

The Stories That Gravestones Can Tell Us

What we choose to inscribe on a gravestone reveals a lot about the deceased – and even more about ourselves. Indelible records of the past, these stone markers can describe family genealogy, family ties and achievements.

The patriarch Jacob put up the first tombstone in the Bible. “And Rachel died and was buried on the way to *Ephrath*, which is Bethlehem. And Jacob erected a pillar on Rachel’s grave” (Genesis 35:19-20). In Biblical times, most Jews were buried in caves, with heaps of stones set at their entrance to mark their place.

Throughout the centuries, the urge for creativity – even ostentation – in marking graves has often clashed with an equally passionate egalitarian ideal: that all Jews should be equal in death.

This tension has been felt all through history. According to the Book of Maccabees, Simon erected elaborate pyramids for the graves of his father and brothers. Excesses like these led the Talmud scholar *Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel* to declare: “They do not build monuments for the righteous. Their words are their memorial!” (Yer. Shek. 47a)

Yet, over the centuries, many customs have flourished in Jewish cemeteries. In Israel today, gravestones are erected 30 days after the death, the end of *shloshim*. It’s common in America to wait until the year of mourning has passed. Sephardic stones are laid horizontally over the grave; this is also often the Israeli practice for Ashkenazic burials. Elsewhere, Ashkenazic stones are upright.

In some eras, inscriptions have covered the entire stone. At other times, much like our own, they are far simpler. The earliest European Hebrew tombstone is in the Italian cemetery of Brindisi and dates to the year 832. It records the death of Leah, who died at the age of 17. In keeping with Sephardic custom, only her mother’s name is recorded – *Yaffa Mazal* – and not her father’s. In contrast, Ashkenazic custom generally uses only the father’s name.



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***HFBA has provided
358 burials so far this year.
We need your support to
continue our holy work.***

HFBA MISSION STATEMENT

THE HEBREW FREE BURIAL ASSOCIATION devotes its resources to performing *chesed shel emet* (the ultimate act of loving kindness). It is the only agency in the New York metropolitan area dedicated to assuring that every Jew, regardless of financial means or religious affiliation, receives a dignified, traditional Jewish funeral and burial.

YOU CAN HELP IDENTIFY EVERY GRAVE AT MOUNT RICHMOND CEMETERY

Dear Friends and Supporters:

Impoverished Jews have been buried at Mount Richmond Cemetery since 1909 – 55,000 in all. Through the decades, Mount Richmond's caretakers did the best they could – with the records they had – to identify each grave.

Time and decay have taken their toll. This past year, we began a massive effort to identify, locate and map every grave at the cemetery.

We need to make sure that no one is ever forgotten.

So far, we have completed 70% of this extraordinary effort. But we need your help to complete this sacred task.

- We must raise another **\$160,000** to complete this project.
- Gifts of **\$5,000** will complete an entire section.
- Your two-year pledge of **\$10,000** will speed completion.
- Smaller contributions are also greatly valued and very much appreciated.

Your contribution will ensure that each precious soul at Mount Richmond Cemetery is remembered — the grave marked and recorded — for posterity.



Executive Director, Hebrew Free Burial Association



An article in The New York Times, “22 Unclaimed Bodies Endured a Grim Detour Before Burial” continued a Times’ series investigating the fate of unclaimed bodies, which included their unauthorized use as medical cadavers and ultimate burial in unmarked graves on Hart Island. In one case, cousins searching for Lorraine Arutt’s body discovered that two years after her death, her remains were still “lying in Einstein’s (Medical School) cooler, after its dissection in a summer anatomy class.” Finally, “Lorraine Arutt was buried in Hebrew Free Burial Association’s cemetery on Staten Island, in the presence of a family she never knew she had.”

To avoid situations such as that described above, a New York State law, signed in August, 2016, by Governor Cuomo in bans the use of unclaimed bodies as cadavers unless the deceased had registered as a body donor or permission is granted by a spouse or next of kin.

HFBA History

From New York newspaper, "The World," December 23, 1924

Crowd Gathers in His Poor Slum, Moaning with Sorrow

(Edited for clarity)

When the very poor of the Lower East side died, there were two things that could happen to their bodies. They might be impersonally shuffled under the ground in the Potter's field or prepared for burial by the charitable and prayed over with warmth by Jacob Seider, shamus (sexton, synagogue leader) of the poor, who yesterday morning joined the dead for whom he had given his prayers.

