

Chapter 1: A BRIEF HISTORY OF JEWISH BURIAL

The first Jewish burial was recorded in Genesis 23:19 when Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the Cave of Machpelah in the field of Mamre. Abraham understood that burying his wife as quickly as possible was a final act of respect for her, for Jews believe in a concept called *kevod ha-met*, honouring the dead, where an unburied corpse is considered to be naked and humiliated. The injunction to bury Jewish dead with haste is given a lower priority only to saving human life.

Archaeologists have discovered ornamented Jewish catacombs with hinged doors and gabled columns dating from the immediate centuries surrounding the time of Jesus, which suggests that the practice of cave burial increased in popularity from the biblical era through the Babylonian period and into Roman Palestine. In the Talmud Sanhedrin 96b (line 55) there is a clear reference to Jewish cave burial where Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon is advised by his Palestinian agents that the Jewish catacombs surrounding the city of Jerusalem can shelter his army: “their graveyards are better [more practical] than your palace!”

The Jerusalem Talmud (Mo’ed Katan 1:5) describes the practice of *likut atzamot* (gathering of bones), a two-phase procedure of burying Jewish bodies in deep pits (*mahamorot*) and

waiting for the skin to dissolve before removing the bones for reburial. The bones were then placed in an ossuary, or bone box, in anticipation of the resurrection of the dead. The Jewish acceptance of ossuaries was probably based on Ezekiel’s prophecy of the Valley of the Dry Bones (37: 1–14), but when the Romans arrived in Judea they introduced the concept of ground burial in public cemeteries. Burial in cedar coffins is more hygienic than disinterring bodies and placing bones in an ossuary.

Ground burial in private plots became common practice in Judea. The first mention of a Jewish gravestone dates back to Genesis 35:20 where Jacob set up a “pillar” (the Hebrew word is *matsevah*, denoting a tombstone) on Rachel’s grave on the road to Bethlehem. The desire among Jews to return a dead body to the earth is probably based on Genesis 3:19 where God informs Adam that he shall return to dust. In Israel, people are often not buried in coffins unless the body is severely injured so as to facilitate quick return to the soil.

A medieval belief that a heavy stone helps to retain the dead (in case they have aspirations of returning home) is probably a contributing factor in the tradition of Jewish tombstones. A Jewish version of this belief holds that

soil and stone add weight to contain a ghost leaving the body. Talmudic rabbis refer to a gravestone as a nefesh (soul) as there is a Jewish mystical belief that a soul hovers over the place where its body is buried. Owing to the supernatural association with the dead, Talmudic rabbis ruled that, where possible, cemeteries were to be situated at least fifty cubits (about 22 metres) from the nearest residence.

The oldest existing public Jewish cemetery with ground graves is almost certainly the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. The mountain has been used as a cemetery since about 2400 BCE, initially by the Jebusites and later by Jews, Christians and then Muslims. It is considered by many Jews to be the most important Jewish cemetery in the world because of a belief that when the Messiah arrives from the Judean wilderness, he will come down from the Mount of Olives and enter Jerusalem through the adjacent Golden Gate in the wall of the Old City.

In the Middle Ages, Monotheistic religion canonized many of its beliefs into religious legal texts with rational commentary. Many pagan practices once attached to early Judaism and Christianity were either incorporated to the point where they became indiscernible to lay worshippers or they became lost to Western society. A result of formalizing religious material, as far as cemeteries are concerned, is that cave burial became associated with pagan practice and ground burial in public

Jewish cemeteries became the standard for the Orthodox Jewish community. A stone was no longer seen as a weight to entrap demons but became associated with affection and respect.

Rabbi Solomon ben Aderet (1235–1310) of Spain is one of the earliest authorities to add a layer of Talmudic complexity to burial. He comments on a biblical prohibition on members of the Jewish Kohanim (priestly family) coming into contact with dead people for fear of spiritual defilement. See Chapter 7 question 26 for a detailed explanation of Cohens and cemeteries.

During the Middle Ages, anti-Jewish prejudice shifted from the charge of deicide (Jews killing Christ) to the idea that Jews were bent on revenge against the Christian world in the form of price fixing and usury. Some unscrupulous state officials and even kings would restrict Jews to unpopular professions such as money lending and later threaten the community with assault or ransom if the debts were not forgiven. In this climate of mistrust and hostility, and especially in Christian Europe, Jews were usually careful not to flaunt any good fortune they may have enjoyed in their host countries. Their synagogues often had plain exteriors, and gravestones were simple markers carved out of wood or sandstone. The desire to create modest tombstones is also motivated by tradition. Proverbs 22:2 holds that [in death] “the rich and the poor meet

together.” This belief is strengthened by an ancient rabbi, Simeon ben Gamaliel, who explains in Talmud Bereishit Rabbah 82:10 that “we need not erect monuments for the righteous; their accomplishments are their memorials.”

