



Purchasing a Gravesite Marker for the Temple Beth Shalom Cemetery

A Little Background

The use of a stone to mark a grave is an ancient custom. One of the most famous graves in Jewish history is that of Rachel, who died giving birth to Benjamin along the road to Jerusalem. "Over her grave Jacob set up a pillar; it is the pillar at Rachel's grave to this day" (Genesis 35:20). Traditionally, the monument is a marker identifying one's final resting place, a symbol of respect, and a lasting remembrance of the deceased. This placement of a marker for the deceased has been a practice and tradition ever since.

Today, the Jewish tradition is to erect a monument for a loved one reasonably close to a year after death. Some do it much sooner; in fact, soon after the Shiva period is over. However, for those with loved ones recently buried in the Temple Beth Shalom cemetery in Austin Memorial Park (AMP), we would strongly suggest that you wait for at least nine months from burial to have a headstone marker installed. This is because AMP is well known for needing extra time for the ground to settle with sufficient strength to support the weight of the monument.

Purchasing a Gravesite Marker

You may find, as others have, that even in the grief of having a loved one die and arranging for and participating in their funeral, ordering the gravesite marker is an equally heart-tugging experience. Below are the major steps to guide your purchase of a headstone. Please keep in mind that the supply chain issues that we are all experiencing now has also affected the headstone business, and as a result, this entire process can—but does not always—take over nine months to complete, depending on the material, availability, and workmanship required.

1. Familiarize yourself with the Temple Beth Shalom cemetery policies.

You received a copy of this four-page document when you purchased the gravesite(s), but it is also posted in this section of the Temple Beth Shalom website. Section D, *Markers*, describes the criteria the headstone must meet. This includes the design, size limitations, type (vertical or flush), and material. It is especially important that the marker you purchase stays within these criteria which are consistent with the City of Austin Cemetery Rules and Regulations. Monument providers are not responsible for assuring that the stone you purchase meets the temple's requirements; you are.

2. **With the members of your family and friends, if you wish, discuss and make preliminary decisions as to what kind of headstone appeals to you.** This includes aspects such as:
 - a. Shape. It can be an upright headstone, a flat stone that is stepped up from the ground, or a memorial marker that is flush with the ground. Also, some couples choose a double stone while others prefer individual ones.
 - b. Material. Virtually all markers are now made of granite. This is the material of choice and is highly recommended.
 - c. Size. The Temple Beth Shalom policy allows considerable flexibility, but you need to be sure that you stay within the required size parameters.
 - d. Color. There are no restrictions on color. Many headstones are grey granite while others may be a pink/grey mixture, dark green, or black, for example. The headstone provider(s) will show you a wide variety of color samples from which to choose.
3. **Consider visiting a cemetery, especially a Jewish cemetery, for additional ideas.** Although you have probably been to a cemetery to visit a loved one's grave, start to take more notice of the many different headstones there. Notice the many shapes, sizes, colors, and finishes (e.g., polished smooth or rough on the top and sides). You might even want to take some photographs of the memorials you like to make it easier to discuss them with family and the monument provider. The photographs may also help in deciding the inscriptions you wish to have. Also, be sure to write down all your questions for your meeting(s) with the monument provider, one of the Temple Beth Shalom cemetery co-chairs, and/or the rabbi.
4. **Contact and then visit a local headstone or monument provider.** There are many memorial providers in Austin, two of which Temple Beth Shalom congregants have used almost exclusively. Their contact information is included at the end of this article. If you want to work with a different provider, please contact one of the Temple Cemetery chairs to confirm that your preferred provider meets the temple's quality criteria. If you wish, a member of the Cemetery Committee would be happy to join you and provide guidance when you visit the memorial provider(s) you have selected. Most congregants have elected to do so.
5. **Select the headstone.** You will be asked to choose the type, size, material, color, and finish of the stone. Make sure that the headstone you order includes the mandatory granite base (it most always does) and that it complies with the size requirements. Also be sure to discuss the provider's warranty regarding the installation and long-term stability of the headstone. Ten years is not unusual and should be expected within the already quoted price.
6. **Choose what you wish to be inscribed on the headstone.** The headstone is a lasting symbol and a tribute to the life of the deceased, and thus many families find this a difficult task to undertake (no pun intended). An inscription is either carved (usually sandblasted) into the stone or cast onto a bronze

plaque attached to the marker. Your decisions on the inscription should be made during the time you and the provider are waiting for the headstone blank to be delivered. One of the cemetery co-chairs is always available to discuss or visit with you to provide personal guidance in your decision-making.