Before dawn yesterday, Jacob's body was found sprawled over the altar of the *Agudas Achim Chesed Shel Emeth*, the Hebrew Free Burial Society [sic] at 245 Grand Street, apparently murdered by someone who tried to rob him. The old man had died during his daily sunrise prayers. As word slowly spread along Grand Street, a crowd gathered which expressed sorrow in low moans.

Jacob had earned the love of the neighborhood. For 30 years he was always found where death and poverty

joined hopeless hands and his charity was enough to soften that combination by the assurance of his commitment to ritually prepare the dead for burial.

Seider was Russian born. For ten years he was a Lower East side peddler until something told him to give his time to the Free Burial Society [sic]. From early morning until past midnight, he was a familiar figure at the hospitals and the morgues in the city. At first he was a volunteer, but in his last years he had become a *shamus* and was given a small salary.

Jacob was an unobtrusive but active figure in some of the city's worst tragedies. In 1907, he prepared for burial the bodies of a fire at No. 107 Allen Street. In 1911, nineteen women and three men burned to death in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire were buried by him. He prepared the bodies of the Roth family of five burned to death in the tenement at No. 115 Willet Street. These bodies which would

have otherwise been consigned to Potter's field were buried in the HFBA's plot in the Mount Richmond Cemetery.

Jacob was buried yesterday afternoon in the Acacia Cemetery.

Thank you to Jacob Seider's great grandchildren, Barbara Strauss Neuerman and Dr. Gary H.S. Strauss, for the above information. Ms. Neuerman adds: Jacob Seider came to the United States in 1868 at the age of 18 with his wife Dora. He returned to Russia in 1872 to fight the Turks. Because he was an American citizen, he was placed in Graves Registration where he learned undertaking instead of being given a rifle. His own daughter had worked at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory but was not employed on the day of the fire. Her husband was working at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory on the day of the fire and was badly burned.

THANK YOU TO

the following school groups and synagogues for helping to clean and clear Silver Lake Cemetery

- Adolph H. Schreiber Hebrew Academy of Rockland (ASHAR)
- Forest Hills Jewish Center
- Oheb Shalom Congregation Men's Club
- Rambam Mesivta
- Rav Teitz Mesivta Academy
- Rosenbaum Yeshiva of North Jersey
- Solomon Schechter School of Queens
- Solomon Schechter School of Westchester
- Stella K. Abraham High School for Girls
- Torah Academy of Bergen County
- Yeshiva University High School for Girls



Stella K. Abraham High School for Girls



Yeshiva University High School for Girls



Solomon Schechter School of Queens

РУССКИЙ ДАЙДЖЕСТ

BELOW ARE TRANSLATED SUMMARIES OF THE ARTICLES APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE OF *CHESED*.

Еврейские могильные камни

В течение столетий возникло множество разных традиций, связанных с могильными памятниками. В современном Израиле могильные камни-плиты воздвигают через 30 дней после смерти, по окончании так называемых шлошим, тридцати дней траура. В Америке евреи обычно ждут, пока не пройдет год траура. Сефарды и ашкеназы в Израиле кладут плиты горизонтально над могилой, а за пределами Израиля для ашкеназских погребений характерна установка могильных плит вертикально.

В давние времена на плиты наносились длинные надписи, покрывавшие весь надгробный камень. Нынче же надписи обычно лаконичны и состоят из имени усопшего, дат жизни и иногда изречения из Торы. Имена членов семьи усопшего указываются по-разному в различных еврейских общинах: иногда это только имя матери, или только отца, иногда – имена обоих. Иногда надпись кратко упоминает, что усопший был раввином, козном или ветераном армии. Во всех случаях цель – это простота и достоинство.

При посещении кладбища еврейская традиция предписывает не приносить ни цветы, ни что-либо, что могло бы порадовать усопшего при жизни, например еду и питье. Вместо этого по обычаю евреи кладут на могилу маленький камешек или кусок гладкой гальки, символизируя этим, что усопшего помнят, и что потеря всё ещё ощущается.

Еврейское Благотворительное Похоронное Бюро (НФБА) – страницы истории

Из нью-йоркской газеты «Мир», 23 декабря 1924 года

Яков Сейдер скончался во время молитвы после тридцати лет служения усопшим.

Толпы скорбящих собрались у его бедного жилища.

Когда еврейские бедняки с нижнего Ист Сайда умирали, с их телами могли произойти две вещи: либо их без церемоний зарывали в землю на городском кладбище для бедняков, либо их готовили к погребению по еврейскому обряду на деньги благотворителей. В последнем случае моливы над ними читал Яков Сейдер, шамис (глава синагоги) бедняков. Вчера утром он воссоединился со всеми теми, за кого столь долго молился.

