

A Guide to Planning an Unveiling Ritual

What is an unveiling?

Unveiling is the name for the ceremonial dedication of the headstone at the grave of a loved one. The dedication has its origins in the Biblical story of the patriarch Jacob, who erected a memorial pillar for his wife Rachel following her death, as related in Genesis 35:19-20: “So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Efrat (that is, Bethlehem), and Jacob set up a pillar at her grave; it is the pillar of Rachel’s tomb, which is there to this day.” As the passage suggests, the chief purpose of dedicating a headstone is to mark the final resting place of a loved one to honor his or her life and to serve as a focal point for people’s memories. Accordingly, remembering and honoring the deceased is the main purpose of the unveiling ceremony, which has very few fixed religious requirements.

When is the unveiling held?

The ceremony is typically held in the final months of the first year of mourning, before the first *yahrzeit* (anniversary of the death in the Jewish calendar). However, there is a great deal of flexibility in scheduling an unveiling and since there is no particular date on which the ceremony must be held, it’s good to find a time when the greatest number of family members will be able to attend, since gathering the mourners in a circle of memory is the chief purpose of the ceremony. Unveilings should not take place on Shabbat.

How long is the ceremony and what does it consist of?

The unveiling ceremony generally includes a few English or Hebrew readings which can be drawn from traditional sources or from other appropriate sources that were meaningful to the deceased, including favorite poems or song lyrics. It includes the Memorial Prayer (“*El Malei Rachamim*”) and Mourner’s Kaddish. It should also include an opportunity for those present to share memories or reflections should they wish. The service can have an informal tone but should be sufficiently solemn and respectful for the occasion. The ceremony typically lasts no longer than ten to fifteen minutes.

Who attends an unveiling?

The unveiling is a small service that typically includes only family and very close friends. Of course, anyone is welcome to attend an unveiling but generally those who come are specifically invited; there is no public announcement.

Who should lead the ceremony?

The ceremony itself is very plain and simple, and there is no requirement for a rabbi to be present. It is necessary that someone take charge of planning and leading the ceremony. It is helpful if this person has some familiarity with Hebrew liturgy but more important that this person have a relationship with the person who has died and the mourners, and a sensitivity to the occasion and the range of emotions those present – including the leader him- or herself – will be experiencing in the moment.

Leading an unveiling ceremony is a tremendous gift to those present, and done with thoughtfulness and sensitivity can help bring closure to the year of mourning that



Judaism describes following the death of a loved one, and can dedicate the gravesite as a place of love and memory to which relatives will return through the years.

What preparations does the leader need to make?

Well before the unveiling, a headstone must be ordered. Creating a headstone generally requires 3-4 months lead time, so the planning should take place well in advance of the unveiling date. The closest family members should choose the wording for the stone, which typically includes the English and Hebrew names of the deceased, the English and Hebrew dates of birth and death, and an inscription. This information should go be given to the cemetery to assist in planning the stone itself. The funeral home can be helpful in providing some of the relevant information.

The leader will need to speak with the closest relatives to choose a date that is convenient for the most people, typically a Sunday morning or afternoon. S/he will need to speak with the cemetery to inform them of when the ceremony is planned for, ensure that the headstone is in place and covered with gauze, and that they will lay out markers so those attending can locate the gravesite. Here is a list of contact information for local cemeteries most commonly used by congregants at Or Hadash:

- King David Memorial Park
3594 Bristol Road
Bensalem, PA 19020 – (215) 464-4747
- Montefiore Cemetery
Church Road and Borbeck Street
Rockledge, PA 19111 – (215) 663-1250
- Roosevelt Memorial Park
2701 Old Lincoln Highway
Trevose, PA 19053 – (215) 673-7500
- Shalom Memorial Park
Pine and Byberry Roads
Philadelphia, PA 19116 – (215) 673-4600

The leader should plan a brief service as detailed below and make sure to have copies of any readings that anyone present will recite, including Mourner's Kaddish. *Booklets with readings, including the Memorial Prayer and Mourner's Kaddish, are available free of charge from Jewish funeral homes or the synagogue.* If relatives will be sharing reflections at the service, the leader may wish to inform them in advance so they are not surprised by the request. For planning the service itself, the leader should take into consideration the mourners' relationship to the deceased, the type of atmosphere s/he seeks to create, the weather at the time of the year the unveiling will held, and whether there will be elderly friends and family members who will be unable to stand for an extended time. *If you want help in planning the service, please e-mail Rabbi Alanna at rabbi@orhadash.com to arrange a time to meet and discuss and aspect of planning or preparation.*

