

Visiting a Cemetery

Rav Gershon Schaffel

There are two main reasons to visit the graves of deceased relatives.

1. The neshamah of the deceased gains pleasure when people visit their graves and daven for their neshamah.
2. When we daven for the deceased, they daven for our well-being and success, and once they have undergone their refinement, their tefilos are more readily accepted.¹

When possible, one should visit the grave of their deceased relative on:

1. The 7th day of shivah after the mourning ends,
2. On shloshim,
3. At the completion of the 12 months of aveilus,
4. On the yahrtzeit.²

SHABBOS, YOM TOV AND CHOL HAMOED

We do not visit graves on Shabbos, Yom Tov, or on Chol Hamoed.³ However, if someone is dangerously ill, it is permitted to go to the cemetery even on Shabbos or Yom Tov.⁴

WHEN THE LAST DAY OF SHIVAH FALLS ON SHABBOS OR YOM TOV

When the seventh day of shivah falls on Shabbos, Yom Tov, or if shivah is cancelled by Yom Tov, the Gesher HaChaim (vol. 1 29:6) provides the following guidelines:

Shabbos – One visits on Sunday, and Keil Malei may be recited.

Pesach – Some visit after Pesach, while others wait to visit until Shloshim.

Shavuos – One visits after Shavuos. However, since it is isru chag, one does not recite Keil Malei.

Sukkos – Some visit after Sukkos, while others wait to visit until shloshim.

Rosh HaShanah – One visits after Rosh HaShanah.

Yom Kippur – One visits after Yom Kippur.

WHEN SHLOSHIM OR THE YAHRTZEIT FALL ON SHABBOS OR YOM TOV

When shloshim or the yahrtzeit fall on Shabbos or Yom Tov, the following guidelines apply:

The Gesher HaChaim (vol. 1 29:7) writes that some opinions hold

that when shloshim or the yahrtzeit falls on Shabbos or Yom Tov, one should visit the grave beforehand. Other Poskim argue that it is better to visit afterward. Regarding Pesach and Sukkos, the appropriate time to visit depends on when shloshim or the yahrtzeit occurs. If shloshim or the yahrtzeit falls on the first day (or second day in chutz la'aretz), one should visit beforehand. If shloshim or the yahrtzeit falls on the last day (or days in chutz la'aretz), one should visit afterward. If shloshim or the yahrtzeit falls on Chol HaMoed, many have the practice of not visiting at all.

ROSH CHODESH

There is a debate regarding Rosh Chodesh. Daas Torah (O.C. 420:2) cites sources that maintain that one should not visit a grave on Rosh Chodesh. The Steipler Gaon zt"l (Orchos Rabbeinu vol. 4 (new version) page 365) maintains that there is no benefit for the neshamah if one visits the grave on Rosh Chodesh. However, the Gesher HaChaim (vol. 1, 29:5) writes that nowadays, the common practice is to visit graves on Rosh Chodesh, although we refrain from reciting Keil Malei on that day. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l (Halichos Shlomo Rosh Chodesh 1:23:93) concurs with the lenient position.

CHANUKAH

Gesher HaChaim (vol. 1, 29:5) writes that visiting graves on Chanukah follows the same guidelines as Rosh Chodesh. Specifically, it is permitted to visit, but Keil Malei is not recited. Rav Elyashiv zt"l (Tziyunei Halachah – Aveilus, pgs 608-610) maintains that one should not visit graves on Chanukah since the neshamos of the deceased are not present there. However, if someone has already begun the practice of visiting graves on Chanukah, he may continue and daven there.⁵

PURIM

The Magen Avrohom (cited in the Mishnah Berurah 696:8) maintains that if shiva ends on Purim or even erev Purim, one should visit the grave with just the chazan to recite Keil Malei. However, the Gesher HaChaim (vol. 1 29:5) writes that nowadays the practice is to visit graves on erev Purim but we do not recite Keil Malei.

BA'AL KERI

The Chaye Adam (138:5) writes that a ba'al keri should not visit a cemetery⁶ since the kochos hatumah will attach to him. The Magen Avrohom (559:15), in the name of the Arizal, writes that someone who has not immersed after becoming a ba'al keri should not visit a cemetery unless it is necessary when accompanying the deceased. Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l (Y.D. 2:162) notes that according to the Arizal, one would not even visit kivrei avos; however, the minhag does not follow the Arizal regarding this. The Minchas Elazar (1:68) argues that the Arizal's intent was to restrict a ba'al keri from unnecessary cemetery visits, but on days when it is common for people to visit the

graves of the deceased (e.g., after shivah or on the yahrtzeit), it is permitted.

WOMEN VISITING A CEMETERY⁷

Mishnah Berurah (98:7) maintains that married women do not visit a cemetery until they immerse in the mikvah.⁸ Sefer Shulchan Melachim⁹ permits women to visit once their flow stops, even if they haven't yet undergone immersion. In urgent situations, like a yahrtzeit, a woman can visit once her flow ceases, even if she is not yet immersed. Additionally, if avoiding the cemetery would cause embarrassment, such as when family members are visiting, a woman may be lenient and visit even during her menstrual flow¹⁰.

Regarding pregnant women, the Minchas Yitzchok (10:42:2) states that some do not visit cemeteries because they hope for the rebuilding of the Bais HaMikdash and want their sons to be pure so they can prepare the parah adumah ashes. In contrast, HaRav Vosner zt"l (Kovetz MiBeis Levi Y.D. pg. 129) writes that there is no such custom. Rav Elyashiv (Tziyunei Halacha, Aveilus, p. 615) also allows pregnant women to visit a cemetery.

