From Rachel's Tomb to BillionGraves:
Inscriptions on Jewish Tombstones
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As a member of Israel Genealogical Research Association (IRGA), I have been transcribing the epitaphs on tombstones to BillionGraves.com information forms on the Internet. I have learned that a cemetery is not only a sad place but also a place to find valuable genealogical information.

One Shabbat, while reading a commentary on the portion of the week "VaYishlach" from the book *The Fruits of the Tree*, something reminded me of BillionGraves. I was reading about the tombstone of Rachel in Bethlehem. The article told about inscriptions on tombstones and I decided to research the background of these inscriptions. This article summarizes what I learned.

In the course of my research, I learned the following important basic facts:

• No Jewish law mandates a tombstone

• It is forbidden to receive material benefit from a tombstone and

• A Jewish epitaph typically is composed of standard components—the opening abbreviation, title and given name, paternal lineage, surname, date of death—usually according to the Hebrew calendar—and a closing abbreviation. All of these components may vary according to the individual, the family, the cause of death and/or regional influences.

History of Jewish Epitaphs

The event of Rachel's burial is the first time a tombstone is mentioned in the Bible. The uses of a gravestone are cited in the Gemora:

• So that Cohanim (priests), who were considered pure, would not go near the place

• So the dead person will be remembered

• So people could pray here (this reason was added later)

Although Rachel's Tomb is known to be in Bethlehem, some researchers believe that it actually may be located north of Jerusalem.

The shape of Rachel's tomb and its epitaphs are examples of the development of shapes and epitaphs in Judaism. The inscription engraved on a marble tablet inside the structure states that the philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore renovated the structure in 1841.

During the First Temple period (1006–586 BCE), commemorative inscriptions marked burial places, a practice copied from other neighboring nations, especially the Phoenicians. The most elaborate known inscription is a carved

Illustration of Rachel's tomb

rock one found in the Kidron Valley outside of Jerusalem. It seems to be referenced in the Book of Isaiah (Isaiah 22: 15 and 16) and indicates the grave of the royal steward, Sheba.

Another example is what King Josiah did for the prophet who prophesied that Josiah, as king, would bring about religious reformation (1-Kings: 13, 2-Kings 23:17). The prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 39:15) also stated that such a sign should be placed over a grave.

The custom of designating a grave (at this time it was a pile of stones) continued to the time of the Second Temple and the Talmud. The ornate tombstone and monument that Simon the Hasmonean erected in Modi'in over the grave of his father and brothers is described in two places: I-Macabees 13:27–9, and Josephus, *Antiquities* 13:211. Photographs may be found by Googling "Macabee tombs."

The practice of burying in sarcophagi (stone coffins) or secondary burial in ossuaries also began at the time of the Second Temple. Usually the names of the people whose bones had been brought to these places were inscribed there, with more elaborate inscriptions over the burial places of important people. The tomb of the priestly family Hezir in the Kidron Valley, is an example of elaborate, cut-rock design inscriptions. The custom of erecting tombstones of ornate shape for nobility, carving and size also reflects Greek and Roman influence. Examples of such tombstones are the monument for Absalom and the sepulcher of Zacharia in the Kidron Valley.

For a long time, the Hezir family tomb was the only one from the Second Temple period known to have such an inscription. It reads זה הקבר והנפש שלאלעזר חניה יועזר יהודה שמעון יוחנן בני יוסף בן עובד יוסף ואלעזר בני חניה כהנים מבני חזיר. (This is the tomb of Eliezar, Chania, Yoezer, Yehudah,

Shimon Yochanon, Yosef son of Oved, Yosef and Eleazar sons of Chania Cohenim from the Hezir family.) In recent years, other similar tombs have been discovered in Jerusalem, such as the tomb of Jason the builder of the Sanctuary and Simeon the Just. Jason's tomb is located in west Jerusalem in a nice residential neighborhood. The tomb of Simeon is located in the northern part of east Jeruslem.

