Kaddish, Tombstone and the Yahrzeit
Frequently Asked Shaylos

Kaddish

Why do we say kaddish?

There are a few reasons.

i. When one says kaddish for a departed soul, it helps that soul escape some of the punishment they may have been facing in the next world.[1]

ii. It is also an expression of ratifying the actions of Hashem in this world and acknowledging that He runs the world with a plan.

iii. It is also an attempt to increase the expression of sanctity in this world, especially following the vacuum created by someone passing away.

iv. It is also a mitzva to elicit the words of kedusha from others in a minyan and by the children performing public mitzvos of kiddush Hashem, that serves as a great merit for the deceased.

Who is obligated to say kaddish?

It is the responsibility of the sons to say kaddish.[2]

What if there are no sons?

If there are no sons, the grandsons should say kaddish. If there are no grandsons, the father should say kaddish. If there is no father, the brother or husband should say kaddish. If there is no brother or husband, the son-in-law should say kaddish. If there is no son-in-law, then another relative should say kaddish.[3]

What if there are no relatives to say kaddish?

It would be important to hire someone who can say kaddish every day at least once and they would say it l'iluy nishmas the departed.[4]

What if that person is already saying kaddish for someone else?

It is not an issue for a person to be hired to say kaddish for multiple people. But if the person is saying kaddish for a relative, they should not say kaddish for others at the same time.

Can daughters say kaddish?

If there are sons to say kaddish, they should be the ones to say it.

If there are no sons to say kaddish, there are some poskim who still would suggest that daughters to not say kaddish[5] and there are others who allow it if they are in a shul and kaddish is already being said in the men's section, they may also say it.[6]

Should children under bar mitzva say kaddish?

Children under bar mitzvah may say kaddish if they understand what they are doing.[7]

When does one stop saying kaddish?

In Ashkenazik tradition, kaddish is stopped after 11 months from the burial.

In Sephardic tradition, kaddish is stopped from 11 months after the passing for a week and then continued till the yahrzeit.

Why the shortening?

During the year following the passing of a person, the soul undergoes judgment and cleansing for the issues in their lives. That can go up to 12 months for evil people. When saying kaddish for one's parent, one wants to maximize the merit for them but not make it seem that they needed 12 full months of judgement.

What if one is saying kaddish for someone else but is not the child of the deceased?

In such a case, the person saying kaddish should say kaddish for the full 12 months.[8]

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[1] Ohr Zarua II, Ramo YD 376:4
[2] Ramo YD 376:4
[3] Hilchos Aveilus, R. Rimon page 184
[4] Gesher Hachaim 30:8:7
[5] Pischei Teshuva YD 376 sk 3 in the names of the Chavos Yair
[6] Hapardes 37:44 in the name of R. Henkin
[7] Mishna Berura OC 132 sk 10
[8] Gesher Hachaim 30:9 sk 4

What if it is a leap year?
One who's parent passed away this year (a leap year), and is currently in Aveilus:

- Kaddish is said for eleven months from the day of the burial.
- The practices of the twelve months of mourning continue for 12 months - not 13. This is also calculated from the day of burial. No mourning is observed during the 13th month.
- The first yahrzeit is observed after 13 months, on the same calendar date as the day of passing (not burial).

How much focus should be placed on the kaddish? Kaddish is important but it should not be the main focus. Living a life of honesty and commitment is far more important.[9]

Yizkor

When is Yizkor said?
The original custom was to do Yikzor on Yom Kippur.[10] This is because it humbles the hearts of the living and it is also a time the deceased are being judged.
In Ashkenazik tradition, Yizkor is also said on Shmini Atzeres, last day of Pesach and last day of Shavuos. This is as a function of the leining on the second day Yom Tov talking about giving tzedaka and since one is giving tzedakah it should be in the merit of the departed.[11]

Why is it said?
Originally Yizkor for one's loved ones is part of the tradition in order to pledge tzedaka for their merit and that pledge gives the soul an aliya.
At the same time, in Europe, communal azkaros started to be made following massacres of Jews. This took the form of a communal yizkor called 'Av Harachamim.' Today we have added special prayers for those murdered in the holocaust or defending the land of Israel.

