

A Practical Guide to Jewish Cemeteries

***A Practical Guide to Jewish Cemeteries*, by Nolan Menachemson. Hardcover, 248 pages + vii. Bergenfield, NJ: Avotaynu, 2007.**

As becomes apparent from the pages of this tome (pun intended), there is richness even in death.

This is the most concise and thorough guide on the subject of Jewish cemeteries that you are likely to find. The book is both a useful practical manual to help decipher tombstones in the “field,” as well as a broad-ranging scholarly work that encompasses sociological, cultural, religious and other perspectives of a surprisingly multi-faceted subject.

Menachemson takes a broad view of the topic and begins with a chapter on the history of Jewish burial. (As chronicled in Genesis 23:19, the first Jewish burial on record was that of Sarah, in the Cave of Machpelah in the field of Mamre.) The chapter offers a survey of Jewish burial customs and traditions down through the ages, highlighting such fascinating elements as the ancient cemetery on the Mount of Olives, in use since 2400 B.C.E.; the medieval cemetery of Prague, where for space reasons there have been as many as 12 layers of burials; and the post-Enlightenment period in the 19th-century Pale of Settlement, where “Jewish tombstone carving developed into a highly stylized art,” probably in imitation of the Victorians.

Chapters 2 and 3, “How to Read a Jewish Gravestone” and “Symbols on Jewish Tombstones,” are essential reading for those requiring a primer on Hebrew naming conventions, translating Hebrew dates and abbreviations, and the meaning of symbols found on Jewish tombstones. This section, enlivened by illustrations, explains the meaning of pictographs both common and rare, including bird, bookcase, candle, fish, lion and water pitcher. Although a place of death, the cemetery tells us much about life; although mute, the tombstones speak to us, and each one tells a story.

Chapter 4 presents details of major Jewish burial grounds around the world, including (as one must) the Nazi death and concentration camps that tragically became the places where millions were annihilated and their ashes and last remains anonymously disposed of under circumstances both crude and cruel.

Chapter 5, formidable at more than 80 pages, lists burial locations of famous Jews; appropriately, the book takes a reverential tone and does not advocate a Hollywood-style romp through sacred burial grounds in search of celebrity graves. It outlines the history of the custom of visiting the *kever* (grave) of a beloved sage, even praying by the graveside, which has become an essential ritual within some sects of Judaism.

Chapter 6, on “Preserving Jewish Cemeteries,” offers advice on the cleaning and protecting of stones from such enemies as roots, weeds, lichen, acid rain, vandals and war. I showed this book to Gail Sussman, a Toronto stone conservator, who commented that it was a valuable addition to the literature, but that Chapter 6 contains a few technical errors and could have been improved through a stringent peer review. Menachemson recommends methyl methacrylate as a protective coating for stone, for example, but Sussman warns that this substance should not be used for all stones in all environments. The book also advocates using copious amounts of water to clean a stone, but Sussman offers the important caveat that such treatment must be avoided within 30 days of a potential frost.

Still, this interesting and useful guide is recommended for all Jewish genealogists who venture, as most of us do, into the sacred precinct of the dead that is sometimes referred to in Hebrew as *beit ha-chayim*, or literally, the House of the Living. As Menachemson amply illustrates, each tombstone tells a story, and this book helps bring those stories to life.

Bill Gladstone