

A more practical reason for waiting a year before erecting a monument is to give the earth a chance to settle, so that the heavy tombstone will not sink into the ground.

Why is one to ignore the wishes of a deceased who requested that a tombstone not be erected over his grave?

There is a strong obligation upon family members to accord due respect to the deceased. Since one way of fulfilling this requirement is to erect a monument to the deceased, instructions requesting that a monument not be erected may be ignored. In cases where a deceased leaves instructions that a monument not be erected, families are advised to install a stone that is very simple and modest.²³

Why is the dedication of a tombstone called an "unveiling"?

Prior to commencing the formal ceremony at which the tombstone is dedicated, a cloth is draped over the stone so as to conceal the words engraved on it. After the recitation of appropriate prayers and psalms by the rabbi or other leader of the service, a member of the family is given the honor of literally unveiling the monument, thus revealing it to the public for the first time.

Following the official unveiling of the stone, the rabbi or leader of the service reads aloud the inscription etched into it. The *El Malay Rachamim* prayer is then recited and a brief eulogy customarily given. If a *minyana* (religious quorum) is present, *Kaddish* is recited by the immediate family.

Why is a formal unveiling ceremony not a legal requirement?

Although monuments have been erected over graves for many centuries, the custom of conducting a special

ceremony at which the tombstone is unveiled to friends and loved ones is relatively new. The practice was instituted toward the end of the nineteenth century both in England and the United States in order to formalize and dignify the erection of the monument. Whereas Americans refer to the ceremony as an "unveiling," the British call it a "tombstone consecration."

Although a formal ceremony does add dignity to the erection of a tombstone, there is no religious obligation under Jewish law to conduct one. Many families prefer to mark the occasion informally by reciting psalms and personalized prayers. It is unnecessary to have a rabbi officiate.

Why is an unveiling sometimes conducted more than once?

If a tombstone has been badly damaged and the family wishes to replace it, or if the family decides that it would like to erect a more presentable tombstone in place of an old one, it is considered proper to hold a second unveiling for the new stone.

Why are stones sometimes placed on monuments by those visiting graves?

The Talmud and later rabbinic writings are replete with references to the powers of the dead. The souls of the deceased were believed to be aware of everything that transpires here on earth, to be privy to all laudatory and derogatory remarks made about them, and to have the power to reward or punish, as they see fit. The only thing the souls of the dead lack is the power of speech.²⁴

In order to bridge this absence of direct communication between the living and the dead, it became common practice, at the conclusion of a cemetery visit, to place one or more small stones on the cemetery marker as a way of reminding the dead that the living have not forgotten them. In some locales it became customary to leave

grass instead of stones on the grave marker. In time, these gestures lost their original superstitious associations and simply became a way of showing respect to the dead. It also became a kind of "calling card" that serves as a reminder to the living that relatives or friends have come to visit.²⁵

Reform Jews do not, as a rule, leave reminders on tombstones.²⁶

Why are some communities more amenable than others to the practice of adorning graves with flowers?

During World War II, the chaplaincy committee of the National Jewish Welfare Board (representing Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbis) ruled that on Memorial Day, as a way of honoring the dead, it is permissible to decorate military graves with flowers. The committee did, however, object to permanent plantings.

In Israel today, placing flowers on graves, particularly in military cemeteries, is more accepted than in the Diaspora. In fact, floral shops and stands are found near cemeteries in many parts of the country. Outside of Israel, traditional Jews generally do not encourage (and often do not permit) the adorning of graves with flowers, but they do permit the use of shrubbery. Liberal Jews in the Diaspora have no objection to the use of flowers on graves.

Sephardic practice varies from community to community.

Why do some Jews place the left hand on a loved one's tombstone during a cemetery visit?

When visiting the resting place of a loved one, some Jews today follow the old practice of laying the left hand on the tombstone—or on the grave itself—and uttering a fifteen-word Hebrew prophecy from the Book of Isaiah

(58:12), which translates as:

Men from among you will rebuild ancient ruins,

You shall restore foundations laid long ago.

And you shall be called "Repairer of Fallen Walls, Restorer of Streets for Habitation."

The Rabbis associated Isaiah's prophecy and its promise of God's protective care with the later prophecy of Hosea in which Israel affirms its loyalty to God. Hosea, speaking in the name of God, says (2:21-22):

I will betroth you to Me forever.

I will betroth you to Me in righteousness, in justice, in goodness and in mercy.

And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness.

Then shall you know the Lord.

This prophecy of Hosea consists of exactly fifteen Hebrew words, just as the prophecy of Isaiah does. It is reasoned that since the words of Hosea are spoken whenever one wraps the *tefilin* straps around the left arm and hand (unless he is a lefthanded person), it is this hand that should touch the monument when reciting the words from Isaiah.

Why do Jews traditionally visit the cemetery before the High Holidays?

Visits to the cemetery during the month of Elul (the month preceding Tishri, the month of the High Holidays) are common. This tradition, which was introduced by Ashkenazim, was first noted in the writings of the Mahariil, Rabbi Jacob ben Moses Ha-levi Mollin (1360-1427), the outstanding German authority on Jewish customs and ceremonies. The sixteenth-century Moses Isserles, in his notes to the *Code of Jewish Law*,²⁷ describes the practice of people coming to the cemeteries before the High Holidays to visit the grave sites of their loved ones.

This practice spread to all segments of the Jewish community and today it has become a traditional way for Jews to prepare spiritually for the Days of Awe.