While the Jews of Central Europe often lived with the threat of victimization on both sides of city walls, their Jewish cousins in Arab Morocco and Spain were enjoying a relatively better quality of life. For Jews living in the Arab World, the period 900–1200 CE became known as the Golden Age. In a time when Europe was in intellectual decline and disease was rife, the Arabs were building a great civilization. Jewish intellectualism made a major contribution to Arab science and literature, and the community had enough good sense to present a modest face to their Muslim masters. Moroccan Jewish graves were unadorned and lay horizontal instead of positioned upright like many of their European counterparts. This tradition is today maintained in Israel, notable examples being the graves of the prime ministers of Israel on Mt Herzl in Jerusalem.

Catholic Spain lay at the crossroads of these two vastly different Jewish communities. In 1391, about 100,000 Jews lived in the Spanish kingdom. The word *convivencia* best describes the Spanish Catholic grudging tolerance of “living together” with Jews. Anti-Jewish riots at the time were only resolved after a mass conversion of Jews to the shaky status of Conversos,

or New Christians. The converts naturally attempted to balance a public Christian life with their secret Jewish life. Conversos would go to church, yet they would quietly observe the Sabbath and Jewish festivals, sometimes at low-key synagogues. In the 1480s, political circumstances found the royal family unable to reconcile the double life of converted Jews, and Tomás de Torquemada’s fanatical Dominican order was brought in to administer an Inquisition to expose Conversos who practiced secret Judaism. The consequence was disastrous for Spain’s Jewish community. Within a decade of burnings and torture, thousands of Jews were forced out of the country. They fled to the relative tolerance of Italy and the Netherlands.

The Spanish Inquisition had an indelible impact on the psyche of European Jewry. Violent anti-Semitic acts were a part of life, but they were usually reactionary and not the result of policy. Of course Jews had been faced with conversion or death before, for example in ancient Greece, but never at the hand of a religious order with such access to the royal ear. Jews across Europe, even in regions that were relatively safe, suddenly felt hunted. A close inspection of gravestones from the period demonstrates an emerging crisis in Jewish Diaspora (the Jewish world outside of Israel) thinking on the issue of ghettoization versus assimilation. In a pre-Nazi world, many Jews naively believed that conversion guaranteed

liberation from persecution. In Inquisition refugee centres like Venice, one can find examples of tombstones of converted Jews depicting, sometimes in bas-relief, a cross in a national crest or a knight's plumed helmet above a Spanish crown. The crude loyal designs on these graves illustrate a deep-seated need for many Jews to publicly espouse their allegiance to their host country.



The plumed helmet crest suggests loyalty and a longing for pre-Inquisition Spain

It is sometimes not enough for some Jews to simply exist as quiet taxpayers at the mercy of a ruler, and Jews often make great patriots. It has been said that one only values something when it

is in danger of being lost. For Jews in a world before Israel, the desire to attain civil rights and economic security was as endemic to their survival as their desire to maintain tradition.

The veneer of assimilation was maintained even after death as an insurance policy to safeguard civil liberties for future generations of Jews residing in the host country.

Within a decade of Expulsion from Spain, after failing to gain acceptance through conversion, Jewish communities began to consider self-imposed ghettoization as an option for the preservation of their culture. The Venetian and Roman Jewish communities approached their respective nation-states to grant them a *condotta*, a charter which gave foreign nationals the right to establish a loan bank. Once settled in their ghettos (the first Jewish ghettos, 1516 and 1555 respectively), the two communities were suddenly faced with the question of where to bury their dead.

Jewish law prohibits members of the *Kohanim* from being in close proximity to a dead body. As Jews were now living within the framework of a Christian administration and with disease everywhere, the rulers had no choice but to grant these

communities a tiny piece of land for a burial ground. In Venice, a monastery on Lido island grudgingly relinquished some land to the local Jews. The Italian Jews were by no means the first Jewish community to face this problem. Since the late 13th century, the Jews of Prague faced a similar situation. Walls were erected around their cemetery to enforce a space barrier to allow members of Jewish priestly descent to reside without defiling themselves. It should be noted that space –not walls – is required by Orthodox Jewish law to separate the dead from living Jews. Many East European Jewish cemeteries do not even have a fence.

The Gentile (not of Jewish descent) practice of burying dozens of corpses in a pauper's grave became more acceptable after the Plague of 1347 – 1351 killed up to a third of Europe's population. Infected bodies needed to be disposed of quickly. Jewish law forbids bodies to share the same grave; it is considered disrespectful. The law, as explained by Talmudic commentators Joseph Karo and Shabbsei Cohen, requires that bodies be separated by a solid surface of a minimum of six tefachim (handbreadths). The Jews of Prague resolved their space problem by ingeniously digging a deep trench in their cemetery and burying the deceased in layers. Jewish law allows bodies to be buried in rows one above the other so long as they are separated by the same minimum of six tefachim of soil. Between 1439–1787, it is

estimated that about 100,000 bodies were buried in this cemetery in layers twelve deep. This explains why in some small Jewish cemeteries tombstones are packed closely together.

