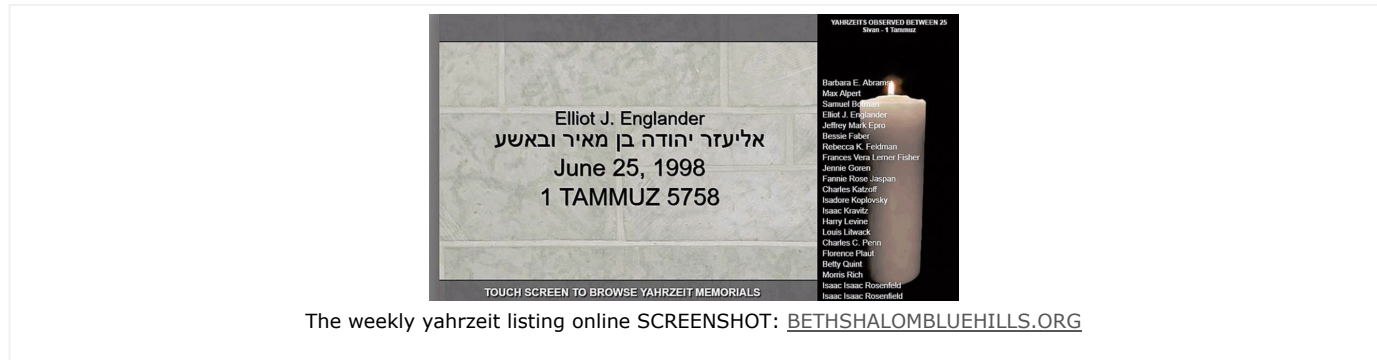


# Yahrzeit in the 21st century

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MILTON – Much like the growing number of synagogues either closing or merging, Congregation Beth Shalom of the Blue Hills – a union of Milton’s Temple Shalom, Temple Adas Shalom of Quincy and Temple Beth El of Quincy – had many yahrzeit plaques and a limited space to hang them when they dedicated their new building in May 2016.

As a member of the Ritual Committee, David Dauer took the initiative to find a solution for this.

At first, per suggestion of the rabbi, the congregation considered building a type of structure with all the nameplates on it. Showcasing all the plaques, though, would be cumbersome and weigh some “hundreds of pounds,” Dauer told The Jewish Advocate.

“These things aren’t tiny,” he said, “and they are heavy.”

Yahrzeit plaques commemorate the death of a relative or other loved one. They are usually inscribed with both the English and Hebrew names and the date of the person’s death in both the standard and Hebrew calendars. A memorial light, which is usually placed next to the plaque, is lit annually on the yahrzeit and during Yizkor services.



Congregants buy the memorial plate for their loved one, which Dauer compares to buying a cemetery plot.

"At Beth El, to buy a plate, it was \$70," he said, "but at Beth Shalom – that was ours – it was \$250. Someone feels like they're buying a plot, even though they're not. They feel like they own that and if you're going to destroy that or take that away, well, it's a mindset."

"I said there's got to be a better way," Dauer continued. So, with a background in publishing and computers, he set out to find a way to digitize it.

"I only found one place, though," he said. It was the Canadian company Planned Legacy, which creates digital signage and memorial displays for nonprofit organizations.

Soon after, Dauer found a Conservative synagogue on the North Shore that was using the system. He took a group of congregants and lay leadership – whom he describes as "tied to the traditions" and not looking to consider a digitized version of such traditions – to Congregation Shirat Hayam in Swampscott.

There, the group entered a spacious room dedicated to the yahrzeit memorials. Rather than them covering the walls though, there was a touch screen on one wall surrounded by some chairs and decor, including an image of a tree and a quote on another wall.

According to Dauer, the woman in charge began to tell stories about how congregants interacted with the system, and that was when the wheels began to turn.

For instance, at Shirat Hayam, one man comes in early to every Shabbat, grabs a cup of coffee, enters the room and closes the door, so he can sit with his late wife, via the yahrzeit memorial, during services.

"Every single Shabbat," Dauer said, "and there were many stories like that."

There were also educational advantages to this system.

Shirat Hayam made a deal with congregants, allowing anyone who had purchased a nameplate to have a 250-word story about their relative and one-to-three photographs published on the digital version. This benefits genealogists by providing a deeper history about a person, their background and relatives, as well as their accomplishments.

