

# JEWISH CEMETERY BASICS



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## *Here Lies*

At the top of many markers is an abbreviation with two Hebrew letters (פ"נ). This generally stands for Po Nikbar/ah (פה נקבר/ה) "here lies".



## *Eternal Life*

At the bottom of many markers are five Hebrew letters (תנצ"ח) sometimes read as "tantzava". It is the abbreviation of a verse from Samuel, 25:29, "May their soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life."



## *Kohanim Symbol*

Two hands lifted, palms faced down with fingers forming the Hebrew letter Shin (ש) is the ancient sign of the Kohanim, the Jewish priestly class. It is thought that the Divine Presence would shine through the outstretched fingers of the priests when saying the Aaronic Benediction – named after Moses's brother, Aaron, the first priest. The Kohen (also spelled Cohen, or Kohan) lineage is passed down through generations.



## *Levite's Symbol*

In ancient Jewish life, Levites helped the Kohanim with the ritual washing of hands. A pitcher represents the act of pouring water over hands for purification. This lineage is also passed down through families.



## *Other Symbols*

Often a lamb, dove, broken branch, or tree stump suggests a short life lived, a drooping flower is life cut off in full bloom, a menorah often suggests a female and a six-pointed star suggests a male.



# JEWISH CEMETERY TERMS

For more Jewish wisdom and  
resources on death and dying, visit  
[www.shomercollective.org](http://www.shomercollective.org).

- **Aninut** – period of time between death and burial, interment or final resting place.
- **Aveilim** – Mourners. **Nihum Aveilim** means comforting the mourners.
- **Avelut** – is the 12-month mourning period observed for parents, beginning with **Shiva** (the first 7 days) followed by **Shloshim** (the initial 30 days of mourning).
- **Baruch Dayan haEmet** – Blessed is the True Judge, a phrase said upon learning of a death. This is also said during the ritual of **Kri'ah** or “Tearing” clothing or a ribbon indicating to the community that they now hold the status of a mourner.
- **Chesed Shel Emet** – A term found in Genesis 47:29 when Jacob summoned Joseph asking for “True Loving Kindness” to bring his body to his family burial ground.
- **Chevra Kadisha** – A discreet group responsible for preparation of a deceased's body for interment. Those who have died cannot repay them for their kindness and that is where both the sacredness and motivation to do this work is found.
- **Hamakom Yinachem Etchem B'toch Sha'ar Avlei Tzion v'Yerushalayim** – Traditional statement to mourners offering comfort amongst those in Zion and Jerusalem.
- **Natilat Yadayim** – ritual rinsing of hands with water symbolizing a transition from a physical or spiritual space of death back to the realm of the living.
- **Kavod haMet** – Respect for the dead.
- **Kever** – The Hebrew word for “grave”. The plural of graves is **Kvarim**.
- **Matzevah** – is a gravestone while a **Hakamat Matzeiah** or “raising the stone” is a short unveiling ceremony observed at different times depending on the Jewish community or family (usually held at the end of **Shiva**, **Shloshim**, or the first **Yahrzeit** or anniversary).
- **Mitzvah** – “Commandment” further translated to a good deed or a decisive act that embodies empathy and kindness. For example, it is a **Mitzvah** every time someone uses the Bay Area's nonprofit funeral home Sinai Memorial, as the modest amount charged enables someone who can't afford Jewish death care services to receive them at no cost.
- **Shmira** – is the act of guarding a deceased's body. A **Shomer** is one who guards.
- **Tachrichim** – Simple white linen burial shrouds placed on the deceased's body.
- **Taharah** – Washing of the deceased's body done by members of the **Chevra Kadisha**.
- **Tz'ror** – Small stone or pebble left on a Matzevah or Gravestone indicating someone visited. Stone is frequently used in Jewish text as a metaphor for G~d. Prayers often ask that the deceased be **Tz'ror haHayyim** or “bound up in the bond of life.” By placing a visiting stone, we not only indicate our visit, but also that their memory continues to live on through us as **Zichrono/ah Livracha** or as a Blessing. 