The wording on the memorial belongs with the family, but most Jewish markers contain the following:

- a. Virtually all Jewish headstones have a Star of David and the Hebrew letters *pei* and *nun* at the top center. These letters stand for *poh nitman*—"here is buried," or "here lies."
- b. The Hebrew name of the deceased. In Reform tradition, it is common practice to include the names of the deceased's father and mother as an integral part of the Hebrew name.
- c. The transliterated Jewish date of death.
- d. The years spanning birth to death according to the secular calendar.
- e. Identifying relationships, such as "*daughter, wife, mother, and grandmother, son and father,*" etc. In these cases, it is traditional to list those relationships in the order in which they occurred (e.g., a person becomes a daughter before she becomes a wife, which precedes her becoming a mother, etc.). Words of endearment, such as *beloved* or *loving*, are often added.
- f. Some families wish to also include a symbol such as a fraternal or school logo. Temple Beth Shalom policy would have any logos or symbols placed on the back of the stone—and always remain in good taste worthy of being in our Jewish cemetery.
- g. In place of the "relationship" information discussed in "e" above, many families elect to inscribe a brief, but meaningful, epitaph commemorating the life of the now deceased. A visit to the cemetery is certain to give you some excellent ideas.
- h. At the very bottom of the monument, virtually all Jewish headstones have the Hebrew letters *tav, nun, tzadi, bet, and hei*, which are the initial letters of the Hebrew words *t'hei nafsho(ah) tzeruah bitzror ha-chayim*—"may his or her soul be bound up in the bonds of eternal life" or "may he/she rest in peace."

7. **Review the initial layout.** Check the initial proof developed by the headstone provider to see how well the resultant layout was translated from your initial sketch or information that you provided. Is the layout and placement the way you want it to be? This will likely be an iterative process as you near perfection.
8. **Notify the headstone provider and the Cemetery Committee Chair if your deceased loved one served in the military.** The Austin chapter of the Jewish War Veterans pays its respects to every Jewish veteran by placing a small U.S. flag at their grave on Veterans Day. They will also add your loved one to their national registry. In addition, you should be aware that the U.S. Veterans Administration will provide, free of charge, a personalized brass

plaque commemorating your loved one's military service, for permanent mounting on the back of the headstone.

9. **Obtain the temple Cemetery Committee approval of the contents and layout.** As required by the Temple Beth Shalom Cemetery Policies, the approval by one of the Cemetery Committee Co-Chairs regarding the layout, design, wording, and symbology on the gravesite marker is *mandatory* prior to you giving the final approval to the provider to begin inscribing the stone. The temple Board of Trustees requires this pre-approval to provide an extra level of assurance to all families with loved ones interred in our cemetery, so that every final resting place will remain the sacred ground of which we can all be proud, and feel at peace. One of the Cemetery Co-Chairs—in consultation with the rabbi, if necessary—will also assure that all the Hebrew lettering to go on the stone is correct.
10. **Review and approve the final layout.** You want to see exactly what is going to be created. Review the proof carefully to be sure that all the information is correct, and the layout and placement is how you want it to be. You will be required to formally approve the final layout.
11. **Commit to the purchase.** At this point you will be required to sign a purchase agreement for the stone and leave a deposit—normally 50% of the total purchase price. Unless a headstone that meets your desires is readily available in inventory, it may take over six months for it to be delivered from the distributor or quarry. So it is very possible for the entire process to take over nine months. Please plan ahead to avoid more stress!
12. **Check the headstone itself.** Although both of the recommended headstone providers do excellent work, you may wish to check the completed stone yourself (ask the provider to let you know when it is finished) to be sure that your information, layout, and design are exactly the way you approved it in the proof.
13. **Arrange for the unveiling.** Arrangements for the unveiling should be made through the temple office. The clergy assistant will, of course, try to accommodate your requested date with the rabbi's schedule. It would be wise to wait until Step 9 (above) is completed before requesting an unveiling date. At this time, one of our Cemetery Committee Co-Chairs can guide you through the details of the unveiling, such as arrangements for a tent and chairs if desired.
14. **Arrange for the final placement of the headstone.** In addition to the headstone that is purchased from the memorial provider, there is also a fee payable to the City of Austin to construct a mandatory concrete foundation upon which the headstone and its base will sit. You can make those arrangements directly at the cemetery office, or most providers will make those arrangements for you at your request. Arrangements for the concrete foundation should be made at least ten days prior to the scheduled unveiling.

If you have any questions, concerns, or need help at any time regarding the purchase of a gravesite marker, you are encouraged to contact Sam Scheer or Larry Cohen. Their contact information is below, along with two very reputable and recommended Austin headstone providers.

Contacts

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