**Purchasing a Gravesite Marker**

**for the**

**Temple Beth Shalom Memorial 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 ones 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.

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You may find as others have that, even in the grief of having a loved one die and arranging 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 this entire process can take over 4 months to complete, depending on the material (granite) availability and workmanship required.

1. **Familiarize yourself with the Temple Beth Shalom Cemetery Policies.** You received a copy of this 4-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 marker must meet. This includes the design, size limitations, type (vertical or flush), and material. It is very 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:
   1. 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.
   2. Material. Virtually all markers are now made of granite. This is the material of choice and is highly recommended.
   3. Size. The Beth Shalom policy allows considerable flexibility, but you need to be sure that you stay within the required size parameters.
   4. 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 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 in order 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 of your questions for your meeting(s) with the monument provider, a member of the Cemetery Committee, and/or the Rabbi.
4. **Contact and then visit a local headstone or monument provider.** There are a number of 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 the Temple Cemetery Committee 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. Almost all 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. 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 3 months for it to be delivered from the distributor or quarry. So it is very possible for the entire process to take over 4 months. Please plan ahead to avoid more stress!
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 very difficult task to take on. 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 occur during the period of time you and the provider are waiting for the headstone to be delivered. A member of the Cemetery Committee is always available to discuss or visit with you to provide personal guidance in your decision-making.

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

1. 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.”
2. The Hebrew name of the deceased. In Reform tradition, it is common practice to include the names of the deceased’s father and mother.
3. The transliterated Jewish date of death.
4. The years spanning birth to death according to the secular calendar.
5. 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.
6. Some families wish to also include a symbol such as a fraternal or school logo. Temple Beth Shalom policy would have any logos placed on the back of the stone.
7. In place of the “relationship” information discussed above, many families elect to inscribe a brief, but meaningful, epitaph commemorating the life of the now deceased.
8. 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.”
9. **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.
10. **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.
11. **Obtain the Temple Cemetery Committee approval of the contents and layout.** As required by the Temple Beth Shalom Cemetery Policies, the approval by the Cemetery Committee Chair 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 requires this pre-approval by the Cemetery Committee to provide an extra level of assurance to all families with loved ones interred in our cemetery, so that this final resting place will remain the sacred ground of which we can all be proud, and feel at peace. The Cemetery Committee – in consultation with the Rabbi, if necessary -- will also assure that all of the Hebrew lettering to go on the stone is correct.
12. **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.
13. **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.
14. **Arrange for the unveiling.** Arrangements for the unveiling should be made through the Temple office. Marissa Wright 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 a member of the Cemetery Committee can guide you through the details of the unveiling, such as arrangements for a tent and chairs if desired.

1. **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, Cemetery Committee Chair, or any member of the Cemetery Committee. Sam’s contact information is below, along with two very reputable Austin headstone providers.

**Contacts**

Temple Beth Shalom Headstone Provider Headstone Provider

Sam Scheer, Marcie Golliher Steve Gilbert

Cemetery Committee Chair Stasswender/Dietz Memorial Riley-Gardner Memorial

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