

“Why Place Stones on Graves?”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Why do Jews place stones on a grave? Stones have a special significance in Judaism. Altars are stones; the most sacred shrine in Judaism is a pile of stones — the wall of the second Temple.

But why place stones on the grave? One beautiful explanation takes its cue from the inscription on many gravestones: the five-letter Hebrew abbreviation *taf, nun, tsadi, bet, hey*, which stands for *Teheye Nishmato Tsrurah Bitsror HaChayyim*. This is usually translated as: “May his soul be bound up in the bounds of eternal life.”

Yet *tsror* (the fourth Hebrew word above) can also be translated as “pebble.” Suddenly, the phrase takes on a different meaning. In ancient times, shepherds needed a system to keep track of their flocks. The shepherd would carry a sling over his shoulder, and in it keep the number of pebbles that corresponded to the number in his flock. That way he could have an accurate daily count.

When we place stones on the grave we are asking God to keep the departed’s soul in God’s sling. God is a shepherd carefully counting and cherishing each soul.

Flowers that bloom and die are a good metaphor for life. As Isaiah says, “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty like the flower of the field; grass withers and flowers fade.” (Isaiah 40:6,7) While flowers may be a good metaphor for the brevity of existence, stones are better suited to the durability of memory. In moments when we are reminded of the fragility of life, Judaism reminds us that there is permanence amid the pain. While other things fade, stones and souls endure.