

Kever Avot Taharah
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Kever Avot tradition:

It is an ancient Jewish custom to observe **Kever Avot**, going out to our cemeteries and remembering our beloved family members who now lie in the earth. We conduct this ritual between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, reciting El Maelei and Kaddish for the souls who departed this earth over the preceding year. This is a ritual for family and community members to remember and honour their loved ones.

Kever Avot: additional visits by Chevra Kadisha

In a separate ceremony, maybe on the same day, members of the Chevra Kadisha, will consider visiting the cemeteries, also between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (some communities may choose to wait until Zayin Adar). Due to the nature of the COVID 19 virus, and in order to preserve the lives of Chevra members, we decided to bury our Jewish family members without full taharah. We can think of such a ritual as a secondary taharah, resonating with the custom of secondary burial of two millennia ago, the timing of which is replicated in the custom of unveiling the matzevah.

In an interesting side note, these ancient burial caves were limestone, and the ossuaries were carved from limestone. While limestone was, of course, the stone most available in the geographical area of Israel, lime is also known to be a disinfecting agent.

“Lime (Quicklime, CaO): Lime is produced by burning limestone. If water is added to quicklime, slaked lime is produced. If lime is exposed to the air, air-slaked lime is formed. Lime is strongly alkaline, corrosive, and has been used to spread over carcasses before they are buried to destroy infected animal tissue due to its caustic action. However, current thought is that the lime may actually destroy the putrefying bacteria and hamper bacterial degradation of the carcass if placed directly on the carcass, especially under wet conditions. Lime is not used as much as a disinfectant anymore because there are safer and more effective products on the market. Lime is caustic to organic matter and will destroy debris, including pathogenic microorganisms”. <https://www.vironize.ca/lime-disinfecting-health-hazard/>

Secondary Burial:

See: “In talmudic times, burial took place in caves, hewn tombs, sarcophagi, and catacombs; and a secondary burial, i.e., a re-interment (likkut azamot) of the remains sometimes took place about one year after the original burial in ossuaries (Maim. Yad, Evel, 12:8). The rabbinic injunction (Sanh. 47a) that neither the righteous and the sinners, nor two enemies (Jeroham b. Meshullam, *Sefer Adam ve-Havvah* (Venice, 1553), 231d, *netiv* 28) should be buried side by side is the origin of the custom of reserving special rows in the cemetery for rabbis, scholars, and prominent persons”. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ancient-burial-practices>

See also: https://ancient-world-project.nes.lsa.umich.edu/tltc/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/DEATH_JUD_Hachlili-1983_Jericho-Necropolis.pdf

Also:

<https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/2011-2020/alternative-burial.pdf>



Instructions for Chevra Kadisha members:

- Coordinate with clergy to track full names/Jewish names/date of death and burial/location of each kever for reference.
- Coordinate this Taharah ritual with clergy and cemetery committee: establish date and time. Clarify participation of family members (or not). Each community will develop its own minhag.
- Know location of water source (check source, availability of hoses, running water with cemetery custodian ahead of date of ritual). Bring hose as needed.
- Bring three buckets to each cemetery.
- Bring Taharah booklets (enough for each member to be able to participate as needed).
- Rehearse how/when the visits to each kever will happen; this will depend on how many Chevra members can participate and how many k'varim there are to visit. Move as a team, or one by one, as time allows.
- Discuss who will attend which kever (for example, will men attend men, women, women).
- If individuals were cremated out of necessity, choose a separate area in the cemetery to remember them by name and date of death, and also pour water over that site, in their memory and honour.

Day of Chevra Kadisha Kever Avot ritual:

- Address meitim by their Jewish names as per usual.
- Read some of the prayers (see below) we would usually recite while in the Taharah room.
- Pour nine kavim of water over the graves of the meitim who could not receive the blessing of a full taharah after death.
- Ask forgiveness of the meitim, which we know they will each give us, blessing us with their rachmanes for us.

Suggestion: Recite the following prayers for each of the meitim

- Chamol: Ribbono shel olam...
- Ana Elohei, prayer seeking forgiveness
- Rosh'oketem (men) and Sa'rech k'eder for women
- Amar Rabbi Akiva
- Pour nine kavim of water over each kever
- Tahor hu/T'horah hi.
- V'Hitkaddisitem, Make yourselves holy...
- Sos Asis, halbashah
- Asking Mechilah from meit.
- Wash hands when leaving cemetery.