For children, the system is interactive and may allow them to connect with grandparents or family members they were unable to meet. For the Hebrew school, the system could serve as a history lesson.

"I've always said we could put past presidents of Israel in there with a little history about them," Dauer said. "We could even put Moses in there. We could put anything we want. It's interactive."

Another story they heard was about a woman who requested her challah recipe be listed on her yahrzeit memorial when she died. According to Dauer, the woman wanted everyone to have access to it, since fellow congregants asked her about it all the time anyway.

"You're celebrating life; it shouldn't be like going to the cemetery," he said.

The Beth Shalom group, which Dauer believed would be the hardest to convince, was in tears after hearing these stories. He knew he had succeeded in winning over the toughest group and with their

help; the community would be convinced, too.

They believed “it was even better than going in and putting your finger on a person’s plaque,” Dauer said.

### **Into action**

Next, the community had to agree on the type of space they would create, the cost of implementing the new system and most importantly, what to do with all the physical plaques.

Dauer led a group of volunteers to sort through the plaques, which were in storage at the time. The process involved taking each individual nameplate off the large plaques, sorting them into bins, arranging them alphabetically, photocopying the plaques, crosschecking the names to make sure all plaques were accounted for, triple-checking that the Hebrew dates were correct and much more. They created a book with images of all the plaques.

Congregants then had the option to pick up their plaques or any family member’s plaques if they would like to display them in their own home or garden, or just to take them for safekeeping. The remaining plaques were sold as scrap metal and the money went toward the new system.

One issue with the system, at first, was the automatic “Shabbat mode.” The system shut down automatically during Shabbat, as well as the High Holidays, due to its interactive nature.

Congregants soon complained, expressing that with the old system, they were able to touch their plaques on Shabbat or during the High Holidays. The congregation eventually voted and agreed they should have access to the system even during Shabbat. They were able to solve the issue by contacting Planned Legacy.

After all, Dauer said, “Who’s going to come in on a Monday?”

“So, do people use it?” he continued. “I don’t know, but it’s here. It was a lot of hard work.”

Anyone can access Beth Shalom’s yahrzeit memorial database at [bethshalombluehills.org/spiritual-life/legacy-yahrzeit-memorials](http://bethshalombluehills.org/spiritual-life/legacy-yahrzeit-memorials). To find a yahrzeit or see any family history, just enter the first few letters of the person’s last name. Some listings have more information than others, but that depends on what was provided by the family.

In response to a question about if he would recommend the system to other congregations, Dauer said, “Recommend? I more than recommend.”

In the end, it depends on a congregation’s current needs. If they have the space and they are not in a place where they need to merge with another congregation, there’s no reason to get rid of the physical plaques.

Dauer is satisfied with what he considers to be Beth Shalom’s successful blending of old and new.

“We were the little congregation that could,” Dauer said about the 2016 merger. “We were the little congregation that could, and we were the little congregation that did.”

### **The future of yahrzeit plaques**

Beth Shalom and Shirat Hayam are not the only ones seeking alternatives.

Local genealogist Carol Clingan has been seeking out yahrzeit plaques for about a decade. Around 2007, through her work with the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston, Clingan began seeking out “every synagogue that ever existed in Massachusetts and to locate any remaining records,” she said.

The initiative was an outgrowth of a project by Jewish Worldwide Online Burial Records to record as much Jewish history as possible, from graves to plaques, for genealogical research.

“I found that the only things that were reliably kept from when a congregation moved were the Torahs and the yahrzeit plaques,” Clingan said.

For about six years, Clingan and a small team – photographers Sue Rosenstrauch and Al Bernstein, and transcriber David Rosen – traveled around Massachusetts photographing, translating and transcribing some 80,000 plaques from 65 synagogues and Jewish organizations.



Carol Clingan, left, with, from left, David Rosen, Sue Rosenstrauch and Al Bernstein PHOTO COURTESY CAROL CLINGAN

The JGSGB Memorial Plaques team later received an award from the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies for the largest state collection of memorial plaques, which helped create the JewishGen Memorial Plaques Database. Clingan is now working to document such history in New Hampshire.

*More information is available at [jgsgb.org/jgsgbs-memorial-plaques-project](http://jgsgb.org/jgsgbs-memorial-plaques-project) and [jewishgen.org/databases/Memorial](http://jewishgen.org/databases/Memorial).*

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