The unveiling service

It is important to begin the service by formally convening those present for the purpose of dedicating the marker. This can be done through a moment of silence, a song or *niggun* (melody), gathering in a circle and holding hands, an opening reading, or other method appropriate for the group. However it is done, it is important that the ceremony be opened in some manner so those present can focus on the task of honoring the loved one and dedicating the stone in his or her memory. An example of an opening reading is included below.

Typically, the leader or others in attendance will share a reading or two. Examples of appropriate readings include Psalm 23, Psalm 121, Psalm 90, “We Remember Them,” “Birth Is a Beginning,” (all of which can be found below), favorite poems, or other contemplative passages.

Following the reading(s), the leader can invite those present to share some memories or reflections in honor of the deceased. Some people can find sharing in this manner uncomfortable, and it may not be appropriate for all groups. In this case, the leader can share a few thoughts of his/her own. As mentioned above, it may be helpful to let people know that you will be asking for these reflections beforehand. Various questions you can ask to facilitate sharing include:

- what is your favorite memory of spending time with _____?
- what are the qualities you appreciated most about him/her?
- if you could speak directly to him/her right now, what would you like to say?

Again, it is important to remember that these sorts of questions can elicit a wide range of responses and it is important for the leader to be sensitive to the emotional state of those present. The purpose is to allow the mourners to verbalize their feelings of loss for and their love of the deceased, but not to reopen wounds or experience grief as freshly as when the person had just died. Properly facilitated, such sharing gives great honor to the memory of the deceased and allows those present to feel connected to him/her and each other through the bond of memory.

Next, the leader should recite the Memorial Prayer (“*El Malei Rachamim*”) in Hebrew and/or English. After that, the leader should remove the covering from the gravestone and read the inscriptions. Allow a moment of silence following for people to be alone with their reflections.

After this, Mourner’s Kaddish should be recited. Technically, Mourner’s Kaddish is only obligatory for the closest relatives (parents, partner, siblings, children) but anyone may choose to recite it. Traditionally a minyan of ten adult Jews is required for Mourner’s Kaddish to be recited, but most progressive congregations waive this requirement in a cemetery.

Following Mourner’s Kaddish, another reading may be recited. The leader should invite those present to locate small stones to place on the grave before they leave. The leader can also choose to close the ceremony in any of the ways suggested above for opening it,

although it is not as crucial on this end. Typically, the mourners leave the cemetery and gather immediately afterward at a home or restaurant to spend additional time together.

Following the ceremony, it is appropriate to give *tzedakah* in honor of the deceased to a cause or institution important to him or her. The grave is typically visited ahead of the deceased's *yahrzeit*, Yom Kippur, and other occasions on which Yizkor (the memorial service) is recited but it is appropriate to visit at any time.

In the next sections you will find an annotated ***Ritual Outline*** for a graveside unveiling and an appendix of ***Readings, Texts and Blessings*** from which you might draw as you craft your unveiling ritual.

Please do, if you have any questions or want to talk anything out, feel free to be in touch with me.

B'Shalom,
Rabbi Alanna

Ritual Outline

Introduction [for the ritual leader's own knowledge]:

It has become a custom in Jewish families to gather for an unveiling (or stone-setting) ritual around 1 year after the death of a loved one. Because of the timing, this often coincides with either the first *yartzeit* (anniversary of the death) or the end of saying Mourner's *Kaddish* daily for the deceased (which continues for 11 months). This ritual moment of coming together can be led by a rabbi or cantor, but more typically these days is led by members of the family themselves as a way to mark this moment in a more intimate and personal way. The simple service below was designed for an unveiling in my own family – and I hope that it supports you and yours during as you gather in memory and transition.

UNVEILING SERVICE

_____ - date

☞ Words of Welcome

- Coming together in this place at this moment, we recognize that we – nearly one year later – are each in a place that feels at once to be profoundly similar and profoundly different...