Some believe that such tombstone ostentation is contrary to the Jewish religion. Rabban Simeon Ben Gamaliel said, "One does not build such in memory of the righteous, for their words are their memorial" (Genesis Rabbah 82:10; Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim 2:7, 41a). Maimonides agreed with Gamliel (Yad Avel 4:4), but others disagree. Solomon B. Aderet regarded epitaphs as a way of honoring the dead (Responsa 375), and Isaac Luria saw epitaphs as contributing to the memory of the dead (Sha'ar HaMitzvot Vayihi).

An epitaph is mentioned in the Talmud (Horayot 13b) in a section that tells about reading the inscription on the epitaph. The importance of Kohanim knowing the location of a grave also is stated and explained (Tosefta Oholot 17:4). Rabbi Nathan HaBavli ruled that money provided for the burial of the dead was to be used for the building of a monument over the grave (Talmud, Shekalim 2:5), and the 15th of Adar was the date set aside for marking graves (Shekalim1:1). The latter was done with the use of lime (Ma'as Sh. 5:1).

Some epitaphs were simple grave markers; others were more decorative. The first ones were simple structures of square stones over a grave, about one to three meters in size (Talmud, Eurvim 55b). The second was similar, a small building similar to Jason's tomb, with an entrance to a dwelling chamber, which was possibly for a watchman (Eruvim 5:1). This style may have been the result of Greek and Roman influence.

Many epitaphs were preserved from the time of the Byzantine-Roman domination, (after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.). These are discussed in J.B. Frey's *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaica-rum*, V.2. Most come from catacombs at Bet She'arim in the Galilee. Usually they contain only the name of the deceased in Hebrew or in Greek, although two epitaphs have a lengthy poem in Greek verses.

In his second volume, Frey discusses the large number of Jewish epitaphs found in Roman catacombs. Approximately 75 percent are written in Greek, with 25 percent in Latin; only a few include any Hebrew. Those with Hebrew have mainly simple words or phrases such as "shalom" or "rest in peace." Many, however, include Jewish symbols, such as the seven-branched candelabra or menorah. These epitaphs cover most of the surface of a vertical stone and usually have such information as the names and possibly the position in the community of the deceased (secretary, warden, and so forth).

The influence of Jewish tradition on Jewish art was felt when Jewish symbols were added to the epitaphs. The study of these epitaphs shows the development of Jewish art from ancient times to the present. After Rome conquered Jerusa-

lem, Arabic numerals were used to alleviate confusion since people could have thought that Hebrew consonants were an abbreviation of a word, a word they did not understand, and if people did not know Hebrew, it was clear that this was to represent the date. Roman numbers were used only to refer to dates.

Catacombs in Bet She'an are similar to the Roman Jewish catacombs in Venosa in southern Italy. In Venosa, however, the epitaphs are longer and more descriptive. From about the year 800 C.E., the epitaphs in Venosa and the surrounding area become even longer and mention Jewish schools and scholars. Hebrew is used more than Latin and Greek. In other places in Europe (France, Greece and Spain) the epitaphs of this late classical period are in Latin and Greek. An inscription from Merida, Spain, is trilingual in Greek, Hebrew and Latin.

As Latin became the language of the Roman Catholic Church and the knowledge of Hebrew spread, the use of Hebrew on epitaphs became universal for Jewish graves. Epitaphs from France, Germany, Spain and other places from the 11th century onward are preserved in Hebrew; as time passed, they became more elaborate. Spanish epitaphs of the 13th and 14th centuries sometimes have writings on all sides of the horizontal stones—front, back and sides.

French medieval inscriptions (collected by M. Shwab) and some Italian epitaphs from the 16th century feature short poems or a short stereotyped lilting meter. Many of the latter were composed by Ratti Leone Modena of Venice (published by A. Berliner and R. Pacifici).

Jewish graves in the Papal States of Italy and France (Avignon and Carpentras) did not have epitaphs during the ghetto period there (16th century) as the local governments forbade inscriptions over the dead.

Preserved medieval epitaphs from Prague, Frankfurt am Main and Salonika are less literary than the French and Italian graves discussed above, but they also have historical importance as they provide some information about Jewish art and life in those places at that time.

