

## The Orthodox Jewish Woman and Ritual

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### Women's Involvement in Funeral and Shiva

When death strikes a family it is often men who become the organizers of arrangements. Women often tend to rely on male family members or the Rabbi to organize the funeral, *shiva*, *matzevah*, etc. But death is not a sacrament in Judaism. A woman can organize a funeral and deliver a *hesped* at the service. Additionally, women may carry the coffins of women. While a few decades ago it was not common for women to go to graveside funerals, this is now a common phenomenon. As women attain leadership positions in synagogues, there is no reason they should not be involved in funerals. A female in a leadership position in a synagogue may prepare mourners, deliver the eulogy and make necessary arrangements. She may also help arrange the *gilui matzevah*, and compose the text for the tombstone. The only *halachik* problem which may arise is that of the woman serving as *shaliach tzibur*. While a woman may perform a variety of leadership functions at a funeral or *gilui matzevah*, she can not lead the congregation in prayer which requires a *minyan*.

Accordingly, women's roles may be increased in the *shiva* house. When women do not say *kaddish*, they are often publicly invisible during the *shiva*. Women mourners are often asked to leave the room so that male mourners or those assembled can pray. The tendency then is for women to congregate in the kitchen, and not pray at all. Such behavior is disrespectful to the mourners as well as to the dead. A *shiva* room may be set up with an equitable division of space whether or not the woman is reciting *kaddish*. Similarly, the learning of *mishnayot* in memory of the dead during *shiva* can be lead by female mourners or by women who come to comfort.