



# The Shiva Project

Initial Findings Report



# Intended Audience

This report sheds light on the challenges and opportunities to modern-day mourning in the U.S. and Canada. The report is for those interested in thinking about how the Jewish community responds to grief and mourning.

## Disclaimer:

Our researcher heard the voices and opinions from more than 100 people from many types and expressions of Judaism. Given the scope, this report may not encompass the entire spectrum of Jewish expression.



# How to use this report

This report is designed for use by professionals and lay leaders in Jewish community settings and beyond to gain insight into how Jewish grief and mourning tools are being conceptualized and practiced. We encourage professionals and lay leaders across the spectrum of Jewish diversity to think expansively about the current systems in place that are available to mourners and what we can do to improve, build upon, and revitalize them.

We hope you will think about how to make these mourning rituals accessible to more individuals and families.

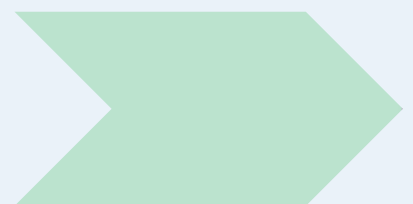
**“Grubhub  
has taken  
the place of  
chesed.”**

-Rabbi Jen Gubitz

# ***Over the course of nine months*** in 2023,

Shomer Collective embarked on a journey to identify the challenges and opportunities in revitalizing Jewish grief and mourning rituals and practices across the U.S. and Canada.

We took a two-pronged approach to understanding the landscape, engaging both laypeople and professionals.



# Laypeople

43 people participated in the eight focus groups based on their availability and continued interest. Participants ranged in age from mid-20s through early 80s and spanned Jewish experiences, including Jews by Choice and non-Jews who were connected to the Jewish community during mourning.

People also responded to our interest questionnaire, of which 77% reported participating in Jewish mourning rituals.

# Professionals

We conducted 80 interviews with professionals in the following fields:



# Professionals

Hospice workers

Clergy (pulpit rabbis, non-pulpit rabbis, chaplains)

Synagogue presidents

Chevra Kadisha and Chesed committee members

Funeral directors and administrators

'Death Tech' Entrepreneurs

End-Of-Life Doulas

Arts professionals (writers, musicians, and comedians)

Executive Directors of Jewish organizations

Lifecycle Managers at synagogues

Bereavement specialists

Shomer Collective Board Members

Nonprofit Professionals

including representatives from:  
At The Well, 18 Doors, Jewish Community Centers (JCCs), Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA), Honeymoon Israel, and Reimagine



Here's

What

We

Found.

# Trends:

The COVID-19 pandemic deeply **disrupted** and affected grief and mourning and had an effect on *shiva* and *kaddish* practices.

The **landscape** of how and where we live and affiliate has changed.

Grief is abstract **until it isn't.**

Knowledge and understanding of Jewish mourning rituals are **low** among less affiliated individuals.

Many focus group participants shared **positive** experiences with sitting *shiva*.

The death of an important person can lead to **deeper** Jewish engagement.

There is an appetite for **innovation!**



## Trend 1:

**The COVID-19 pandemic deeply disrupted and affected grief and mourning and had an effect on shiva and kaddish practices.**

### **More loss:**

Many people were unable to have funerals, sit *shiva*, or have opportunities for saying *kaddish* with their own communities, and that feeling of ambiguous loss continues to be felt.

### **Shorter Shiva:**

Amongst the non-Orthodox community, individuals sat *shiva* for shorter amounts of time, typically between 1-3 days maximum.



## Trend 1:

### **More technological access:**

Zoom has provided opportunities for increased access to Jewish mourning rituals. New technology, modalities, programs and hosting methods like hybrid *shiva* (partially in-person and partially online) have allowed more people to participate.



## Trend 2:

**The landscape of how and where we live and affiliate has changed.**

### **Demographic shifts in geography:**

Many individuals don't live in the same communities where they are burying a loved one, resulting in logistical challenges and diffusion around responsibilities.

### **Synagogue membership dwindled:**

Individuals are not affiliating with traditional movements and are not putting themselves in places equipped to manage death and lifecycle moments, like in a synagogue.





## Trend 2:

### **Family composition and affiliation:**

More and more families affiliate with multiple faith traditions and cultures and they have varying degrees of Jewish experiences.