The use of the vernacular on tombstones became more common in the Western world during the 19th century. At first, both the secular and the Hebrew name appeared, but details were in Hebrew. Then the epitaph was written in both languages and finally only the name was in Hebrew. In some English cemeteries the name must be in Hebrew and among strongly Orthodox groups, no English is permitted.

The essay "The Jewish tombstones in Southwest England," by Rabbi Dr. Bernard Susser, describes the Brighton, England, Jewish cemetery and in a way, tells about the changes in all epitaphs:

> Tombstone inscriptions in the South-West Jewish cemeteries clearly demonstrate the process of acculturation. At first only Hebrew was used on the stones. In 1840, English appears for the first time: "Our lives are in thy hands O God/ And the length of our days/ Are as nought before thee. פ״נ ל דוד ב״ר אברהם /For 50 years a member of the Congregation of this town./ From 1850 the Jewish name is retained in Hebrew but the secular name as well as the Jewish date appear

in English. There were isolated uses of the common era year in the first six decades of the 19th century, but after 1870 it appears invariably. Surnames themselves may be an indication of the assimilatory process—Kennard, Palmer, Harding, Walter. Hebrew names ending in אברהם אבינו / בת/בן (son/daughter of Abraham our father) indicating a convert are similar indicators. Perhaps the ultimate stage in the process is represented by a tombstone in the Torquay Jewish cemetery in Paignton which is a railed off part of the municipal cemetery. There is, or was, a stone which when approached from the Jewish section displays on its front a Magen David but when looked at from the municipal part has on its rear a cross!

Until the third quarter of the 19th century, religious sentiments are to be found.

About Ashkenazic Epitaphs

The Ashkenazic areas referred to in this article are communities in Western, Central and Eastern Europe from the 13th to the 20th century. Tombstones from the Rhineland area reflect some Middle Eastern influence with flat designs bordering the inscription field. The ten oldest known Jewish tombstones from Eastern Europe date from the third and fourth centuries in contemporary Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary and Serbia. The epitaphs are typically Roman, written in Latin and Greek. Some show a menorah and one includes the closing formula in Hebrew. The Hebrew, however, had no influence on the future development of the epitaphs.

Tombstones have been found from the 13th century in Poland (1203), Moravia (1269) and Hungary (1278). From roughly the 11th to the 14th century, tombstones were rectangular in shape and placed in a vertical position. They usually were made of stone although many were of wood. A few cast iron tombstones were found in poor communities, usually in Poland.

Many tombstones from the 14th and 15th centuries have been preserved. They are from Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia and Hungary. The oldest Hungarian tombstone found dates from 1130. The oldest Polish tombstones (apart from Silesia) are from the 16th century.

Historical literature from the 14th and 15th centuries includes the topic of tombstones. All epitaphs were written in Hebrew, although some contained a bit of Aramaic. The Hebrew was written in a square script, the lettering resembling the book-hand style (script used for transcribing books). Cursive and semi-cursive script began being used on the tombstones in the 16th-17th centuries.

Epitaphs of this time contain the basic elements of later inscriptions, but the sections, (beginning with introductory remark such as "here lies," middle with information about the deceased and end, a closing remark such as "may he rest in peace") had not yet been separated. All Western, Central and Eastern European epitaphs were similar in basic information and layout of wording. In Eastern Europe, some tombstones were found near Lvov (1520), Lublin (1521), Lesko, Poland (1548), and Buczacz (1587).

A new type of sepulchral stonemasonry of high artistic value and local traits developed in the middle of the 16th century. The influence of the Renaissance (14th to 17th century) and, later, of Baroque art (17th and 18th centuries) is felt here. The oldest examples come from Krakow (1549), Przemysl (1574) and Prague. The Magen David was a figurative motif used in Prague. The influence of Baroque art, called "Jewish Baroque," dominated until the middle of the 19th century.

