

About *Yahrzeit*

What is *Yahrzeit*?

Yahrzeit is a Yiddish term for the anniversary of a loved one's death. The word comes from the German for year (*jahr*) and time (*zeit*). Mizrahi (Middle East) Jews use the word *nachalah*, the Hebrew word for inheritance. Sephardic Jews use *meldado* or *anyos*, the Ladino for years.

Rabbi Harry writes, "Jewish wisdom holds that grief never fully ends. There is no closure. We simply learn to live with the pain of the loss. Based on my own experience I liken grief to a stone thrown into a still pond. Soon after death the waves and ripples are frequent and intense but as time passes the waves are gentle, subtle and occasional. No matter what name you call it, *Yahrzeit* creates a space in time to remember and connect. Torah teaches us that real love is eternal and therefore our relationships built on real love must also be eternal. Marking *Yahrzeit*, an annual personal memorial day for a loved one, is a powerful and ancient tradition. It offers an opportunity to reflect on the life lessons learned from the loved one no longer living on this planet and to connect with memories of the loved one including the tear in the fabric of our existence resulting from their death and loss. *Yahrzeit* is a time to recall and invoke our loved ones and take notice of their continued, albeit subtle, presence in our lives".

Yahrzeit Traditions

Synagogue

Kaddish

- Attending, and if you have the skills, leading a prayer service.
- Reciting the Mourner's *Kaddish*.

The Mourner's *Kaddish* is a prayer that focuses on God's life enlarging presence in the universe. The prayer draws inspiration from the Biblical works of Ezekiel and Daniel and offers hope and redemption at a time of loss and pain.

Rabbi Harry writes, "I understand the Mourner's *Kaddish*, sometimes referred to in Hebrew as *Kaddish Yatom* (literally the Orphan's *Kaddish*), as a means of confronting one of life's primary paradoxes wherein God is the source of pain and loss but also the source of comfort. At a tender moment, the *Kaddish* asks mourners and those remembering loved ones as they recite the *Kaddish* to connect to life, hope, peace and, perhaps most importantly, to community. *Kaddish* is only said publically when there is a *minyan* (prayer quorum)".

Home

Lighting a 24 hour candle

On the eve of a *Yahrzeit* it is a tradition to light a 24-hour candle. Jewish days begin at sundown and last until the stars come out the next evening. We light *Yahrzeit* candles known in Hebrew as a *ner*

neshamah (soul candle) because the book of Proverbs 20:27 teaches that the “soul of human is the candle or lamp of God.”

Rabbi Harry writes, “When I light a *Yahrzeit* candle for my loved one I take time to focus on my life. I spend time with the candle recalling the past year, especially the places where my loved one was missed, the moments of pride I want to share, the times where I could really have used their wisdom and support. I reflect on the light that they instilled in me and each year I rededicate myself to shining and sharing that light. Lighting a candle feels like a way for me to physically bring them into my home and for the next 24 hours to do my best to make my loved one more present in my day to day life”.

Community

Tzedakah

Tzedakah is about using material resources to do righteous work in this world. It is an important custom to donate to charity on the day of remembering a loved one. Historically it was customary to fast on the *Yahrzeit* day and some small communities may still follow this practice. The idea behind both *tzedakah* and fasting was to care for and support the soul of a loved one.

Rabbi Harry writes, “The righteous giving of *tzedakah* can bring about changes for goodness in our *mazal* (in our karma and fortune). The recitation of *Kaddish* also serves this purpose — *Illui Neshamah* in Hebrew (literally the elevating of a soul). We learn through the liturgy of the *Yamim Noraim*, the High Holy Days of Awe that *Tefillah*, (prayer), *Teshuvah*, (personal reconciliation), and *Tzedakah* (in the memory of a loved one) are ways of bringing physicality to the values that loved ones instilled in us. By acting on those values we invoke their presence and memory through a positive action. The recitation of *Kaddish* and the reflection on the spiritual and life lessons learned from a loved one should move us to *Teshuvah* and *Tzedakah*”.

Yahrzeit Date

Yahrzeit dates can be confusing because we live with a secular calendar that is tied to the sun. The Jewish calendar is tied to the moon with a solar repair so that holidays always fall in the same season. Traditionally we mark the Hebrew anniversary of the death of our loved ones. In our congregation we have prayer services on Saturday and Thursday mornings and occasionally on Friday nights. If you have *Yahrzeit* that does not correspond with those days you should come to the synagogue on the day closest to the *Yahrzeit* in order to publically mark the date and have the opportunity to pray with a *minyan* and recite the mourner’s *Kaddish*.

Rabbi Harry writes, “I personally light my candle and do my home rituals on the exact date. You may be asking, ‘why do we mark the memory of a loved one at death and not at birth’? In Ecclesiastes, the biblical book of wisdom attributed to King Solomon the teaching is ‘A good name is greater than good oil; and the day of death is greater than the day of birth.’ Our Sages understood this teaching through a kind of parable. It is the way of world to celebrate when a ship is about to sail but there is no party when it arrives. The wise would do the opposite and celebrate when the ship has returned to its destination in peace”.