### **Consumer v. community model:**

While in the past lay leaders and/or *chesed* committees have been integral in helping the mourning family, these systems have eroded. In many communities, more emphasis and pressure have been placed on clergy to perform rituals.

**“How do we  
elevate this  
conversation  
so we get to it  
before we have  
to be in it?”**

-Stephanie Garry, Plaza Community Chapel



## **Trend 3:**

**Many people avoid managing their affairs before end-of-life.**

### **Grief is abstract until it isn't:**

Mourning and grief (be it Jewish or otherwise) are not on the radar for those without significant loss experience. They only access these tools when the need arises.

### **Lack of preparation:**

Many people don't take the time to do the work to be prepared due to death denial, avoidance, superstition, being unsure of where to start, discomfort with the topic, and because "it never feels like the right time."



## Trend 4:

**Knowledge and understanding of Jewish mourning rituals are low among less affiliated individuals.**

### **Exposure:**

There is a lack of awareness of the choreography of Jewish mourning rituals due to a lack of exposure and knowledge of condolence call etiquette.

### **Shiva = hosting:**

Many reported that they felt like they had to host a cocktail party after someone died instead of receiving visitors. It's unclear if individuals derived benefits when *shiva* was in this form.



## Trend 4:

### **Lack of awareness as to who can help:**

Depending on the institution where the mourner goes (funeral home, synagogue, hospice chaplain), mourners rely on whatever the clergy and funeral administrators dictate. They typically are not researching what the “best fit” is in terms of the clergy, burial, etc.

**"Thought leaders  
need to refine the  
toolbox & give  
teachers, educators,  
rabbis, a very clear  
idea about how to  
use the tools... it's  
kind of like updating  
the operating  
system of Judaism"**

-Rabbi Dan Goldblatt, AriYael Healing Center



## Trend 5:

**Many focus group participants shared *positive* experiences with sitting shiva.**

Focus group participants with an active synagogue practice, tight knit spiritual community, or relationship with clergy shared **positive experiences** with sitting *shiva*.

This is **primarily** because they enjoyed the focus on hearing stories about the deceased, as well as the feeling of being cared for by shiva attendees. They also found that having a structure to put into action after someone died was a relief.

**The emerging vision for The Shiva Project is to increase access to these meaningful experiences.**



## Trend 6:

**The death of an important person can lead to deeper Jewish engagement.**

**Loss can lead to Jewish meaning-making among less affiliated individuals:**

There were numerous reports of people who had not engaged in Jewish life for years, yet after the death of a loved one or when their loved ones were aging, they began seeking out Jewish-specific spaces.





## Trend 6:

**Those individuals with some established Jewish practices and/or synagogue membership reported deepening their engagement in the following ways:**

- Continuing to help make a *minyan* at their synagogue beyond their *kaddish* year
- Joining the Chevra Kadisha if someone in their life had been cared for after death in a meaningful way
- Gaining training as an end-of-life doula and incorporating a Jewish lens
- Giving charity Jewishly, or joining a Jewish non-profit board
- Going to synagogue specifically for *yizkor* service
- Seeking out a synagogue in their new city to say *kaddish* (created new community)



## Trend 6:

### **There is an appetite for innovation!**

**More innovation is needed for Jewish communal response to the growing positive death movement.**

We are seeing changes in broader societal approaches to death, influencing Jewish Americans. Examples of these topics include:

- End-of-life doulas (who come from a Jewish lens) are gaining traction. They offer shiva support and follow-up for families in ways in which clergy do not have the same flexibility.
- Alternative Body Disposition: Many Jews want “something Jewish” and there has been an uptick in individuals requesting or exploring different body disposition options (cremation, tree burial, aquamation, natural organic reduction).



## Trend 6:

**There is an explicit need for more ways to address the loss of a non-immediate family member, such as a chosen family.**

### **DIY'ing using Jewish wisdom:**

Individuals with Jewish literacy reported feeling comfortable changing things up to meet their needs. They reported creating new rituals and performing them for loved ones independent of clergy. Creative examples have included:

- Creating own shloshim programs and memorials (ex: reading the eulogy again for a different audience, friend adapting the yizkor service for their friend)
- Using the mikveh to mark a transition in the mourning process
- Hosting multiple shivas (home community v. family members' community)
- Utilizing Zoom to customize the shiva experience.



## **Composition of findings: The Mourner Personas**

Based on our research with focus group participants, we compiled three general personas, or composites. Each of these aim to to represent the average mourner/griever and what their pain points might be.

Many of these needs overlap, and a mourner may identify with any number of these personas.

Note: These personas are the result of a small sample size and are not meant to encapsulate the complete experience of a mourner, but rather to inspire innovation in response to specific needs.





# Max

*THE LAST-  
MINUTE  
MOURNER*

They want some form of Judaism woven into their mourning journey.

The dying person and mourner may not have coordinated around what would come after death, sudden or not. Ex: buying a cemetery plot, prepaying for a funeral, etc.

May have little to no knowledge of Jewish communal services, providers, or spiritual organizations, leaving them scrambling at the time of death.

They may think talking about death only applies to imminent death.

May have confusion around Jewish mourning laws.

May think there's one right way and ask, "Are we doing it right"?

Max



# Dylan

*THE  
DISENFRANCHISED  
MOURNER*



May feel  
stigmatized  
around *how*  
the person  
died: suicide,  
homicide,  
addiction.

May not feel a sense  
of 'belonging' to  
existing Jewish  
community spaces.

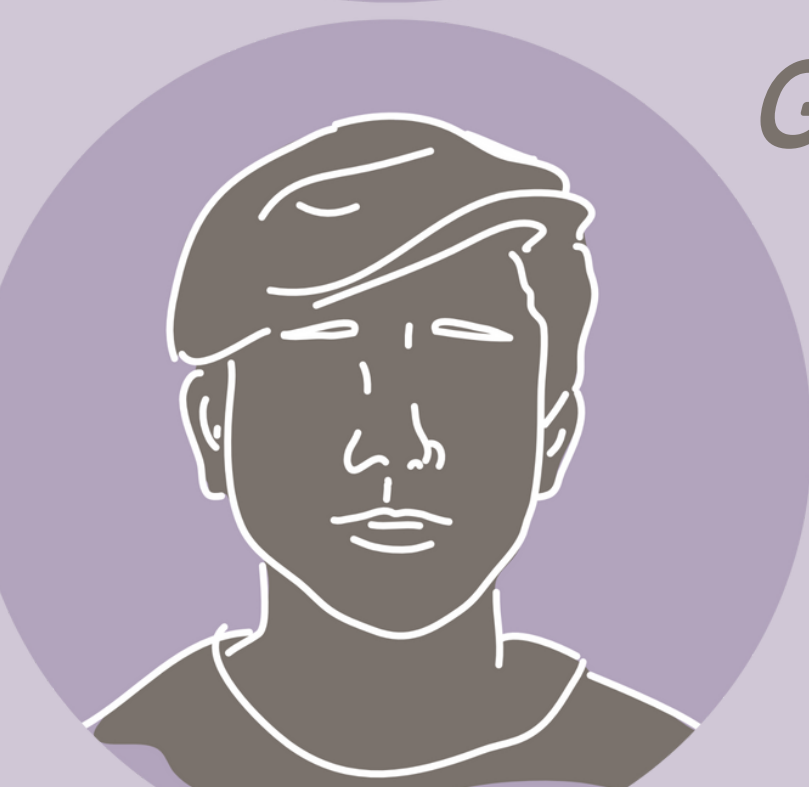
May feel  
financially  
boxed out.

May not have  
access to  
relationships  
with clergy  
for spiritual  
counsel.

They may not see  
themselves represented in  
the broader community  
with fewer resources  
representing their customs.

May feel  
uncomfortable  
and excluded  
from traditional  
Shiva minyanim.

Dylan



# Lou

*THE LONELY  
GRIEVER*

May be someone non-immediate to the person who died, like a best friend or chosen family, and thus left out of “traditional” shiva.

May have grieved alone due to COVID-19.

May have estrangement or divorce in the family and/or with the deceased.

They may be the direct mourner, but how they grew up, and currently practice are different.

May not live close to close friends and family, or to the deceased.

May have few relatives broadly or specifically in the Jewish community.