☞ Reading 1: **There are Stars**

There are Stars

by Hannah Szenes

There are stars whose light reaches the earth
only after they themselves have disintegrated and are no more.
And there are people whose scintillating memory
lights the world after they have passed from it.
These lights which shine in the darkest night
are those which illumine for us the path.

☞ Framing: _____ has illuminated our path and continues to light our way...

- This could be one possibility for family, friends or dear ones of the deceased share memories

☞ Reading: **The Acorn**

The Acorn | From the Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 23a

A rabbi was passing through a field when he noticed an old man who was planting an acorn.
“Why are you planting that acorn?” he asked “You surely do not expect to live long enough to see it grown into an oak tree.”
The man replied, “My grandparents planted seeds so that I might enjoy the shade and the fruit trees. Now I do likewise for my grandchildren and all those who come after me.”

☞ Framing: The flowering and blossoming of the seeds that _____ sowed throughout

their/his/her life is so evident in all of you: their/his/her [children, grandchildren, dear friends, chosen family... customize this to the community gathered. You could name these individuals – especially anyone named after the deceased.]

- If you wish: This could be another option for a place for friends, relatives, and dear ones who are gathered could share memories, or offer a lesson learned from the journey through the past year(ish) since last they were at this graveside for the funeral.
 - This can be done with advance preparation, or offered spontaneously.

☞ **Together: Unveiling Prayer**

A thousand years, in the sight of our eternal and merciful Guardian, 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.

(The covering is removed)

In the name of _____ - _____ [English – Hebrew names] and in the presence of their/his/her family and friends, we consecrate this monument to their/his/her memory, as a token of love and respect.

May their/his/her soul be bound up in the bond of life. **Amen.**

☞ *El Maleh Rahamim* (memorial prayer)

Eil Malei Rachamim

For Male לזכר

אל מלא רחמים שוכן במרומים, המצא מנוחה נבונה
תחת כנפי השכינה, במעלות קדושים וטהורים כזהר הרקיע
מזהירים, את נשמת _____ בת
_____ שהלכה לעולמה, בגן עדן
מנוחתה, אָנָּא בעל הרחמים הסתירהו בסתר כנפיק לעולמים,
וצרור בצרור החיים את נשמתה, יהוה הוא נחלתה, וְנַחַם
בשלוֹם על משֻׁבְּבוֹ, וְנֹאמַר: אָמֵן.

Eil malei rachamim sho-khein bam'romim, hamm-tzei
m'nukhah n'khonah tachat kanfei ha-sh'khinah, b'ma-alot
k'doshim u-t'horim k'zohar ha-rakiya maz-hirim et nishmat
_____ ben _____ she-halakh l'olo-
mo, b'gan eiden t'hei m'nuchato. Ana, ba-al ha-rahamim
hassti-rei-hu b'seiter k'nafekha l'olamim, u-tzror bi-tzror
ha-hayim et nishmato, Adonai hu nachalato, v'yanu-ach
b'sholom al mishkavo, v'nomar amen.

God of compassion, grant perfect peace in Your shel-
tering Presence, among the holy and the pure who shine in
the brightness of the firmament, to the soul of our dear
_____ who has gone to his eternal rest. God
of compassion, remember all his worthy deeds in the land
of the living. May his soul be bound up in the bond of ever-
lasting life. May God be his inheritance. May he rest in
peace. And let us answer: Amen.

∞ Reading: **Hold On**

Hold On | from Many Winters - Nancy Woods

Hold on to what is good even if it is a handful of earth. Hold on to what you believe even if it is a tree which stands by itself. Hold on to what you must do even if it is a long way from here. Hold on to life even when it is easier letting go. Hold on to my hand even when I have gone away from you.

∞ Silent Reflection and placing stones on the *kever* (grave)

∞ *Mourner's Kaddish*

For Female לנקבה

אל מלא רחמים שוכן במרומים, המצא מנוחה נבונה
תחת כנפי השכינה, במעלות קדושים וטהורים כזהר הרקיע
מזהירים, את נשמת _____ בת
_____ שהלכה לעולמה, בגן עדן
מנוחתה, אָנָּא בעל הרחמים הסתירהו בסתר כנפיק
לעולמים, וְצָרֹר בְּצָרֹר הַחַיִּים אֶת נִשְׁמַתָּהּ, יְהוָה הוּא
נַחְלָתָהּ, וְתַנְחֵם בְּשָׁלוֹם עַל מִשְׁבְּבָהּ, וְנֹאמַר: אָמֵן.

