

Suggestions For An Unveiling Service

BY RABBI ALAN BRIGHT

Editor's Note: In response to many calls to the JFDA office concerning procedures for an unveiling, JFDA asked Rabbi Bright to write this article.

Question: What is an Unveiling?

Answer: The unveiling is a ceremony that serves to consecrate a monument erected at the grave for someone who has passed away.

Question: Why is it called "Unveiling?"

Answer: The service is called "unveiling" because; it has become the custom in North America to cover the monument with a cloth just prior to the ceremony. This cloth is removed usually by the family or friends during the ceremony.

Question: What are the religious obligations for the unveiling?

Answer: There is no religious obligation to hold an unveiling ceremony.

Question: What is the origin of the ritual that is used today?

Answer: As far as can be determined, the ritual became popular toward the end of the 19th century in North America. Although it is a custom, it has become universally accepted and an extremely meaningful practice. In addition to dedicating the grave monument, the unveiling gives the mourner an opportunity to commemorate the deceased.

Question: What is the time frame for which an unveiling should take place?

Answer: The generally accepted time frame for placing of the monument and conducting an unveiling is from the conclusion of Shloshim (thirtieth day from burial) through the end of the first twelve months from the date of burial.

Question: Who is responsible for ensuring that a monument is placed at the grave?

Answer: The initial responsibility for the erection of the monument is with the family. However as rabbinic

law dictates the Jewish community is ultimately responsible for the burial of the dead. Therefore if there is no family, or indeed if the family is unable or unwilling to erect a monument, ultimately the responsibility is with the local Jewish community to ensure that a suitable monument is erected.

Question: What happens if the unveiling cannot be held in the specified time frame?

Answer: In such a case the unveiling should be done as soon as practicable.

Question: Can any monument maker be used to prepare the monument or must it be a Jewish Monument maker?

Answer: There is no restriction on which monument maker can be used.

Question: Does the monument have to be made from Stone?

Answer: Most traditional authorities require that the monument must be made from stone/granite/marble etc. Or any other natural material that will not disintegrate with time.

Question: In addition to the stone I want to add adornments, is that acceptable?

Answer: Although there is not Halachic prohibition to placing adornments / imbedding adornments on the monument. Tradition dictates that the monument remain with engraving/etching into the stone itself.

Question: Is there one set form of ritual used for the unveiling ceremony?

Answer: While there is no set ritual for the ceremony, the tradition has evolved to include certain prayers such as the memorial prayer known as "El Moleh Rahamim" and when in the presence of a minyan (quorum of 10) the Kaddish prayer. Most ceremonies however will include a selection of hymns from King David's book of psalms, and a brief tribute to the deceased.

Question: Are the services of a Rabbi and or Cantor obligatory?

Answer: The services of clergy are not required. Families can create a meaningful ceremony themselves. I would suggest asking a Rabbi for his suggestions of material to include in your own service.

Question: Is there a specific formula needed in the service or is one permitted to create their own?

Answer: While various services have been created for the unveiling, there is no one Halachically mandated formula that must be used. A family can certainly create their own service.

Question: Is there specific wording that needs to be on the monument?

Answer: Within reason, anything can be inscribed on the monument. However over hundreds of years a universal custom has been adopted to at least include the Hebrew name and date of death of the deceased. Both the Hebrew name and date of death are preceded with the following specific Hebrew characters. פ"נ – (Pey Nun) which stands for the words **po nikbar** (for a male) or **po nikbera** (for a female), which when translated means "here is buried". Additionally many assign the following words to these letters **po nitman** or **po nitmena**, meaning here is hidden. The term "here is hidden" was considered to be a less painful expression than "here is buried".

Furthermore it is considered meritorious to add a sentence/saying from the bible that depicts the character of the deceased.

The last symbols usually found on the monument are five Hebrew characters which is an acronym for the saying "May his/her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life". The letters are written as follows: ת'נ'צ'ב'ה-ת'נ'צ'ב'ה. The origin of this saying is found in the book of Samuel 1 25:29.

Question: Some cemeteries permit only a small foot monument which does not provide sufficient room for a lot of wording. In that case what is the minimum that should be written on the monument?

Answer: In such cases, the minimum wording should include the deceased's name and date of death. If you can include the letters ת'נ'צ'ב'ה-ת'נ'צ'ב'ה, either in the Hebrew or English it would be meritorious. In the event that the grave site is in a non Jewish cemetery you should also try to include a symbol to indicate that the grave is a Jewish grave, i.e. a Star of David.

Question: Is it mandatory for minyan (quorum of 10) to be present for the unveiling?

Answer: While it is preferred, it is certainly not necessary to have a minyan. However without the presence of a minyan the Kaddish prayer is omitted.

Question: What arrangements need to be made prior to the unveiling taking place?

Answer: Before doing anything, you should obtain from the cemetery the specifications permitted for monuments. With that information you can go to the monument maker. Once the date of installation has been confirmed, you should contact the cemetery and reserve the date and time for the unveiling. Some cemeteries will cover the monument for you; others however do not, so you will need to take care of that yourself. You should also check with the cemetery/funeral home to see if they can provide, kippot, booklets etc. If not you could try your local synagogue to see if they can help.

If you are going to engage the services of a clergyman, then in addition to setting a date and time with the cemetery, you will need to do the same with the clergyman.

Question: If I do my own service without clergy what format would you suggest I use?

Answer: Following is the format I suggest for all lay leaders. I believe that unveilings are not the time or place for eulogies, but rather for memories. To that end and after my opening words, I always invite people to share a memory of the deceased with those present.

continued on page 30

Suggestions for Unveiling, continued from page 29

Select one (or both) of the following Psalms for the opening of the service:

Psalm 1

Happy is the man that has not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seat of the wicked.