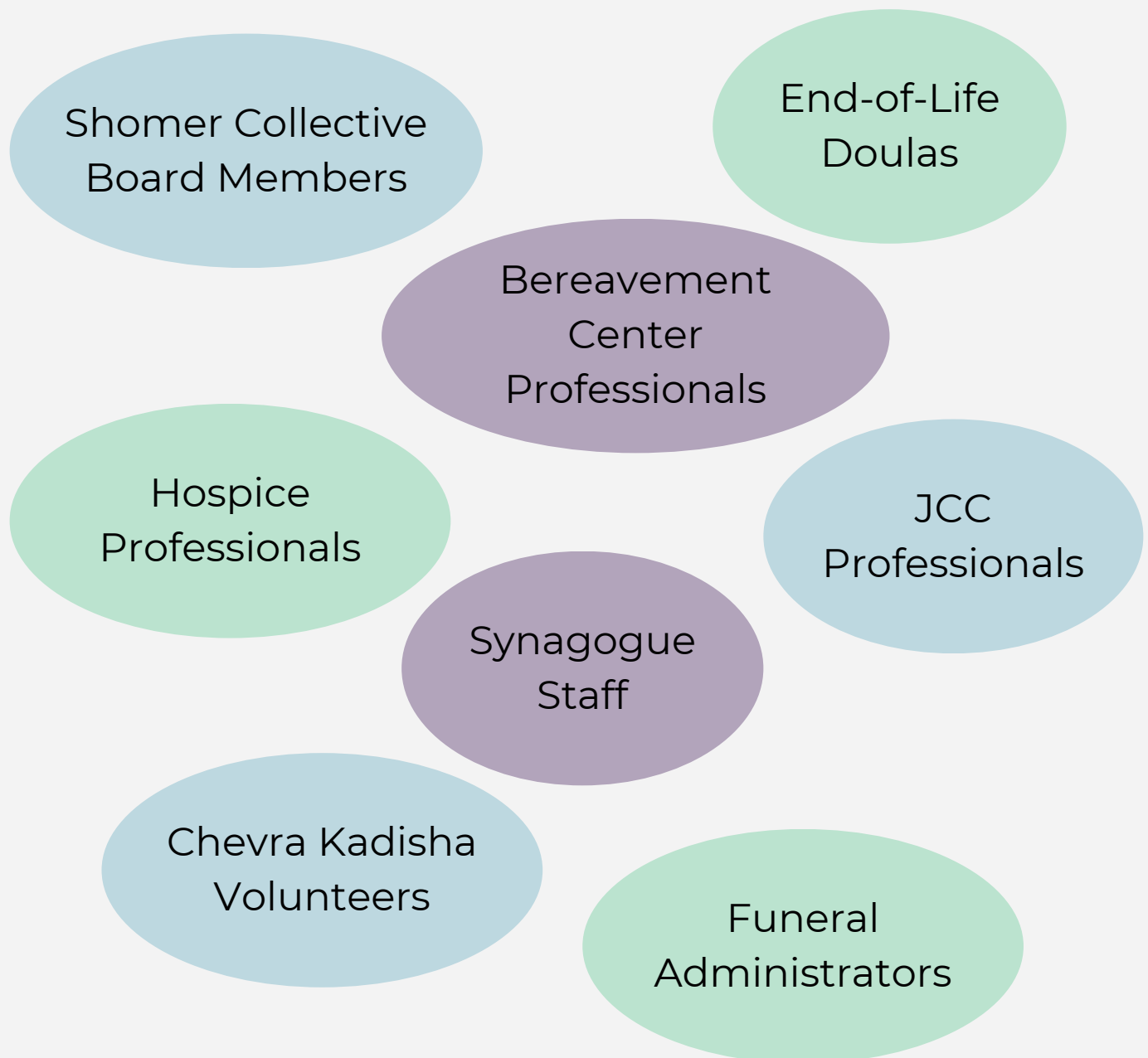


# Potential Solutions

The Shiva Project presented  
these composites  
(Max, Dylan, and Lou)  
to over 50 professionals in  
multiple ideation sessions.

We began thinking about ways  
in which we engage these  
mourners to better address  
their needs...

Those in attendance at these ideation sessions included:





# For the Disenfranchised and Last Minute Mourners:



Customize experiences to fit their needs.

Advertise ritual flexibility.

Appeal to their neutral, non-denominational,  
non-religious side.

Offer a “Jewish trauma” support group for  
those who may have had negative  
experiences with organized Jewish life.

Focus less on prayer and God,  
and more on humanity.



# For the Lonely Grievers:

Expand rituals for those who are not direct mourners.

Grief pen-pal/chevruta.

Overhaul Yahrzeit and Yizkor; Make Yizkor a public death-planning session.

