

Statement on Funerals in the Synagogue

RABBI BEN ZION BOKSER

This statement was adopted by a vote of 10-2 on June 7, 1983. Members voting in favor: Rabbis Isidoro Aizenberg, Ephraim L. Bennett, Ben Zion Bokser, David M. Feldman, Morris Feldman, David H. Lincoln, Joel Roth, Morris M. Shapiro, Gordon Tucker and Alan J. Yuter. Members in opposition: Rabbis Kassel Abelson and Edward M. Gershfield.

SHE'ELAH

Historically, there has been no Jewish funeral home in the Morristown area. Consequently, the Jewish community has an informal arrangement with a non-Jewish funeral home. I have noticed a deterioration in Jewish standards for funerals (in our community). Public viewing is becoming common. There is no *hevra kadisha* and virtually no one requests a *taharah*. Many people no longer use *takhrikhin*.

My purpose is to reestablish Jewish standards for funerals. This coincides with the interests of the Jewish funeral home in a neighboring community, which is willing to follow my requests. My plans hinge on our ability to use the synagogue building. The room that we would be using is *not* the sanctuary. Any funeral that would use our building would be under my jurisdiction, and I can make traditional practices required, e.g., a simple wooden coffin, *takhrikhin*, *taharah*.

It is my ruling that not only is this permissible, but given the circumstances, it is preferable. Would the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards sanction the use of the synagogue for funerals under such circumstances? (Submitted by Rabbi Henry B. Balsler, Morristown, NJ)

TESHUVAH

Generally speaking, it is our feeling that the synagogue should not be used for funerals. At the same time, however, we are aware that there is a new trend to have funerals in the synagogue to assure that the rabbi and the community will have more control to insure that funeral practices are followed in conformity with the norms of Jewish Law.

While traditionally the tendency has been to have funerals in the funeral chapel rather than in the synagogue, an exception was always made in the case of an important individual in Jewish communal life to whom special honors were shown by having the funeral service in the synagogue.

In situations where Jewish funeral chapels are not available, it has become the practice in many such communities to have the funeral service in the synagogue building. Wherever possible, the casket should not be brought into the sanctuary, but should rather be placed in the foyer, while the service itself is conducted in the sanctuary. If this is physically impossible, we would not find it offensive to bring the casket into the sanctuary itself. Where practical, synagogues in such communities may want to consider the option of conducting the funeral service in a part of the synagogue building other than the sanctuary.