Eil malei rahamim sho-khein bam'romim, hamm-tzei
m'nukhah n'khonah tachat kanfei ha-sh'khinah, b'ma-alot
k'doshim u-t'horim k'zohar ha-rakiya maz-hirim et nishmat
_____ bat _____ sheh-
halkhah l'olamah, b'gan eiden t'hei m'nuhatah. Ana, ba-al
harahamim, hassti-reha b'seiter k'nafekha l'olamim, u-tzror
b'tzror ha-hayim et nishmatah, Adonai hu nachalatah,
v'tanu-ach b'shalom al mishkavah, v'nomar amen.

God of compassion, grant perfect peace in Your shel-
tering Presence, among the holy and the pure who shine in
the brightness of the firmament, to the soul of our dear
_____ who has gone to her eternal rest. God
of compassion, remember all her worthy deeds in the land
of the living. May her soul be bound up in the bond of ever-
lasting life. May God be her inheritance. May she rest in
peace. And let us answer: Amen.

Readings, Texts & Blessings

opening reading

We have gathered to honor the memory of our beloved _____. The link of life that has joined us has been broken, but the bonds of love, friendship, and family, continue to connect us.

Adonai is my shepherd; I shall not want.
God makes me to lie down in green pastures and leads me beside the still waters.
You restore my soul and lead me in the paths of righteousness for Your name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies, You anoint my head with oil, my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Eternal forever.

- Psalm 23

I lift my eyes up to the hills: from where does my help come?
My help is from the UNSEEN ONE, the maker of the heavens and the earth,
who will not cause your foot to fail. Your protector never slumbers.
Behold the One who slumbers not, who never sleeps, the guardian of Israel.
The ABUNDANT ONE preserves you,
The WATCHFUL ONE, your shelter, at your right hand a support.
By day, the sun will not afflict you, nor the moonlight by the night.
The VIGILANT shall guard you from all evil and will keep your lifebreath safe.
The SHEPHERD guard your going out and coming in, from now unto eternity.

- Psalm 121

My protector, You are our abode, one generation to the next,
Since before the mountains came to birth, before the birthpangs of the land and world.
From eternity unto eternity, You are divine.
Truly, a thousand years are in your eyes like yesterday—so quickly does it pass—
or like the watchman's nighttime post.
You pour upon them sleep, they sleep.
When morning comes, it vanishes like chaff.
At dawn, life blossoms and renews itself; at dusk it withers and dries up.
The years of our lifetime are but seventy—perhaps among the strongest eighty years—
and most of them are toil and fatigue, then quickly it all ends, we fly away.
Who knows the full strength of Your fury?
Is our fear of You the equal of Your wrath?
Oh, teach us to number our days that we may get us a heart of wisdom.

Let Your accomplishment be visible to those who serve You,
Let Your beauty rest upon their children,
Let our divine protector's pleasure be upon us—
And the labor of our hands, make it secure, the labor of our hands ensure!

- Psalm 90 (selections)

We Remember Them

In the rising of the sun and in its going down, we remember them.
In the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter, we remember them.

In the opening of the buds and in the rebirth of spring, we remember them.
In the blueness of the sky and in the warmth of the summer, we remember them.

In the rustling of leaves and in the beauty of autumn, we remember them.
In the beginning of the year and when it ends, we remember them.

When we are weary and in need of strength, we remember them.
When we are lost and sick at heath, we remember them.

When we have joys we yearn to share we remember them.
So long as we live, they too shall live, for they are now a part of us, as we remember them.

