The Unveiling Ceremony

Introduction

It has long been a custom of the Jewish People to place a marker on a gravesite. The marker is made of some permanent material—usually stone—and contains the Hebrew and English name of the deceased and the date of death. It may also contain the date of birth, some very brief description of the deceased, or a phrase of prayer. Near the top of the marker the Hebrew acronym ה"ז (meaning “Here is interred”) is inscribed. Near the bottom of the marker are the letters נטול (meaning “May his/her soul be gathered up in the bond of life.”) This marker represents our conviction that the life of a person does not evaporate when the body dies. Some significant part of the person lives on among family, friends and community. Establishing and dedicating this memorial stone is an act of קדש חיה, honoring the dead; it often helps with רחמים אבלי, comforting the mourners, as well.

It has also become customary to gather some time after the death and burial to “unveil” and dedicate the marker. This ceremony is a strong customary practice or מנהג. Therefore, it is open to our own variations and inventions. While the presence of clergy is not required, Rabbi Small, Cantor Cohn and Mr. Pinchover are available and willing to lead an unveiling ceremony. To schedule an unveiling ceremony, contact Rabbi Small. If you are motivated to conduct it yourself, provided that it is more convenient for you to do so, Rabbi Small will be happy to coach you.

The unveiling is generally done any time between the end of שבעה and the end of the first year. If you cannot do so because of weather or family schedules, you may wait longer. Most families schedule the unveiling ceremony at a time they are available to gather at the gravesite. Often family and friends gather for a light meal after the ceremony.

The Purpose of the Unveiling Ceremony

Time has passed since the death. The shock has worn off. The pain of loss is still very real, but it has changed. We have begun to learn to live without the regular presence of our loved one. We have begun to find our way back into life again.

The unveiling ceremony gathers us together at the gravesite to recall what is immortal and lasting in this life. We can talk about our loved one with a different spirit than the painful words of eulogy. We may talk of what we miss most in our loved one’s life. We may celebrate what was triumphant and unique in this life. We may laugh at their humor, feel the warmth of their love, bring close their wisdom, recall the moments we most cherish, and cry at the loss.
Preparing for the Ceremony

1. Ask members of the family and close friends to prepare a few words recalling your loved one. This is not a eulogy, but a brief reflection on the person we miss.
   - What one moment best reveals their character?
   - What part of them will you never forget?
   - In what did your loved one find greatest joy?
   - What did you learn from this life?

2. Bring a bagful of stones to place on the gravesite (one per person). This is an old Jewish tradition showing that we have visited the gravesite to recollect the memory of our loved one. You can use either ordinary garden or driveway gravel, or decorative polished stones. The stones express the lasting quality of our loving memory.

The Ceremony

1. Gather at the gravesite. Bring everyone gathered close together. The ceremony is brief; most people can stand through it. Begin with a few words of poetry or prayer to set the mood. We have come to a special place to recall what is eternal in our loved one’s life. You may look in a synagogue prayer book or the booklet of prayer provided by the memorial park or find one from another source of your choosing.

2. Remove the cover and read the marker. This is usually done by the children of or someone very close to the deceased. Say the following:

   In the name of the family of ______________ and in the presence of his/her family (and friends) we consecrate this monument to his/her memory as a token of our love and respect

   **תְּחַי נִשְׁמַת (בֵּשֶׂמֶת הַנִּשָּׁמָה) הַרְפָּאִים בֵּצֵרוֹר חַיִים**

   *T’hi Nishmato (Nishmatah) tzerura b’tzror hachayim*

   May his (her) soul be gathered up in the bond of life.

3. Ask those gathered to share their words of memory of your loved one. Be patient. Not everyone speaks with fluency and grace. Let everyone who wishes share a reflection and a memory. After memories are shared say the following:

   Almighty God, eternal Creator, we are thankful for the life of ______________________, for the years which he/she was granted and for the privilege of having shared those years. May the memory of his/her . . . (incorporate some of the descriptions given for example, sense of humor, dedication to family, generosity, etc.) . . continue to inspire us, that we may live a better life. Oh God, help all who mourn ________________ honor his/her memory through our daily lives. Comfort us and grant us strength, for You are our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.
5. Other prayers that can be said:

A thousand years, in the sight of our eternal and merciful God, are but a day, the years of our life but a passing hour. God grants us life and life God has taken away; praised be God’s name.

__________________________ has been taken from our midst. We are pained by the gap in our lives. Yet love is strong as death; the bonds love creates are eternal. And ours is the blessing of memory, through which the lives of our departed continue to be with us.

4. Read the prayer El Maley Rachamim* in Hebrew (if you are able) and English, and be sure to include the name of the deceased.


Oh God, exalted and full of compassion, grant perfect peace in Your sheltering Presence, among the holy and pure who shine like the firmament, to the soul of ____________________________, who has gone to his/her eternal home. Master of mercy, we beseech You, remember all the worthy and righteous deeds that he/she performed in the land of the living. May his/her soul be bound up in the bond of life. God is his/her portion. May he/she rest in peace. Let us say: Amen.
*(You'll find this prayer in any prayer book and in the booklet provided by the memorial park.)*

5. Read the Mourners’ *Kaddish* prayer together. (See pages 5 and 6)

6. Distribute the stones and ask the gathered family and friends to place the stones on the grave marker.

7. You may end with a closing prayer of your choosing (some join hands for this) as you stand facing the newly dedicated memorial stone.

8. If you are gathering for a meal, announce where people are invited to go. Printed directions from the cemetery help.

9. It is fine to spend a few minutes at the cemetery wishing each other well, talking, or visiting the graves of other relatives or friends (after the ceremony).
Mourner’s Kaddish

Please note that this page contains the name of God.
If you print it out, please treat it with appropriate respect.

Mourners and those observing Yahrtzeit:

Yit’gadal v’yit’kadash sh’mei raba (Cong: Amein).
May His great Name grow exalted and sanctified (Cong: Amen.)

ינפישל מלכותו והגימור והכימור
v’yam’likh mal’khutei b’chayeikhon uv’yomeikhon
May He give reign to His kingship in your lifetimes and in your days,

ב”למה 디 ברא לקרעה
b’al’ma di v’ra khir’utei
in the world that He created as He willed.

Mourners and those observing Yahrtzeit:

Y’hei sh’mei raba m’varakh l’alam ul’al’mei al’maya
May His great Name be blessed forever and ever

Congregation and Mourners:

Y’hei sh’mei raba m’varakh l’alam ul’al’mei al’maya
May His great Name be blessed forever and ever

Mourners and those observing Yahrtzeit:

Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled,
mighty, upraised, and lauded be the Name of the Holy One Blessed is He.

beyond any blessing and song,

praise and consolation that are uttered in the world. Now say: Amen

May there be abundant peace from Heaven

and life upon us and upon all Israel. Now say: Amen

He Who makes peace in His heights, may He make peace,

upon us and upon all Israel. Now say: Amen