The explosion of creativity during the Renaissance was not lost on Jews. After the Dark Ages and centuries of religious totalitarianism, superstition and resultant fear, humanity began to look at itself as a species of infinite ability. What began as a small classical reawakening in Florence soon evolved into an examination of science and the realization of unlimited potential for humanistic development, particularly in the Arts. During the Renaissance, sepulchral art developed into a definite and formidable style. It was during this period that Jews began to commonly adorn their tombstones with plant motif. Images of ivy and fruit began to appear; however, human imagery was strictly forbidden. The practice of placing an image on a Jewish grave was a concern for the rabbinic authorities. It brought into issue an injunction against violating the Second of the Ten Commandments with regard to creating a graven image, or an idol with human characteristics that could later be used to deify the deceased. It was, however, obvious to the Jewish authorities that the stylizing of buildings and gravestones with Greek and Roman imagery was simply aesthetic and that society had no serious intention of worshipping the figures of ancient mythology that were now

adorning civic halls and libraries. Jews incorporated classical design elements into their sandstone tombs, and they sometimes adopted the Renaissance phenomenon of protecting these fragile stones with iron roofs, an excellent example being the graves in the Remuh Jewish cemetery in Kraków, Poland.

In 1787, Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II became the first European monarch to legislate compulsory family names. For centuries, Jewish males used their father's first name to complete their identity, for example, Jacob ben (son of) Isaac. As the Jewish population increased, this naming system became inefficient as a form of unique identification. On Jewish tombs, however, often both a traditional Hebrew name and a secular name are placed on the stone.

The exquisite carvings and architectural adornments on Jewish gravestones were appreciated by more than simply a handful of relatives. By the 19th century, Judaism had incorporated the concept of saint veneration, and Jews in both Europe and the Arab world were actively visiting gravesites with the intention of coupling their prayers with the merits of the personalities buried there. The custom of praying at the graves of great Jewish leaders has its origins in several sources. The Talmud describes how Joseph wept at his mother's grave before leaving for Egypt. In Vayechi 48:7, the Jews are said to have cried at Rachel's tomb. In September/October there is a tradition

of visiting graves before the Jewish New Year to ask the deceased to intervene for the living before Yom Kippur, the Day of Judgment, which falls ten days after the New Year. In the early 20th century, three groups of Jews effectively brought the tradition of saint visitation to Judaism: the Hasidic movement in Eastern Europe, the mystics of the town of Safed in Palestine, and the Moroccan Jews who were probably emulating a similar Islamic marabout (saint) visitation practice called a hiloula. Misnagdim, mainstream Modern Orthodox Jews, particularly the Vilna Gaon (1720–1797), opposed saint veneration.

In the new worlds of America and Australia, immigrant European Jews established Jewish cemeteries in thriving settlements like New Amsterdam, New York (1656) and Newport, Rhode Island (1677) in America and later in Hobart, Tasmania (1828) and Goulburn, New South Wales (1848) in Australia. The immigrants developed organizations called landsmanshaftn, societies of people from the same town or region who came together to ease the transition into their new culture. The landsmanshaft usually owned a section in the Jewish cemetery and plots were reserved for people from a certain town or region. In the New York City area, several Jewish cemeteries have names of the original East European town or region posted in Hebrew on the section entrance.

It is uncertain exactly when Jews began to adorn tombstones with animal and human motif. It is likely that this practice was borrowed from Victorians who were fascinated with ancient symbols. What is certain is that in Eastern Europe during the Pale of Settlement (1791–1917) when Russian Jews were confined to certain living areas, Jewish tombstone carving developed into a highly stylized art. Symbols were designed to represent not only human attributes but were often phonetic representations of the name of the deceased. Jewish tombstone symbols are discussed in Chapter 3.

The tradition of stylized tombstone symbolism reached its zenith in late 19th – early 20th century Poland with notable Neoclassical and Secessionist examples in the Warsaw and Łódź Jewish cemeteries. No one could have predicted that the gathering storm would wipe out not only European Jewry but reduce many of its cemeteries to fields of broken stone. The Nazi agenda for Jews was an all-encompassing genocide. The Reich Main Security Office even had a plan for the exploitation of tombstones. When the Nazis invaded Poland, they set about uprooting many of the tombstones for use as road pavement. It must be acknowledged, however, that some German officials went out of their way to preserve Jewish cemeteries, for example, the one in Worms.

After the War, the Baltic States were annexed by the Soviet Union.

Czechoslovakia and Poland came under Communist control. The Communist overlord, with no sympathy for religious national groups and especially for Jews, effectively wrote six hundred years of Jewish life out of their imposed history books. With few surviving Jews to invalidate Soviet propaganda, generations of Czechs, Lithuanians and Poles grew up in states that looked more aesthetically secular than their thousand-year-old Catholic ancestry would suggest. The neglect during Communism exacerbated the condition of the surviving Jewish tombstones and by the end of the 20th century many of Eastern Europe's Jewish cemeteries either no longer existed or looked like rubbish heaps. A concerted effort on the part of world Jewry and many altruistic East Europeans to restore and clean up the Jewish cemeteries has made an impact, but Poland, for example, with less than 20,000 Jews at time of writing, is no longer a Jewish country. Many Jewish cemeteries that cannot be physically preserved for a lack of funding now exist as virtual scrapbooks on the Internet. Jews have a love fascination with their past.