- Jack Riemer and Sylvan D. Kamens

Birth Is a Beginning

Birth is a beginning
And death a destination.
And life is a journey:
From childhood to maturity
And youth to age;
From innocence to awareness
And ignorance to knowing;
From foolishness to discretion
 And then perhaps to wisdom;
From weakness to strength
Or strength to weakness—
 And, often back again;
From health to sickness
 And back, we pray, to health again'
From offense to forgiveness,
From loneliness to love,
From joy to gratitude,
From pain to compassion,

And grief to understanding—
 From fear to faith;
From defeat to defeat to defeat—
Until, looking backward or ahead,
We see that victory lies
Not at some high place along the way,
But in having made the journey, stage by stage,
 A sacred pilgrimage.
Birth is a beginning
And death a destination
But life is a journey,
A sacred pilgrimage—
 To life everlasting.

- Alvin I. Fine

Life After Death

These things I know:
 How the living go on living
 and how the dead go on living with them
so that in a forest
 even a dead tress casts a shadow
 and the leaves fall one by one
and the branches break in the wind
and the bark peels off slowly
and the trunk cracks
 and the rain seeps in through the cracks

and the trunk falls to the ground
and the moss covers it
 and in the spring the rabbits find it
and build their nest
inside the dead tree
so that nothing is wasted in nature
 or in love.

- Laura Gilpin

Memorial Prayer (“*El Malei Rachamim*”)

For one who identifies as male:

El malei rachamim, shochen bam'romim
Ham'tzei menuchah nchonah
Tachat kanfei ha-Shechinah
B'ma'a lot kedoshim utehorim
K'zohar ha-rakiyah mazhirim
Et nishmat [Hebrew name]
She-halach l'olamo
B'gan aden tehei menuchato.
Ana ba'al ha-rachamim,
Hastirehu b'seter kenafecha l'olamim
U'tzror b'tzror ha-chayim et nishmato
Adonai hu nachalato
V'yanu'ach b'shalom al mishkavo
V'nomar: Amen

For one who identifies as female:

El malei rachamim, shochen bam'romim
Ham'tzei menuchah nechonah
Tachat kanfei ha-Shechinah
B'ma'a lot kedoshim utehorim
K'zohar ha-rakiyah mazhirim
Et nishmat [Hebrew name]
She-halchah l'olamah
B'gan aden tehei menuchatah
Ana ba'al ha-rachamim,
Hastirehah b'seter kenafecha l'olamim
U'tzror b'tzror ha-chayim et nishmatah
Adonai hu nachalatah
V'tanu'ach b'shalom al mishkavah
V'nomar: Amen

God filled with mercy, dwelling in the heaven's heights,
Bring proper rest beneath the wings of your Presence,
Amid the ranks of the holy and the pure, illuminating like the brilliance of the skies
to _____ [child/son/daughter] of _____ and _____
Who has gone to their/his/her eternal place of rest.
May You who are the source of mercy
Shelter them/him/her beneath your wings eternally,
And bind their/his/her soul among the living, that they/he/she may rest in peace.
And let us say: Amen.

Note: this prayer exists in many versions,
and there may be slight variations in wording in certain editions.

Mourner's Kaddish transliteration

*Yitgadal veyitkadash shemei raba
Be'alma divra chirutei veyamlich malchutei
Vechayechon uvyomeichon uvchayei dechol beit Yisra'el
Ba'agala uvizman kariv ve'imru: Amen.*

response: *Yehei shemei raba mevorach le'alam ulalmei almaya.*

*Yitbarach veyishtabach veyitpa'ar veyitromam veyitnasei
Veyit-hadar veyitaleh veyit-halal shemei dekudsha berich hu
Le'eila mikol birchata veshirata
Tushbechata venechamata
Da'amiran be'alma ve'imru: Amen.*

*Yehei shelama raba min shemaya
Vechayim aleinu ve'al kol Yisra'el ve'imru: Amen.*

*Oseh shalom bimromav
Hu ya'aseh shalom
Aleinu v'al kol Yisra'el
[V'al kol yoshvei teivel*]
Ve'imru: Amen.*

* This line is added in the Reconstructionist liturgy but is not found in the various booklets put together by funeral homes and may not be familiar to many participants, and may be omitted to avoid confusion.

Additional Resources

Kol Haneshamah: Prayers for a House of Mourning (Reconstructionist Press, 2001).

Anita Diamant, *Saying Kaddish* (Schocken Books, 1998) – especially pages 152-161, which include a complete service.

Anne Brenner, *Mourning and Mitzvah* (Jewish Lights, 1993) – especially pages 205-213.