISH FUNERALS

Typically a Jewish funeral will take place the day after the death, unless there are extraordinary circumstances. (In the Reform movement some families will wait up to 2 or 3 days for members to gather.) When news of a death is received, immediately phone or visit the family.

The funeral service itself will be held either at the synagogue/temple or at a funeral home and will last between 15 and 60 minutes. It is a stand-alone service of worship which is also a time of intense mourning and public grieving. There will never be an open casket, and often a rabbi will officiate, a cantor will sing, and other family members or friends will be invited to give the eulogy or share memories. Men should wear a jacket and tie. Most often a yarmulke or kippah, which is a small head covering, will be provided. Women should wear a modest dress or skirt. Sometimes they will also be asked to wear a form of head-covering. It is appropriate to offer condolences, such as "I am sorry for your loss."

The interment can be intended either for all mourners or for only family and close friends. Sometimes there is a long, slow procession to the gravesite. Once there, often the rabbi will lead the mourner's kaddish, the prayer for the deceased. After the prayers all present participate in filling in the grave by each putting one spade of earth on top of the lowered casket.

After the funeral the family may sit for seven days in their home of what is called the shiva period. Visiting those who are mourning is a commandment and a reminder sadness (and joy) is a part of the fabric of the Jewish community. Visits during this time should last about 30 minutes during the day or evening hours. If you take food it should be kosher, so completely vegetarian dishes are advised. After expressing condolences, visitors sit quietly or talk to others and wait to be spoken to by the principal mourners. During this time mirrors in the home may be covered, so mourners can concentrate on mourning and not on vanity, a candle may be burned in memory of the deceased, and black ribbons and only slippers or socks may be worn. Men may not shave during this time in order to symbolize their lack of interest in comfort or how they appear. During this time there also may be twice-daily times of formal worship.

Accept a prayer book when offered and read silently the English. Stand and sit as others do.
For eleven months after the death of a close relative (or one month for other relatives) mourners may attend daily services at their synagogue/temple. Thereafter the anniversary of the death is called a yahrzeit and is the day when the bereaved attends the service in order to light the yahrzeit candle. On the first anniversary of the death the unveiling of the tombstone usually takes place. Attendance for this is by invitation.

Adherents of the Reform movement do not believe in bodily resurrection or a physical life after death. Generally they believe in the immortality of every soul. This immortality is manifest in the memories treasured in this life by those who knew and loved the deceased. They do allow for cremation, although it is not traditional and not accepted in the other movements.

Adherents of the Reconstructionist movement also do not believe in bodily resurrection. They believe that when a person dies, his or her soul rejoins the universe.

Adherents of the Conservative movement generally will speak of the resurrection of the dead, but do not specify whether it is physical or spiritual. The former will occur upon the coming of the Messiah, while the latter will occur by those remaining on earth upholding the memory of the deceased. As they wait for the Messiah righteous souls enjoy the pleasure of olam ha’arah, which is a Garden of Eden like world to come, while evil souls suffer in the fiery pits of Gehenna.

Adherents of the Orthodox movement believe in bodily resurrection and physical life after death. This will occur upon the coming of the Messiah.
We have described here very general information about Judaism in North America. It is always a good idea to talk with the family of the deceased directly about their particular traditions and to talk with the rabbi or cantor who may also be participating in the service. It is also important to remember that some Jews have traveled to North America from all over the world. They have brought with them their own cultural contexts, which will vary from country-of-origin to country-of-origin. If you have questions, make sure you ask.
Resources for Deeper Study

Union for Reform Judaism: 212-650-4000; www.urj.org

United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism: 212-533-7800; www.uscj.org

Jewish Reconstructionist Communities: 215-576-0800; www.rrc.edu
Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America: 212-563-4000; www.ou.org


The Council of Bishops Office of Christian Unity and Interreligious Relationships, publisher of this brochure, wishes to acknowledge the contents are intended as a guide and have been developed from a general North American context. United Methodists of other cultural contexts are encouraged to volunteer to create a similar resource applicable specifically for them.