

How to Do an Unveiling Ceremony,

by Rabbi Edward Feinstein

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—stone or metal—and contains the name of the deceased. It may also contain the dates of birth and death, some very brief description of the deceased, or a phrase of prayer. 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.

It has also become customary to gather some time after the death and burial to “unveil” and dedicate the marker. This ceremony is not formal tradition, but customary practice. Therefore it is not fully prescribed and is open to our own variations and inventions. A rabbi is not necessary at an unveiling. You can easily lead the ceremony yourself! Many families wait until a year has passed before unveiling and dedicating the marker. Others do the ceremony after 11 months to signify the end of the daily recitation of Kaddish. Others do the ceremony after three or six months. Most families schedule the unveiling ceremony at a time when family and friends are available to gather at the gravesite. And most families follow the ceremony with a gathering of family and friends.

The Purpose of the Unveiling Ceremony

A year or so 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 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 for this life?

2. Bring a bagful of stones to place on the gravesite. 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 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 will find some excellent poems and reflections on the VBS website. As well, you may look in a synagogue prayer book or the booklet of prayer provided by the memorial park.
2. 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.
3. Ask one of the gathered to remove the cover and read the marker. If there are children present, this is a good job for them to feel involved and part of the ceremony.
4. Read the prayer El Maley Rachameem in Hebrew (if you are able) and English, and be sure to include the name of the deceased. 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.
6. Distribute the stones and ask the gathered family and friends to place the stones on the grave marker.