But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in His law he meditates day and night.

And he shall be like a tree planted by streams of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, and whose leaf does not wither; and in whatsoever he does he shall prosper.

Not so the wicked; but they are like the chaff which the wind drives away.

Therefore the wicked shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

For the LORD regards the way of the righteous; but the way of the wicked shall perish.

Psalm 16

Michtam of David. Keep me, O God; for I have taken refuge in Thee.

I have said unto the LORD: 'You are my Lord; I have no good but You';

As for the holy that are in the earth, they are the excellent in who is all my delight.

Let the idols of them be multiplied that make suit unto another; their drink-offerings of blood will I not offer, nor take their names upon my lips.

O LORD, the portion of my inheritance and of my cup, You maintain my lot.

The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.

I will bless the LORD, who has given me counsel; yea, in the night seasons my reins instruct me.

I have set the LORD always before me; surely He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; my flesh also dwells in safety;

For You will not abandon my soul to the nether-world; neither will You suffer your godly one to see the pit.

You teach me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy, in Your right hand bliss for evermore.

continued on page 32

Suggestions for Unveiling, continued from page 30

At this time the leader can add some words of introduction such as;

We are gathered here this _____ to consecrate this monument to a very special and devoted lady/man. The erection of a monument can be traced back biblically to the time when Rachel the wife of Jacob died while traveling to Bethlehem. Jacob buried her on the side of the road and erected a monument at her grave. To this very day that grave is revered by all who visit it. So too will this grave be revered by all who visit.

The leader can call upon those who would like to share a memory or thought about the deceased.

After all have finished speaking, the cover should be removed and the inscription read, after which the lay leader can say:

In the name of _____ in the presence of his/her family and friends we consecrate this monument as a sign of our love honor and respect.

At this time the memorial prayer maybe said

For a Male:

El maley rahamim, shochen bameromim, hamtzei menucha nehona tahat kanfei hasehina, bmaalot kes-doshim utehorim, kezohar harakiah mazhirim, et nish mat

_____ben

(insert name of deceased)
(name of deceased's father)

Shehalach leolamo. B'Gan eden tehay menuhato, lachen baal horahamim yastireyhu bseter kenafecha l'olamim, veyitzror bitzror hachayim et nishmato adonai hu nacahlato, v'yanuach b'shalom al mishkavo, v'nomar amein.

God, full of compassion, who dwells on the most high, grant perfect peace in your presence among the holy and the pure to the soul of _____ who has gone to his eternal home. Master of mercy we beseech you, remember all the worthy and righteous deeds that he performed in the land of the living. May his soul be bound in the bond of life eternal, The Lord is his portion, may he rest in peace, and let us say Amen.

For a Female:

El maley rahamim, shochen bameromim, hamtzei menucha nehona tahat kanfei hasehina, bmaalot kes-doshim utehorim, kezohar harakiah mazhirim, et nish mat

_____bat

(insert name of deceased)
(name of deceased's father)

Shehalecha leolamah. B'Gan eden tehay menuhatah, lachen baal horahamim yastireha bseter kenafecha l'olamim, veyitzror bitzror hachayim et nishmatah adonai hu nacahlatah, v'tanuach b'shalom al mishkavah, v'nomar amein.

God, full of compassion, who dwells on the most high, grant perfect peace in your presence among the holy and the pure to the soul of _____ who has gone to her eternal home. Master of mercy we beseech you, remember all the worthy and righteous deeds that she performed in the land of the living. May her soul be bound in the bond of life eternal, The Lord is her portion, may she rest in peace, and let us say Amen.

If there is no Minyan the leader can finish with the Psalm 23. If there is a minyan present the service should conclude with the recitation of Kaddish which should be recited after the Psalm 23.

The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.
He causes me to lie down in green pastures:
He leads me beside the still waters.
He rests my soul:

He leads me in paths of righteousness for His 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 overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever.

continued on page 34

Suggestions for Unveiling, continued from page 32

Kaddish:

Yit'gadal v'yit'kadash sh'mei raba (Attendees say: Amein).

b'al'ma di v'ra khir'utei v'yam'likh mal'khutei b'chayeikhon uv'yomeikhon uv'chayei d'khol beit yis'ra'eil ba'agala uviz'man kariv v'im'ru: Amein.

Y'hei sh'mei raba m'varakh l'alam ul'al'mei al'maya

Yit'barakh v'yish'tabach v'yit'pa'ar v'yit'romam v'yit'nasei v'yit'hadar v'yit'aleh v'yit'halal sh'mei d'kud'sha B'rikh hu. l'eila min kol bir'khata v'shirara toosh'b'chatah v'nechematah, da'ameeran b'al'mah, v'eemru: Amein

Y'hei sh'lama raba min sh'maya v'chayim aleinu v'al kol yis'ra'eil v'im'ru Amein

Oseh shalom bim'romav hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu v'al kol Yis'ra'eil v'im'ru Amein

May His great Name grow exalted and sanctified (Attendees say: Amen.)

in the world that He created as He willed. May He give reign to His kingship in your lifetimes and in your days, and in the lifetimes of the entire Family of Israel, swiftly and soon. Now say: Amen

May His great Name be blessed forever and ever.

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

Alan Bright a native of London, England is the spiritual leader of Shaare Zedek Cong, Montreal QC . In addition to his ordination, Alan holds a Masters Degree, with a major in Ancient and Medieval Jewish History. Alan's area of interest is medieval Jewish death and burial rites and customs. Alan can be reached via email at rabbi@shaarezedek.ca.