In the 18th and early 19th century, the typical tombstone was divided into three sections, a pediment (which included ornamental and symbolic images), a framed inscription field and a base. Common motifs for the pediment were crowns flanked by heraldic lions or deer, a pitcher and bowl, and professional and family symbols. The inscription field often had decorated epitaphs. The letters varied and also were decorative. The text was sometimes elaborate, containing poetry, acrostics, or chronograms, and biblical phrases, although most were quite simple, and sometimes even included spelling or grammar mistakes. Examples are in collections of tombstones preserved in Lesko, Miedzyt and Sienawa, Poland; and in Satanow, Ukraine. In certain localities in Belarus, eastern Poland and Ukraine this was the style until the Holocaust.

In the 17th century, Ashkenazic epitaphs were written in Hebrew only. The inscriptions, however, had become much longer and more elaborate; sometimes the name of the deceased was written in acrostic form in crude verses. The inscription for a man usually began with "פ'נ" (פה נקבר-here lies), and that for a woman began with "פ'ט " (פה טמונה-here is interred). The abbreviation "תנצב'ה" (תהא נפשו צרורה בצרורר ה החיים) May His Soul Rest in Peace (Samuel 25:29) appears at the end. These Hebrew inscriptions are still used and sometimes are the only Hebrew in the epitaph.

The development of this style of epitaph on tombstones in Belarus, eastern Poland, Moldova and Ukraine caused a split in the appearance of tombstones between those in Eastern and Central Europe. The ones in Central Europe showed the influence of Baroque, Rococo and, later, Classicism. Tombstones in these areas began to resemble Christian sepulchral art.

In this area, generally, the use of symbols illustrated the deceased's religious status or his or her virtues or trade. Sometimes, in cases of important people, a "sarcophagus" was formed by placing vertical and horizontal stones together. A tombstone in the shape of a tent or tabernacle was used for important religious leaders in Poland and Germany. The latter usually had no artistic or architectural distinction and was built in the form of a small stone or wooden house or hut, standing on four posts, sometimes surrounded by a fence.

The most common designs resembled ark curtains. Flora and fauna designs were used for a frame. These sarcophagi did not necessarily contain a Jewish motif in the 17th and 18th centuries. The epitaph was in beautiful lettering and was engraved on the main part of the gravestone.

The Jewish symbols were common in all communities (a

priest's hands for Cohanim, a musical instrument or basin for Levites). Sometimes the engraver added colors. Most of the traditional tombstones with paintings have not survived. The artisans were excellent craftsmen, but such artwork was only done for the wealthy because stonework was very expensive until the 19th century.

Sephardic Epitaphs

From about the 11th to the 14th centuries, Sephardic tombstones usually were set in a horizontal position and were rectangular in shape. They often were larger and longer than Ashkenazic tombstones. In Medieval Spain, as in the rest of Europe, a "sarcophagus" sometimes was formed for important people by placing vertical and horizontal stones together.

Communities established by former conversos in the 17th century, in Western Europe and in the New World, reintroduced the use of local language on tombstones. Examples are found in epitaphs from Amsterdam, Barbados, Bayonne, Bordeaux, Curacao, Hamburg, Jamaica, Leghorn, London, New York, Venice and elsewhere that former conversos settled.

Spanish epitaphs usually end with "SBAGOG" (*Sua benditaalma goza de Gloria*—May His Blessed Soul Enjoy Glory), or something similar. These inscriptions were sometimes bilingual (Spanish or Portuguese and Hebrew). English began to appear in English-speaking countries in the 17th century. An example from 1684 is the epitaph of Isaac Alverez Nunes, the English court jeweler. It includes an English poem in Alexandrine couplets.

The Jewish cemeteries of Padua, Italy, give information from the ghetto period (16th to 18th centuries) until the arrival of Napoleon's army in 1797. Tradition was followed, but Renaissance and Baroque influence definitely was present. Poems constitute the majority of epitaphs from 1529 to 1830, a custom that corresponds to the development of medieval Hebrew literature. The verses in the acrostic letters where the name was carved in a vertical column, the letter at the beginning of each line starting a sentence about the deceased, provide information about the deceased. They sometimes contain Biblical verses and sometimes were influenced by the Jewish and/or secular literature of the period. The epitaphs are in Hebrew and sometimes contain a few words in Aramaic. Only one was found that contains a bit of Latin in a non-Jewish idiom. Roman numerals were used sometimes to signify the Jewish date. In 1780, the Italian language began to be used in epitaphs. Hebrew epitaph poetry flourished in early modern Italy and was written by the best poets. Hundreds of epitaph poems from the Venice Lido cemetery have been published.