THE BERACHAH ON VISITING A CEMETERY

When visiting a Jewish cemetery, one recites the berachah אשר יצר אתכם וכו'.

It is recited once every thirty days, meaning it is not recited again until the 31st day after the last visit.

Although there are Poskim who maintain that someone who visits a different cemetery or even different graves within the same cemetery, the berachah is repeated even if thirty days have not passed, l'maaseh, once the berachah was recited we do not repeat the berachah until day 31, even if one visits another cemetery¹¹. Anyone planning to visit multiple cemeteries on the same day should have in mind that the recitation of the berachah applies to all the cemeteries they visit.

Preferably, it is recited when one is within four amos of the grave. Kohanim, who may not stand within four amos of a grave, recite the berachah when they can see the graves.

PRAYERS WHEN VISITING THE CEMETERY

The Gesher HaChaim (vol. 1, 29:3) states that when visiting a grave at the end of shivah, shloshim, or on the yahrtzeit, the common practice is to recite the following chapters of Tehillim: 33, 16, 17, 72, 91, 104, and 130. After reading these chapters, we recite from the pesukim in chapter 119 that start with the letters spelling the name of the deceased, as well as the word נשמה.

PROTOCOL WHEN VISITING THE CEMETERY

When visiting a grave, the Be'er Heitev (O.C. 224:8) mentions the practice of placing one's hand on the grave. The Shaarei Teshuvah (O.C. 224:8) adds that one should specifically place his left hand on the grave rather than his right. While his hand is on the grave, he should recite the pasuk in Yishayahu. (58:11): וְנָחָה ה' תְּמִיד וְהִשְׁבִּיעַ בְּצִחָחוּת נִפְשֶׁךָ וְעֲצֻמֹּתֶיךָ יִחְלִיץ וְהָיִיתָ כְּגֵן רוּחַ וְכִמְנוּצָא מִיָּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִכָּזְבוּ מִיָּמֶיךָ.

And Hashem shall guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and make strong your bones: and you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.

Afterwards, he should say:

תִּשְׁכַּב בְּשָׁלוֹם וְתִישָׁן בְּשָׁלוֹם עַד בֹּא מְנַחֵם

Lay in peace and sleep in peace, until the arrival of Menachem (Moshiach) who will herald peace.

Preferably, one should stand within four amos of the grave being visited, and effort should also be made to stand near the head of the deceased.¹² However, if that is not possible or kohanim who cannot stand so close to a grave, the sefarim write that as soon as someone approaches a grave, the deceased senses the presence of the visitor, and this gives them satisfaction.

It is common to place a stone or some grass on a grave before leaving. This act shows respect for the deceased because it communicates that one visited the grave.¹³ Some also observe the practice of ripping out grass when leaving the cemetery.¹⁴

WASHING HANDS

One should wash their hands before visiting a cemetery, and when leaving, they should wash their hands and face.¹⁵ Many have the practice to wash each hand three times from a cup.¹⁶ The custom is to avoid passing that cup to someone else. Instead, leftover water is poured out, and the cup is turned upside down for the next person to pick up himself.¹⁷ The hands are left to air dry instead of drying them with a towel.¹⁸

Whenever possible, one should not enter his house before washing his hands, but entering a public building without washing one's hands is allowed.¹⁹

1 Sefer Chassidim 450 and 710

2 Yoreh Deah 344:20. Chochmas Adam (155:18) writes that visiting graves on day 7, 30 and upon the completion of the 12 months is limited to the grave of a talmid chacham but acknowledges that there are places where the custom is to visit the grave on day 7, even if the deceased is not a talmid chacham. Gesher HaChaim (vol. 1 29:1) writes that common practice nowadays is to visit the grave of every deceased on days 7, 30, at the end of 12 months and on the yahrtzeit.

3 See Orchos Chaim (Spinka) 581:14 and Gesher HaChaim vol. 1 29:5.

4 Teshuvos Be'er Sarim 4:8:7.

5 See also Ben Ish Chai who writes that one who has yahrtzeit on Chanukah should visit the grave before Chanukah.

6 Rav Simcha Bunim Cohen (The Laws of Aveilus ch. 51 section V) asserts that this limitation applies to one who stands within four amos of a grave but a ba'al keri who will stand more than four amos from the graves is permitted to enter a cemetery.

7 The Gra (Igeres HaGra) and the Chazon Ish (Orchos Rabbeinu vol. 4 pg 363, new printing) maintain that women should never visit a cemetery even at the end of shivah or on a yahrtzeit. Rav Elyashiv (Ashrei Halsh 90:40), however, writes that those who in general do not observe minhagei HaGra does not have to observe this chumra.

8 See also Shulchan Shlomo Niddah 9:4. Shiurei Shevet HaLevi 195:17:5 explains the difference between attending shul and visiting a cemetery for a woman who has not immersed.

9 Pg. 38 Dinei Niddah V'Yoledes Halacha L'Moshe.

10 Shulchan Shlomo Niddah 9:3-4.

11 See M.B. 224:17 who presents a disagreement about this and thus we follow the rule safek berachos l'hakel.

12 Ma'avar Yabok, Imrei Noam ch. 1.

13 Chaye Moshe: Hilchos Aveilus 15:[12].

14 Y.D. 376:4.

15 M.B. 4:42.

16 M.B. 4:39.

17 See Bais Lechem Yehudah 376:4 and Ma'avar Yabok, Sefas Emes ch. 35.

18 Bais Lechem Yehudah 376:4.

19 The Laws of Aveilus (Rav Simcha Bunim Cohen) 51:X.



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