Яков был незаметным, но незаменимым во время многих трагических происшествий нашего города. Он работал на Еврейское Благотворительное Похоронное Бюро (НФБА) сначала добровольцем, затем за небольшую плату. В 1907-м году он готовил к погребению тела погибших в пожаре в доме 107 на Аллен Стрит. В 1911-м девятнадцать женщин и трое мужчин, погибших в пожаре на ткацкой фабрике в здании Утюга на Пятой Авеню были похоронены им. Он также готовил к похоронам тела пяти членов семьи Рот, сгоревших в тесной съёмной квартирке в доме 115 на Уиллет Стрит. Все эти усопшие вместо кладбища бедняков были похоронены на принадлежащем НФБА кладбище Маунт Ричмонд.

По мере того, как расходилась весть о смерти Якова, у его дома собиралась толпа скорбящих и стенающих. Яков Сейдер был похоронен вчера днём.

НФБА в новостях

В газете Нью Йорк Таймс появилась статья, озаглавленная «22 невоastreбованных тела – мрачная задержка на пути к последнему упокоению». Этот материал – результат журналистского расследования судьбы невоastreбованных тел, которые использовались в медицинских целях без должного разрешения. Один из случаев, описываемых в статье, касался некой Лоррейн Арутт, чьё тело через два года после кончины разыскали её двоюродные братья и сёстры. Её останки всё ещё находились в одном из морозильников Медицинского Колледжа Эйнштейна, после того как их препарировали во время лекции по анатомии. В итоге тело Лоррейн Арутт было похоронено на принадлежащем НФБА кладбище на Стейтен Айленд, в присутствии семьи, о которой она не знала при жизни.

Чтобы избежать подобных ситуаций в будущем, штат Нью-Йорк принял закон, подписанный губернатором Куомо в августе 2016 года. Закон запрещает использовать невоastreбованные тела в медицинских целях, за исключением тех случаев, когда усопший заранее оформил использование своего тела в донорских целях, или когда разрешение дано супругом, супругой или другими ближайшими родственниками.

ВЫ МОЖЕТЕ ПОМОЧЬ ОТМЕТИТЬ ВСЕ МОГИЛЫ НА КЛАДБИЩЕ МАУНТ РИЧМОНД

Дорогие друзья, все те, кто нам помогает:

Еврейских бедняков хоронили на кладбище Маунт Ричмонд начиная с 1909 года – всего было похоронено 55 тыс. человек. Все эти годы работники кладбища делали всё возможное, использовали все доступные им способы чтобы отметить каждую могилу. Но время и износ кладбища взяли своё. В прошлом году мы начали огромный проект по определению и картированию каждой могилы.

Мы хотим сделать так, чтобы ни один похороненный здесь не был забыт.

К настоящему времени сделано 70% работ. Но нужна ваша помощь в завершении этого благородного дела.

- Для завершения всего проекта нам необходимо собрать 160 тыс. долларов.

- Стоимость обследования и каталогизации одной секции кладбища составляет 5 тыс. долларов

- Если Вы пожертвуете 10 тыс. долларов за два года, это существенно приблизит окончание проекта

- Небольшие пожертвования тоже очень ценны для нас

Ваше пожертвование поможет сделать так, что все могилы будут помечены и внесены в каталог, и что все-все, когда-либо похороненные на кладбище Маунт Ричмонд, останутся в нашей памяти навечно.

Желаем всем, кто поддерживает НФБА и членам их семей счастливой Хануки. Пусть ханукальные свечи принесут радость и свет в наши дома, в наши сердца, и всем тем, кто на всей земле желает света и мира.

In the Mail



Letters below have been edited for clarity and to protect confidentiality.

My recent donation in memory of Susan B. was made as a result of the extreme kindness shown by the Rabbi to my friend Debby B., the sister Susan never knew, when Debby visited the grave last week. It was very comforting for Debby to see her sister's final resting place so well cared for.

With my thanks for your work,

B. T.

A friend of mine recently travelled a long distance to visit the grave of her baby sister for the first time. Her sister was a toddler in the 1950's when she died at Willowbrook. The circumstances of her death were very sad, and it was a difficult trip for my friend.

However, she was greeted warmly at the cemetery by Rabbi Shmuel Plafker who stayed with her and helped her find her sister's grave marker. It was an unexpected kindness when she was feeling shaky, and she was grateful for it.