Epitaphs of Mediterranean and Ottoman communities all included Sephardic constituents but also reflected local traditions and influence.

The Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam was one of the most prosperous Sephardic communities in the

Photograph of a Sephardic section of the Jewish Cemetery in Altona, Germany

western Sephardic diaspora. Its dead were buried in the Outerkerk cemetery, which was founded in 1614. The literary structure of its epitaph poems, a bit similar to that in Italy, is quite special in literary style, grammar and quotations. The original model for this style of Hebrew poetry is Spanish Muslim poetry from the 10th to the 12th centuries.

The Sephardic section of the Altona Jewish cemetery in Germany for the period 1611 to 1871 contains many horizontal marble tombstones and triangular "tents" (*ohel*). Baroque influence is felt in the decorations. The epitaphs usually are written in French, Portuguese and Spanish, in addition to Hebrew. Sometimes the epitaphs read as if the dead were speaking, written as if they wrote it themselves. Some have biblical quotations. The style is similar to that of medieval Sephardic or Italian Renaissance poetry. The influence of the time and the location is felt, but there usually also is something from tradition. The cemetery was in use until 1862, and 376 epitaphs have survived.

During the Renaissance, epitaph art became more elaborate especially in Sephardic communities in northern Europe (e.g., Amsterdam) and the West Indies (e.g., Curacao). In North Africa, the Middle East and London, however, simplicity continued. Tombstones often were decorated with relief scenes that depicted the connection between the name of the deceased and the biblical character of that name. In Italy, vertical tombstones often were decorated with the family badge.

Information on books about Sephardic cemeteries may be found in "Printed Books on Cemeteries of Sephardic Communities Among the Collections of the Jewish National and University Library and the Ben Zvi Institute Library, Jerusalem," an annotated bibliography compiled by Mathilde Tagger.

Modern Times

Epitaphs were carved in stone in the 19th and 20th centuries, some of artificial (terrazzo, concrete) stone. The tombstones that contain much artwork are not representative of the common people for they were expensive and also

could not be preserved well. Punctuation marks were usually not used. If they are used now, this is considered modern detail and shows a hint of assimilation.

In large cities in Western and Central Europe, Jewish sepulchral art sometimes came closer to Christian artistic traditions in the 19th and 20th centuries, as historical styles began to be used and Jewish symbolism disappeared almost completely. In general, a style of sepulchral art similar to that of Christians began in the 19th century. Bilingual inscriptions became widespread. German inscriptions became more popular; some tombstones had the date of birth shown with an asterisk (the Christian symbol for the star of Bethlehem) and the date of death with a cross. This also appeared in Eastern Europe, but was much less frequent. In the "New World," the local language was used in addition to the basic Hebrew epitaph.

In the interwar period, even the most traditional Jewish communities used prefabricated tombstones, and the art on these stones caused deterioration of Jewish sepulchral art. In Eastern Europe today, tombstones are made with generic stone-working models; Jewish symbolism usually is the Magen David with Hebrew used only for the closing epitaph.

Most Jewish cemeteries in Central and Eastern Europe were destroyed in World War II after which the Germans ordered the tombstones to be used for paving roads, yards and other sites. Today, however, a number of these cemeteries are being restored.

There are several million old Jewish tombstones in Eastern Europe today. Many have been moved from their original locations, where they had been severely damaged. Though there is an increasing interest in this subject, it still is poorly researched. Few individual cemeteries have been inventoried, documented and studied, an urgent task because of vandalism and atmospheric pollution.

In recent years, the tendency has been (at least among the Orthodox) for tombstones and epitaphs to be simple. In Israel, epitaphs are usually simple and, of course, written in Hebrew. Every person, family, and community can write whatever they feel fitting on the epitaph.

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