



Jewish Community Center of Paramus
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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday June 9, 2023 ~ Parsha: Beha'alotcha

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

The Unveiling

It's unveiling season. It feels like I'm at the cemetery almost every Sunday conducting these important services.

In my discussions with families who are planning an unveiling for a loved one, I am noticing that many are unfamiliar with some of the history, traditions and observances that are associated with this important ceremony. So this week, I would like to educate the community about some of the more important aspects of this observance.

The use of a monument, generally referred to as a family stone, foot stone, headstone, or tombstone, is an ancient custom. The original reference to it in Jewish sources can be found in the book of *Breesheet* ([Genesis](#) 35:20), reminding us of our forefather, Jacob, who erected a *matzaveh*, a stone pillar to mark the grave of our matriarch Rachel. Indeed, *Kever Rachel*, the place of Rachel's death, is a significant religious site in Israel to this day. There is another reference to it in the Mishnah ([Shekalim](#) 2:5) that teaches that any money collected but unspent for the purpose of a funeral should be used to erect a monument in honor of the deceased. The purpose of the stone is simply to keep the memory of the deceased alive and to identify the grave.

I'm often asked when an unveiling should be scheduled. That's an interesting question. Many are familiar with the tradition that has emerged in the United States over the past several generations to plan the unveiling on or around the time of the first *yahrzeit* (anniversary of death) in the Jewish calendar. This is a fine tradition, yet to the best of my knowledge, one that is only widely observed in North America. Our sources provide evidence of a variety of traditions regarding this observance. Some early sources seem to allow mourners even during the week of *shiva* to begin to make arrangements for setting up a memorial stone. Others say that the time for arranging for the stone this is immediately after *shiva* ends. There seems to have been a preference in ancient times and during the Talmudic era to move quickly with this endeavor. Personally, I also think this is a reminder that the headstones in antiquity and in pre-modern times were simply heaps of stones joined together with the rudimentary plaster or cement available at the time. In our time, the construction and procurement of memorial stones takes longer, and is therefore virtually impossible to do so quickly after a burial. That is why most Jewish communities throughout the world conduct this ceremony on or around the time of the *shloshim* (30th day after

burial), the traditional conclusion of the period of mourning for all relatives except for one's parents. The period of mourning for a parent is twelve months on the Hebrew calendar.

So having shared the variety of traditional practices, my suggestion for families who ask me when the unveiling should be scheduled is to do so any time after 30 days when the family can all be together, and the stone can be ready. I would like to point out that in recent years, the time it takes to purchase and have a stone installed has increased, often taking more than 3 months from purchase to delivery. Adding to this difficulty (which is practical in nature, not an issue of Jewish law) is that the stone companies and cemeteries will not install a headstone from approximately mid-November through March or April because of weather conditions and the difficulty of constructing a proper cement base in the winter.

There is evidence that in earlier times, that the inscriptions on the tombstone were quite elaborate in nature, speaking in great detail to the virtues of the deceased. In our time, most are simpler, consisting of the name of the deceased, the date of death, and other important personal details. When planning the inscription for the stone, it is important to know that some cemeteries, or certain sections of cemeteries have strict rules regarding the type of stone allowed, and how much information can be added to it. It is always important to check before ordering.

I would like to remind the community that the Hebrew name of the deceased should always be included on the stone as well. I ask all members of our congregation to please allow me to review all Hebrew information on the stone before your final contract with the monument maker is signed. You would be surprised by the number of mistakes I see on monuments. And once they are "set in stone," they are difficult as well as expensive to fix. Please let me review it first.

The unveiling service itself is a simple and brief service consisting of several psalms and a dedication prayer (usually accompanied by the removal of some type of cloth covering the stone, hence the name "unveiling"). Following the dedication prayer, there are often words or tributes to the deceased recalling their value and qualities, and reflecting on the impact they had on their family and community. These words are followed by the memorial prayer known as *El Malei Rachamim* (God who dwells on high and is full of compassion), and concludes with the Mourner's Kaddish. Following that, there is a beautiful tradition of placing stones from the ground on the headstone, footstone or family stone. This tradition reminds all who visit the cemetery that the family and community of the deceased remember them and will continue to perpetuate their values.

Though rarely practiced these days, some of the older members of the congregation might recall a tradition of serving food or even alcohol in the cemetery following an unveiling. I still remember this from my late maternal grandfather's unveiling service in approximately 1969. This practice was frowned upon by our Rabbis (and this particular Rabbi!) as not in keeping with the dignity of our Jewish burial grounds.

I hope that this review of the history and observance of what our tradition calls *HaKamat Matzevah*, the dedication and unveiling of a monument to honor our loved

ones has been helpful. By reviewing and familiarizing ourselves with this important observance, the unveiling ceremony will remain an important part of the mourning and healing process.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner