

Cemeteries

Deciphering Tombstones of Jewish Deceased

Arnon Hershkovitz, Ph.D. tells you what to look for in a Jewish cemetery.

FOR MOST GENEALOGISTS, cemeteries are not a Halloween-only thing, but rather an important resource for learning about their ancestors. And within cemeteries, tombstones (also called headstones or gravestones) are not only markers over graves, but rather most valuable sources for learning about the deceased and his family. With the mass emigration of Jewish people from Europe at the turn of the 20th century, when millions arrived in the United States and Canada, it is most likely that someone in your family was buried according to the Jewish tradition. Understanding what's on these gravestones and being able to decipher some hidden clues

might tremendously enrich the research process into your Jewish ancestors.

How Are Jewish Cemeteries Organized?

Wherever they lived, Jewish people have always been buried separately and according to their own traditions and customs. In the past, women and men have been buried in different sections, and even today, you might find females and males buried adjacent to each other, only if they are spouses. A typical row in a Jewish cemetery might look like this: Mr. Cohen, Mrs. Cohen, Mrs. Schwartz, Mr. Schwartz, Mr. Hochberg, Mrs. Hochberg, and so

on. Also, there used to be separate sections for Ashkenazim and Sephardic Jewish people. In many Jewish cemeteries across North America, there are still plots in which deceased from the same original region are buried, be it a small Shtetl or a big country. For example, New Yorkers who came from the Shtetl of Krasnystaw, Poland, might be found in Beth Moses Cemetery (Framingdale, NY), Block 24, Section 2; Sephardic Jews originally from Romania who made it to Chicago (IL) might be buried in Waldheim Cemetery, near Gate 38. These geographically-based sections are useful in mainly two cases: a) When you don't know the



A motif of broken tree indicating a death at young age. Detail from a gravestone, taken in a Jewish cemetery in Warsaw, Poland. (Courtesy of Philip Trauring)

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deceased's place of origin, finding her or him in a place-related section might indicate a possible relation to this place; b) When knowing a person's place of origin, but not knowing where she or he are buried — in that case, you can look for a relevant *landsmanschaften* (an immigrant benevolent organization formed by ex-residents of the locality or town) and check if they have their own section in any cemetery (they might also have a members' directory with additional details). In addition, visiting such a plot might be helpful in finding relatives of whom you've never heard, so don't forget to look around while you're at the cemetery.

Another important custom which might still be observed in many Jewish cemeteries is burying people who committed suicide near the cemetery fence (and not outside the cemetery, as was done in the old days). Also, according to the Jewish tradition, Kohanim — descendants of the ancient-days Kohanim, who were priests in charge of worship ceremonies in the Holy Temple — are not allowed to walk inside cemeteries. This is why graves of Kohanim are often located in the outskirts of the cemetery.

The little stones you often find on Jewish deceased headstones are a sign of visitors; this is an act of honoring the deceased and a symbol of participating in the burial mitzvah. Also, you might notice candles being lit, in particular around Yahrzeit (annual commemoration ceremony), for commemorating the deceased. Flowers are often put on graves during the burial service, as well as during Yahrzeits. So, little stones, candles or flowers are good indicators of people visiting that grave. If you want to contact a deceased's relatives, you may visit her or his grave around the Yahrzeit day, or just leave a note with a request for contact.

The Basics: Names and Dates

In the United States and Canada, gravestones for Jewish deceased will usually consist of both

Hertz Gordon, 1860-1939, buried in Eternal Home Cemetery (Colma, CA). The Hebrew text tells us his Hebrew name (Naftali), father's name (Liba Ber). Hertz Gordon was a Kohen — based on the two hands symbol, as well as on the Hebrew text. Inside the Star of David (between the birth and death years), there's Peh-Nun written. (Courtesy of Lizzie Fox)



Hebrew and English texts (always check the back of the tombstone). However, in most cases, the texts in the two languages will not be a translation of each other, but rather they will complement each other.

Almost every gravestone will start with the two Hebrew letters, Peh-Nun, which form an abbreviation to "here lies" (in Hebrew: *po nitman*), and will end with the five Hebrew letters *Tav-Nun-Tzadik-Bet-Hey*, which form an abbreviation to: "may his/her soul be bound up in the bond of life" (in Hebrew: *t'hay nafsho/nafsha tzrurah b'tzror hachaim*). Sometimes, you'll find a ceramic cameo with the deceased's photo on it. Although the Jewish practice does not allow having photos on gravestones,

some people adopted the local custom.

The very basic details to be found on a gravestone are the name of the deceased, her or his father's name (sometimes mother's name will also appear), date of death, and date of birth (or age, instead). The Hebrew names — both of the deceased and of her or his parent(s) — are usually the Jewish names. Although there are some conventional "translations" between Hebrew and local (civil) name, they might have nothing in common. The Hebrew name is crucial when looking for information about the deceased's early life or in the country of origin. For example, Haim, who became Harry, might appear as Haim in his immigration or census records,

and if you're looking for his ancestors in Europe, the name Harry is useless. Deceased married women will usually have their maiden name mentioned next to their father's names. Keep that in mind when interpreting a woman's surname from a gravestone, as "Haya daughter of Simcha Abramson" might be either Haya *nee* Abramson, daughter of Simcha Abramson, who later married and changed her surname, or Haya, daughter of Simcha (unknown surname), who married Mr. Abramson.

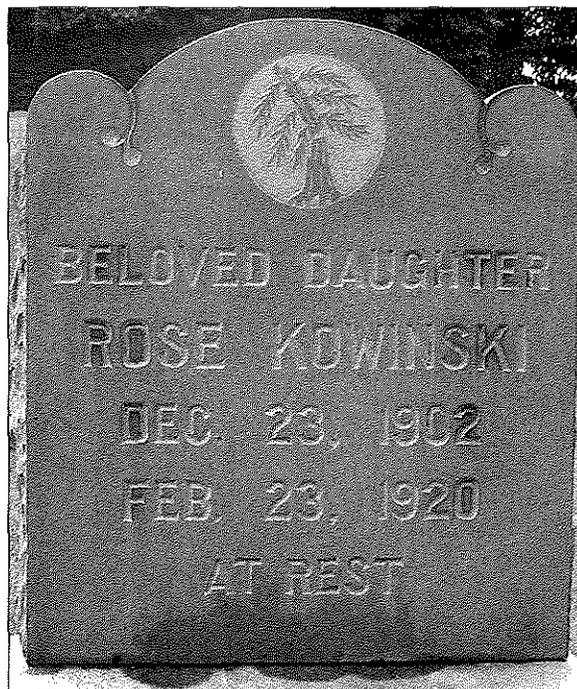
Dates might appear according to either the Gregorian or the Hebrew calendars. Hebrew days, months and years are usually written in letters symbolizing their numerical value (known as *gematria*). For converting a date from the Hebrew calendar to the Gregorian, it is easiest to use an online program (e.g., www.hebcal.com/converter). As a rule of thumb, remember that the year 2012 corresponds to the Hebrew years 5772/3 (the Jewish calendar precedes the Gregorian, as the Jewish New Year — known as Rosh HaShanah — occurs in the fall), so you can calculate backwards. Also, remember that a new day, according to the Hebrew calendar, begins at sunset, so a Gregorian-calendric day co-occurs with two Hebrew-calendric days. Knowing the day of death according to the Hebrew calendar — even if not mentioned on the gravestone — is important, as often a Yahrzeit is being observed according to it.

More Text

It is not uncommon that a deceased's family relationships are mentioned on a gravestone (e.g., "our grandmother", "my sister", "beloved mother"), in which case, you will learn about surviving family members (at the time of death). Jewish emigrants from Europe with family members who perished in the Holocaust will sometimes commemorate those who were killed on their own

grave. In that case, you will have names of relatives, as well as a place of origin.

In addition, you might find lots of honorary titles next to a person's name (mostly in the Hebrew text). Their main purpose is to honor the deceased, rather than to abstract their bio. So, if a title says "Rabbi", it doesn't neces-



Motif of a broken tree indicates death at a young age. Detail from a gravestone in a Jewish cemetery in Warsaw, Poland. (Courtesy of Philip Trauring)

sarily mean the person was, indeed, a rabbi in practice, and if a gravestone reads: "The honest and modest Isaac Hirschhorn", it may very well be that Mr. Hirschhorn was a liar and a braggart. When the deceased had a "Yikhus" of descending from a famous Rabbi, it might be mentioned on the gravestone, a fact useful for genealogy purposes.

Visual Hints

Besides text, Jewish gravestones often have visual symbols which depict important details. The most popular motifs are the Star of David (a star with six vertices made of two triangles) and the Menorah (a seven-branched candelabra) which simply refer to a Jewish male and female deceased, respectively. A broken branch symbolizes a person who died at a young age.

If you find a symbol of two hands in a blessing-like position, it means that the deceased was a descendant to a Kohen or Kohanim (descendants of the 1st priest, Aaron). Another family group often being symbolized is the Levites, denoted by a pitcher or a jar (As the Levites were in charge of washing the hands of the Kohanim in the ancient days of the Holy Temple). Belonging to these two groups is a Jewish tradition being transferred from a father to his sons, so finding one of these two symbols on a (male) deceased's gravestone means that his full paternal line was also part of this group.

Finding Jewish Graves Online

As the number of online repositories of burials worldwide, and, in particular, in North America, continues to increase, you might locate the graves of Jewish deceased online using the standard methods (e.g., searching FindAGrave.com). However, there are two great websites that deal exclusively with Jewish cemeteries. The first is the IAJGS Cemetery Project, www.iajgsjewishcemeteryproject.org, which aims to give details about any Jewish cemetery around the world. You will not find the actual burial registries there, but rather information about locations, inventory of records, contacts, etc. The second most relevant website is that of JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry (JOWBR), www.jewishgen.org/databases/cemetery, which is constantly updated with burial registries from around the world (currently this database holds almost two million burial records, from more than 3,000 cemeteries in dozens of countries).

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