I heard there was something about the first year and yizkor. What should I do?
The default custom is to stay in and recite Yizkor even in the first year after the passing.[12] There are some who say one should avoid saying Yizkor the first year since it brings up too much pain which will spoil Yom Tov.[13] One should follow the custom of one's parents and if that is not known, follow the default.

What do I do about the yahrzeit candle?
The custom is to light a yahrzeit candle before the Yom Tov which will include Yizkor.

How many candles?
Some Ashkenazim have the practice to light a candle for each deceased person in the family. Sephardim light one candle for everyone.

What if I forgot to light on erev Yom Tov?
One may light on Yom Tov from an existing flame but the candle should be placed in an area where people are eating.[14]

Hakamaz Matzeiva

When should one plan to do hakamas matzeiva?
Some have the custom of putting up the monument right after the shiva.[15] Others have the custom to wait until 12 months.[16]

How does one go about it?
One should contact the Rabbi of the deceased and discuss what is important to one to have on the tombstone and to discuss the best way to word it.

What should the tombstone have on it?
There are certain basics that need to be on the tombstone:

פ"נ
Here is interred
פלוני בן אלמוני
Name of the deceased
Hebrew date of death
ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.
May their soul be bound up in the eternal bond of life

More than that, people sometimes have poetic acrostics for the name or a brief description of who the person was. It should not be exaggerated and it should reflect the general atmosphere of the neighboring tombstones.

[9] Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 26:22
[10] Ramo OC 521:6
[11] Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 134:21
[12] Kol Bo 65:4
[13] Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 134:21
[14] Shemiras Shabbos Kehilchasa 13:6
[15] Kol Bo 65:3:2
[16] Elya Rabba 224

Some like to add the date of birth and English dates as well.
Some are careful not to have any other language than Hebrew on the tombstone.

Is there a ceremony? What should be done?
There is a ceremony called a hakamas matzeiva – erecting a monument. It includes reciting certain Tehillim, a eulogy, kaddish and malei rachamim. It is also the first time to read and explain the stone. For more specifics, please contact Rabbi Trump.

Do we need a minyan?
While a minyan is technically not needed, it enables one to say kaddish which is a merit.

When can the hakamas matzeiva not be done?
It should not be set on a day that one does not say Tachanun on.

What is the reason for setting up a tombstone?
The tombstone has many names in Judaism. One is *Tzion* – a marker. It demarcates where a person is buried so people will respect the grave and also act appropriately regarding tuma and tahara.
Another name for the tombstone is *nefesh*. That means literally – the soul. It relates to the lowest level of the soul which is manifest at the grave.
It is also noteworthy that a tombstone is fashioned from stone – אבן – which is the acronym for אב-בן-נכד or -אמא בת-נכדה which demonstrates the legacy of life even beyond the grave. That is one of the reasons one places a stone onto the tombstone when visiting.

Yahrzeit

What does the word yahrzeit mean?
It means in Yiddish 'day of the year.' It is the anniversary of a person's passing away.

When is the yahrzeit set?
The yahrzeit is the day a person passes away.[17] However, if the day of death was 2 more days before the burial, then the yahrzeit will be on the day of burial for the first year and then from then onwards, it will be on the day of death.[18]

What if it is a shana meuberes?
One whose parent passed during the month of Adar in a non-leap year.

- The opinion of the Rama is to observe the Yahrzeit in Adar I during a leap year. (Minhag Ashkenaz).
- The opinion of the Shulchan Aruch is to observe the Yahrzeit in Adar II during a leap year. (Minhag Edut HaMizrach).
- There are Ashkenazi poskim who suggest that although the main observance is during Adar I, if one fasts on the yahrzeit, one should fast during the Adar II date and also say kaddish again on that date. This does not allow one to take the amud when there are other chiyuvim present.