The work done by HFBA and the way it was carried out person-to-person by Rabbi Plafker is something to be grateful for in this world.

Thank you.

D.R.

My family and I want to thank everyone connected with providing help and assistance in the arrangements for our Victor L.

Not knowing exactly what to do and how and who to contact we found to be a huge undertaking.

However, everyone connected with Hebrew Free Burial and the Funeral Director made our decisions much easier.

I know my Cousin is now in a better place.

Thank you again for all your help.

R.L.

Gravestones *continued from page 1*

Leah's inscription hints that she was well loved. The text is a prayer that the gates to the Garden of Eden be open for her so that she can have "delightful things to her right and sweet things to her left." It ends with a plea to the Almighty, "This may You answer and tell her: 'This is my beloved, my companion.'"

Hebrew abbreviations are often standard. The Hebrew letters *peh-nun*, פ-נ, stand for "*po nikbar*," "here is buried." The letters at the bottom of the stone – ת.נ.צ.ב.ה. – are an abbreviation for the ancient Jewish prayer: "May his soul be bound in the bonds of life." These lines paraphrase the blessing that the heroic biblical figure Abigail bestowed upon David, who was soon to be king (I Samuel 25:29).

Today, we carve symbols into the stones. A woman's grave may have a candle or candelabra; a man's stone may include a *Magen David*. A *Kohen*, indicating a member of the priestly class is often represented by the traditional spread of hands, fingers outstretched just as they are when the priestly blessing is recited. Someone who traces his genealogy to the Levites will be marked with a pitcher as Levites traditionally washed the hands of the priests.



Other personal information might include date and place of birth; whether the deceased was a rabbi or Talmud sage; if he or she died in the service of the military; whether there are any mourners or descendants.

Perhaps the most poignant grave markers are the symbols used on the graves of children and the young.



These may include a tree stump or broken branch. Here, the mourners are expressing, "*the tree of life has been cut down: a young person has died before his time!*" A century ago, children's graves were marked with lambs – innocent and unknowing.

Gravestones are all about memory, after all. A time-honored custom is to leave a pebble or small rock on top of a headstone that we've visited. We want others to know

that our loved one is remembered. The next time you visit a cemetery, you may want to look more carefully at the stones that you pass. Each one is a rich story of a life once lived.



Wishing all our supporters and their families a Happy Chanukah

May our Chanukah candles bring radiance and joy to our homes, our hearts and to all those around the world seeking light and peace.

Chesed Shel Emet – How You Can Help

REMEMBER to include HFBA in your will with a bequest.

ESTABLISH an HFBA Forever Gift Annuity or Charitable Trust Plan. In addition to the guaranteed income and tax benefits, these plans ensure that HFBA's promise of a Jewish burial to future generations of indigent Jews will be fulfilled.

CELEBRATE a *simcha* or commemorate a loss with HFBA cards. Cards cost \$18 and can include a personalized message.

CONTRIBUTE to HFBA to ensure an annual *yahrzeit* reminder for your lost loved ones.

INSTITUTE a perpetual *yahrzeit* *kaddish* for your loved one for a donation of \$180.

ARRANGE for *kaddish* to be said for the eleven month mourning period following a death of a relative or friend for a donation of \$360.

DONATE unused graves. If the graves are not part of a burial society or family plot and are located in New York or New Jersey, please consider donating them to HFBA and receiving a tax deduction for your gift.

SPONSOR perpetual grave care for an indigent's grave for \$600.

ENROLL a Bar/Bat Mitzvah in our "Mitzvah Circle" by suggesting a gift to HFBA to your guests. The generous child who shares his/her *simcha* in this way receives a framed certificate.

VOLUNTEER with your friends, classmates, fellow group members, or family at Silver Lake Cemetery Chesed Days.

GET INVOLVED as a professional with HFBA by donating your expertise and skills in an area that can help us.

DONATE your property, used vehicle or boat and receive a generous tax donation.



PLEASE HELP OUT TODAY BY SENDING A DONATION IN THE ENCLOSED ENVELOPE.

THE HEBREW FREE BURIAL ASSOCIATION was formed in 1888 on Manhattan's Lower East Side by a group of philanthropic and community-minded Jews who were committed to burying their indigent dead according to Jewish tradition, rather than having them buried in a mass grave in city cemetery. Since its inception HFBA has interred over 65,000 Jews in its two cemeteries. HFBA is also committed to retrieving the identities of those interred and is attempting to provide a gravestone for each unmarked grave.



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