Create a QR Code for individual online memorials.

Create a Yahrzeit kit beyond an aliyah, a candle, and an email.

Offer sustainable support for a more extended period.

Integrate Death over Dinner: Jewish Edition into a larger day of grieving like *Yom Kippur* and *Tisha b'Av*.

Focus on programming geared toward life stages or types of losses, such as a young adult grief retreat or suicide support.

Connect grief support to nature.



## Universal Ideas:

Build relationships with Jewish organizations with strong distribution channels to less affiliated networks. Many organizations have done excellent work in recent years in identifying less connected individuals (e.g. PJ Library, Honeymoon Israel, At the Well, OneTable).

Create more accessible + inclusive resources.

Create a shiva hotline or digital concierge.

Create a *shiva* kit, a resource guide with the meaning behind rituals and practices.

Centralize information about the logistics of *shiva* and Jewish mourning rituals.



Offer more virtual/non-traditional ways to say kaddish, like journaling daily/weekly/monthly with a group online. (Witnessing is essential to Kaddish's cathartic nature.)

Create a template or checklist to help mourners.

Customize grief groups for different types of deaths and diverse expressions of Judaism.

Design customs cards or signage for the house of mourning.

Adapt stone ritual. Bring a rock to make a shiva call, involving children in shiva (painting rocks, doing chores).

Use 'the walk around the block' at the end of shiva as a framework for incorporating walking to process grief. Consider creating peer-to-peer walks.

## **Offer more peer-to-peer support:**

After a death, there is typically a need for a logistics coordinator to support the mourner. Often, this falls to a trusted friend or family member. We generated ideas of how to systemize this without organized infrastructure.

### **Ideas included:**

Personalize the shiva design for the mourner.

Create empowerment and training programs for lay leadership.

Create an independent organization dedicated to shepherding someone through their mourning process.

## Utilize Technology:

The technology around Jewish end-of-life needs to be updated.

### Ideas included:

Afford more access to facilitated online *shiva*.

Create an app to identify mourners to help connect them to resources.

Record more podcasts related to the topic.

Utilize Instagram/TikTok.

Design an online platform to match mourners with resources to expedite their ability to sit *shiva*.

## **Shiva Awareness + Education Campaign:**

Reorienting shiva requires educating one's community on how to help. (Nowadays, many people find community in multiple places and not necessarily in the synagogue.)

### **Ideas included:**

Create a social media campaign around the benefits of sitting *shiva* and using other Jewish mourning rituals.

Create the Shiva Kit/Hotline/Digital Assistant in places many can find, like hospice and hospital settings. Advertise its availability for chaplains, non-pulpit rabbis, and EOL doulas.

## **Do more of what is already working.**

There is a lot of innovation happening in the Jewish end-of-life space that is working to support mourners.

### **Ideas included:**

Offer Jewish bereavement support/grief circles through grief counselors working from a Jewish lens, JCCs, end-of-life doulas, and peer-to-peer counseling like “Rosh-Chodesh Well Circles” grief book clubs.

Improve marketing and communication for existing end-of-life education, for example, at synagogues, community funeral homes, JCCs, and Jewish Family Service.

Encourage Jewish hospice utilization for grief support and follow-up.

# ***Going Further Upstream***

Connect B-Mitzvah, weddings, birth, etc., as opportunities to discuss this topic.

Normalize talking about death with different populations, including school-aged children.

Make Jewish organizations industry leaders on bereavement policies.

Train clergy outside the typical synagogue setting to respond more individually.

Diversify rabbinic education for different family configurations and backgrounds.

Expand the definition of a “griever.” For example, there are different types of loss, like divorce and estrangement, and shiva may be helpful in these contexts.

Expand financial support and access.

# Looking ahead

The Shiva Project is an ongoing one, with next stages in development as of this report publication.

Thank you to the Aviv Foundation for supporting this important first stage of preliminary research.





# The Shiva Project

is an ongoing initiative of  
Shomer Collective.

## **Chloe Nassau,**

consultant to Shomer Collective, led  
the research and development for  
The Shiva Project 2023-2024.

**“Shiva offers  
a beautiful  
container...”**

**...We are actually  
held in place and  
encouraged to  
turn towards our  
pain while  
supported  
by our  
community.”**

-End of Life Doula, Birgitta Kastenbaum



# ***The Shiva Project***