One whose parent passed during the month of Adar I in a leap year:

- Should observe the Yahrzeit in Adar I during a leap year, and Adar in a non-leap-year.

One who's parent passed during the month of Adar II in a leap year:

- Should observe the Yahrzeit in Adar II during a leap year, and Adar in a non-leap-year.

What if the death was on the 30th of Cheshvan or Kislev?
These are 2 dates which are not in every annual calendar depending on the length of Cheshvan and Kislev.
If the year of death, the death was on the 30th and the it is now a year where there is no 30th:

- Sephardim commemorate the yahrzeit on the 29th.
- Ashkenazim would follow the pattern of the first year following the death. If it was chaser, the yahrzeit will be commemorated on the 29th, and if the year was malei, the yahrzeit will be commemorated on Rosh Chodesh (the first), even when it is a chaser year in future.[19]

What happens spiritually on the yahrzeit?

[17] Ramo YD 402:12
[18] Shach YD 402 sk 10. A 3 day gap is clear according to all. A 2 days gap is a matter of debate but it is best to treat it like a 3 day gap.
[19] Mishna Berura 568 sk 42

On this day, the memory of the deceased person enters in front of Hashem and the possibility of elevating the standing of the Neshama is possible.[20]

What are practices that I should do the Shabbos before the yahrzeit?

- The minhag is to get an aliya, and if possible maftir and haftorah.
- The son should try to lead the davening if possible. If the son is not a good baal tefilla, they can take pesukei dezimra or mincha.
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- One says a Malei Rachamim at Shabbos mincha for the deceased.
- Ashkenazim have the practice that the a person who has a yahrzeit in the coming week davens maariv on that Motzei Shabbos.[21]

What practices should I do on the day of the yahrzeit?

- One should light a yahrzeit candle for the full day of the yahrzeit so one remembers the deceased and prays on their behalf.[22]
- One should daven all the tefillos for the amud.
- One should say all the kaddishim.[23]
- If there is krias haTorah, one should get an aliya that day.[24]
- One should endeavor to learn more Torah on the yahrzeit for the deceased. It is ideal to learn the mishnayos which begin with the letters of the name of the deceased and the word נשמה.
- One should try visit the grave on the yahrzeit, and if possible light a candle there.
- One should give tzedaka in the merit of the deceased and to pray for their soul's elevation.[25] If pledged, it should be redeemed immediately and it should always be said bli neder.[26]
- It is ideal to have a meal[27] or tikun[28] at which divrei Torah and brachos are said for the aliyas Neshama of the deceased.

Are there any aspects of aveilus on the yahrtzeit?

Yes. One should not attend a wedding meal the night one is observing a yahrzeit.[29] Other smachos are allowed.

Is it true that people fast on yahrzeits?

Yes. It is codified in halacha that one should fast on the yahrzeit of a loved one.[30] However, today the practice has become not to fast with the weakness of our generations.[31]

What if I was not able to do all that I wanted to do?

It is important to remember that the greatest nachas a parent can get is when their children and family are working in harmony without machlokes. Being able to be together it a big zechus for the deceased. Moreover, the minhagim on the yahrzeit should not become a reason to be makpid on others. If one gave up the amud for others who needed it, that is a bigger zechus than leading the davening on principle.

Does Kibbud Av V'eim stop at death?
Davening
Seudah Shlishis
Learning projects
How to Refer to Parents
Overly Mourning
Visiting the grave

[20] Likutei Halachos Tefillin 5, sk 44
[21] Gesher Hachaim 32:2
[22] Magen Avraham OC 261 sk 6
[23] Ramo YD 376:4
[24] Gesher Hachaim 32:12
[25] Ramo YD 249:16
[26] Shulchan Aruch YD 203:4
[27] Yalkut Yosef Aveilus 40:24
[28] Pnei Baruch 39:34
[29] Ramo YD 391:3
[30] Shulchan Aruch OC 568, Ramo YD 376:4
[31] Nitei Gavriel II 72:1-5