

Yahrzeit – Remembering Our Loved Ones By Rabbi Michael Lotker

I spend a lot of time remembering to help you remember. Since I am not only the Senior Rabbi of the Temple but also the Temple's "Senior Nerd" – that is, it is I who maintains the computer systems including our Yahrzeit Data Base (developed by my computer mentor, Max Heller) – it falls to me and my computer to keep track of the dates of your loved ones' passing. This takes a bit of time and, often, a bit of explanation.

The custom of remembering someone on the anniversary of their passing was introduced in Talmudic times (4th – 5th century CE) but actual observance did not become common until the Middle Ages (11th – 12th century CE) in the aftermath of the crusades. The word *Yahrzeit* is a Yiddish term coming from the German *Jahrzeit* meaning "anniversary." The tradition is to light a twenty four hour Yahrzeit Candle at sunset on the day before the anniversary date; this is because in the Hebrew Calendar, the new day begins at sunset (and this is the case because in describing the beginnings of the world in the first chapter of Genesis, the phrase, "and it was evening and it was morning" is used). Are you still with me? We use a candle because Proverbs teaches us (Prov. 20:27) that "the soul of a person is the lamp of Adonai."

It is a common custom to do mitzvot in honor of someone who has passed on, the idea being that in such a case both the loved one in the next world and you in this world get credit for the mitzvah. Thus it is appropriate for one to donate to charity, host an Oneg Shabbat, etc. in honor of someone dear to you. Another important custom is to recite the Mourner's Kaddish prayer on the Yahrzeit of someone's passing. This prayer is said in the congregation at every worship service and our tradition is to read a list of Temple members' Yahrzeits on the Shabbat of or following the actual date. The mystics teach that reciting the Kaddish in someone's honor helps to elevate their soul in the next world. It is also our practice to remind you of the Yahrzeit date a few weeks before it occurs each year so you won't forget.

This is where it gets interesting. It is traditional to observe someone's Yahrzeit on the anniversary of their passing according to the Hebrew calendar date. As you know from your experience in keeping track of the dates of such Jewish holidays as Hanukkah and the High Holy Days, this can be a bit confusing. This is because our Hebrew calendar is a lunar calendar in contrast to the solar Gregorian calendar we use day to day. Since 12 lunar months are about 11 days short of a solar year, the Hebrew Calendar adds an entire extra month seven times in a nineteen year cycle. So the Yahrzeit dates jump around a bit and I often get calls from people worried that we may have missed a Yahrzeit date. For example, this last year Rosh Hashanah fell on September 30th, Hanukkah on December 22nd and for the same reason, the Yahrzeit of your loved one also may have seemed "late."

If you are worried about this, I have a few suggestions. Learn the Hebrew date of your loved ones' Yahrzeits and keep track of them on your own Hebrew calendars (we have extra Hebrew calendars at the Temple). Also be assured that we will contact you and

remind you of the dates by mail and by publication in the Megillah. If you really want to plan ahead, let me know and I'll be happy to send you a special Yahrzeit Calendar for anyone you'd like with the Hebrew and Gregorian anniversary dates for the next thirty years. After that, you'll have to check back with me (I hope I'll still be there to answer your call).

There are several phrases that we add when we mention the name of someone who has passed on to the next world. For a man we say *alav ha-shalom*, for a woman *aleha ha-shalom* meaning "peace be upon him/her." My favorite is *zichrono l'vracha* (for a man) or *zichrona l'vracha* (for a woman) meaning "may his/her memory be for a blessing." I do hope that you will continue to bless the memory of those you loved in this life by working with me and with the Temple to keep our Yahrzeit data base current and will continue to honor those who came before us in this uniquely Jewish way.