

When Should I Say Kaddish for Yahrzeit?

It seems like a straightforward question. But customs develop which sometimes make even the easy questions seem confusing.

Let's start with the basics. The Yahrzeit is the anniversary of a person's death. On the yahrzeit, we perform a variety of activities which help us honor the memory of our loved one (more on that below). Just as with all of our holidays, the yahrzeit begins the evening before the date of the yahrzeit. For example, if someone's yahrzeit is the 3rd day of the Hebrew month of Kislev, and that falls on a Tuesday, the observance begins on Monday evening after dark.

We begin the observance of yahrzeit by lighting the candle which will burn for 24 hours. As the Psalmist said, "the soul of man is the candle of God". In addition, the day of a yahrzeit is an appropriate time to give tzedaka in a person's memory and to visit their grave.

Finally, there is the recitation of Mourner's Kaddish. Optimally, we are able to be present with a minyan so that we can recite Kaddish at Ma'ariv (evening service) on the night on which the yahrzeit begins and at Shaharit (morning service) and Minha (afternoon service) on the day of the yahrzeit. Kaddish is an affirmation of God, and reciting it within the community, links us and the one we remember on that day with God and the Jewish community.

In our congregation, we have an additional custom. At the conclusion of Shabbat morning services, we announce all of the yahrzeits for the coming week. Though I don't know the exact origin of this custom at Beth Ahm, clearly this is a wide-spread custom. Many people take the opportunity to come to services that Shabbat prior to a yahrzeit to hear the name of their loved one and to recite kaddish. Though our sources don't mention a custom like this, I happen to think that it is a nice one. It links people with the community at an important time in the life of our community---Shabbat. We should understand, however, that coming on Shabbat is an additional opportunity, not a substitute for saying kaddish on the actual day of a yahrzeit. It is still important to plan to say kaddish with a minyan on the day of the yahrzeit. In fact, a few years ago we have incorporated the reading of the yahrzeits at our daily minyanim so as to help people connect that moment of saying kaddish with the person they are remembering that day. It has become a meaningful and important aspect of our daily services.

A final thought---It seems clear to me that there are people who are 'yahrzeit people'. They come to say kaddish for their relatives; not only their parents or siblings, but even their grandparents or aunts and uncles. These people were probably taught by their parents or grandparents that this is just something that you are supposed to do. Then there are others in our congregation who don't come to say kaddish for a yahrzeit. Do they not care about their relatives? Of course they care; and they miss their relatives. But somehow, we haven't passed on the knowledge and the feeling of the importance of observing a yahrzeit (and saying yizkor too, but that's for a different article). Observing

a yahrzeit is important and can be a meaningful expression of the love and respect that we have for our loved one. It provides us an opportunity to honor their memory in several different ways and in so doing, we make their memory a blessing for us, for our family, and for our community.