

## The Mitzvah of Kever Avot: Visiting the Grave of a Loved One

It is a *mitzvah* to visit the grave of one's ancestors. Over the centuries, a number of traditions have developed that show respect to the dead and offer comfort to mourners.

**Timing:** Many survivors visit the grave of a loved one on a *yahrzeit* and in the days leading up to a family life-cycle event. In addition, it is customary to perform the *mitzvah* of *kever avot* on 9 Av, during *Elul* and the *Yamim Noraim*. Graves are not visited on Shabbat or holidays.

**Special Prayers:** People find the experience of *kever avot* meaningful for different reasons. Some visitors to graves are absolutely silent, absorbed in their private memories. Others "talk" to the deceased, sharing concerns, hopes and prayers. It is customary to recite *El Malei Rahamim* in Hebrew or English and to read psalms such as Psalm 23, 91, 119, 130. Some touch the gravestone with the left hand and say, "Rest in peace until God who comforts and announces peace comes." תִּשְׁבֵּב בְּשָׁלוֹם עַד בֹּא מִנְחָם מִשְׁמִיעַ שְׁלוֹם.

**Entering:** There is a special *brakha* that can be said upon entering a cemetery (recited not more than once in 30 days). This *brakha*, like the one said upon first hearing of a death, acknowledges God as Author of life and death:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר נִצַּר אֶתְכֶם בְּדִין, וְתָן וּכְלֹכַל אֶתְכֶם בְּדִין, וְהַמִּית אֶתְכֶם בְּדִין, וַיּוֹדַע מִסְפֵּר כְּלֶכֶם בְּדִין, וְהוּא עֲתִיד לְהַחְיֶיכֶם וּלְקַיֵּם אֶתְכֶם בְּדִין. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' מְחַיֵּה הַמֵּתִים.

Blessed are You, Adonai, our God, Master of Space and Time, Who in keeping with the laws of nature created you, nourished and sustained you, brought death to you with justice. God knows the sum total of you and will restore and resuscitate you with judgment. Blessed are You, Adonai, who gives life to the dead. You are eternally mighty, Adonai, Restorer of the dead. (Continue with the second paragraph of the *amidah*: *mikhalkel hayim b'hesed* You sustain the living with loving kindness.)

**Walking:** Though not always possible, we try to avoid walking directly on or over graves. Cemeteries should not be used as short cuts.

**Cemetery Etiquette:** Cemeteries are considered holy ground. Behaviors that are undignified or in a spirit of levity (*kalut rosh*), therefore, are to be avoided. These include eating, drinking or sitting on a gravestone.

**Adorning Graves:** It is customary to place a small pebble on a gravestone. As opposed to flowers which fade and wither, stone is solid and permanent. It serves, therefore, as a sign of hope that the memories of our loved ones never fade. At gravesites, flags may be placed and flowers planted but not plucked for home use.

**Leaving:** It is customary to wash hands upon leaving a cemetery as a sign of purification and to distinguish between "the world of the dead" and "the world of the living" (no *brakha* is recited). Some also have the custom of plucking grass when leaving. This act symbolizes the frailty of life and reminds us that though "we are as dust" (Ps. 103:14), never-the-less, we hope for the time of resurrection when the righteous "shall blossom out of the city like grass of the earth" (Ps. 72:16).