

B'H

**From Rachel's Tomb to Billion Graves:
The Inscriptions on Jewish Tombstones**

by Esther (Herschman) Rechtschafner
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This article is dedicated to my dear cousin Betty Rice Schoenberg, for every year she visits the graves of my grandparents Edith and Zacharia Marcus.

Introduction

Being an active member of IGRA¹, I have become acquainted with "Billion Graves"². For over a year I have been transcribing the epitaphs on tombstones to information forms, via the internet. There are members of IGRA and other genealogical organizations who do more than I do, and actually go out to cemeteries here in Israel and photograph the tombstones. This is usually done as a group project. Billion Graves has information about many cemeteries in Israel and around the world.³

I would like to thank my friends from IGRA who taught me that a cemetery is not only a sad place; but a place to get genealogical information.

The inscriptions on tombstones often give genealogy researchers valuable information.

One Shabbat, I was reading a commentary on the portion of the week "VaYishlach"⁴ from the book The Fruits of the Tree⁵. I found that I was reading something that

¹ [Israel Genealogy Research Association: www.genealogy.org.il/](http://www.genealogy.org.il/)

² BG

³ Here are a few examples of the Israeli cemeteries that have been photographed: Herzliya Cemetery, Herzliya New Cemetery, Gilil Yam, Netzach Cemetery, Kfar Shmaryahu Cemetery, New Ramat HaSharon Morasha Cemetery, Rishpon Cemetery, New Hod HaSharon, Hulon Cemetery, Afula Cemetery, Atlit Cemetery, Beer Sheva New Cemetery, Gedera Cemetery, Jaffa Old Jewish Cemetery, Jerusalem Givat Shaul Cemetery, Karmiel Secular Cemetery, Military Cemetery Jerusalem, Moslem Cemetery-Nazereth, Ramat Rachel Cemetery, Omer Cemetery, Catholic Cemetery –Jerusalem. As of today (30/11/15) there are 85 cemeteries on this list. BGL

⁴ HSC Genesis 32:4 - 36:43. [Jacob](#) returns to the Holy Land after a 20-year stay in Charan, and sends angel-emissaries to [Esau](#) in hope of a reconciliation, but his messengers report that his brother is on the warpath with 400 armed men. Jacob prepares for [war](#), [prays](#), and sends Esau a large [gift](#) (consisting of hundreds of heads of livestock) to appease him.

That night, Jacob ferries his family and possessions across the Jabbok River; he, however, remains behind and encounters the angel that embodies [the spirit of Esau](#), with whom he wrestles until daybreak. Jacob suffers a dislocated hip but vanquishes the supernal creature, who bestows on him the name [Israel](#), which means "he who prevails over the divine."

Jacob and Esau meet, embrace and [kiss](#), but part ways. Jacob purchases a plot of land near [Shechem](#), whose crown prince—also called Shechem—abducts and rapes Jacob's daughter [Dinah](#). Dinah's

reminded me of "Billion Graves". I was reading about the tombstone of Rachel in Bethlehem⁶. This article went on to tell about inscriptions on tombstones.

This caused me to think about the inscriptions on Jewish tombstones. Therefore I decided to research the background of these inscriptions.

Pictures of tombstones can be seen on the internet.⁷

Please note that the abbreviations in the footnotes refer to the bibliography.

I have summed up the information that I found about this subject. I trust that you may also find it interesting and educational.

Esther (Herschman) Rechtschafner

<u>Table of Contents</u>	Page
Introduction	3
History	3
General History of Jewish Epitaphs	5
Specific information about Ashkenazi Epitaphs	6
Specific information about Sephardi Epitaphs	8
Modern Times	10
Conclusion	12
Illustrations	13
Bibliography	19

brothers [Simeon and Levi](#) avenge the deed by killing all male inhabitants of the city, after rendering them vulnerable by convincing them to circumcise themselves.

Jacob journeys on. [Rachel](#) dies while giving birth to her second son, [Benjamin](#), and is buried in a roadside grave near Bethlehem. [Reuben](#) loses the birthright because he interferes with his father's marital life. Jacob arrives in [Hebron](#), to his father Isaac, who later dies at age 180. (Rebecca has passed away before Jacob's arrival.)

Our Parshah concludes with a detailed account of Esau's wives, children and grandchildren; the family histories of the people of [Seir](#), among whom Esau settled; and a list of the [eight kings](#) who ruled Edom, the land of Esau's and Seir's descendants.

⁵ "The Tombstone of Rachel's Tomb", Professor Jacob Speigel, pps. 114-5, TRT

⁶ WVY

⁷ TP: media related to this article; etc

History

General History of Jewish Epitaphs

The event of Rachel's burial⁸ is the first time a tombstone is mentioned in the Bible. There are explanations for the reasons for the use of a gravestone in the Gemora. The reasons are:

1. So that the Cohanim, who were considered pure, would not go near this place⁹.
2. So that the dead person would be remembered¹⁰.
3. So that people could pray here (This reason was added on later.)

Rachel's Tomb is known to be located in Bethlehem; however some researchers believe that it may actually be located north of Jerusalem.¹¹

The history of the development of the shape of Rachel's tomb¹² and the epitaphs¹³ is very interesting, as they are examples of the development of the shapes and epitaphs in Judaism.¹⁴ The inscription engraved on a marble tablet inside the structure states that the philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore renovated the structure in 1841.¹⁵

At the time of the First Temple there were commemorative inscriptions that marked burial places. This was copied from other oriental nations, particularly the Phoenicians.¹⁶

The most elaborate of these is a rock-carved inscription, which was found in the Kidron valley, outside of Jerusalem. It seems to have been referred to in the Book of Isaiah¹⁷, indicating the grave of the royal steward Sheba.^{18, 19}

Another example is shown in what King Josiah did for the prophet who prophesied that he would be the king to bring about religious reformation (1-Kings: 13, 2-Kings

⁸ JV; See pictures of Rachel's Tomb, Illustrations: A

⁹ HE, V. 29, p.6

¹⁰ Graves were regarded as a holy place. Even today people pray at the graves of Holy and important people. MN

¹¹ EA, p. 649; EJ, V. 13, p. 1490. A detailed coverage of this subject appears in EB. EB, pps. 360-3

¹² EJ, V. 13, pps. 1489-91

¹³ There were customs of inscribing names of visitors on the tombstone, and of women surrounding it with red threads, which were tied onto children and sick as a remedy against the "evil eye". EA, p.6452,7; EJ, V. 13, p. 1490

¹⁴ EA, pps. 6450-6461

¹⁵ It reads as follows: "This structure which was built by Sir Moses Montefiore and his wife Judith, will make us worthy to receive the Messiah" (my free translation, EHR.) EA, p. 6451; EJ, V. 13, p. 1490

¹⁶ JV

¹⁷ Isaiah 22,15: Thus saith the Lord, the GOD of hosts: Go, get thee unto this steward, even unto Shebna, who is over the house:

Isaiah 22,16: What hast thou here, and whom hast thou here, that thou hast hewed thee out here a sepulchre, thou that hewest thee out a sepulchre on high, and gravest a habitation for thyself in the rock? "*Burial*", *Ariel*, *Shlomo Zalman*, MN

¹⁸ EJ, V. 6, p. 818, JV

¹⁹ See picture of Shebna Inscription, Illustrations: B

23:17).The prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 39:15) also stated that such a sign should be placed over a grave.²⁰

This custom continued at the time of the Second Temple and of 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).²¹

At the time of the Second Temple the practice of burying in sarcophagi (stone coffins) or secondary burial in ossuaries began. Usually the names of those people whose bones had been brought to these places were inscribed there. There were more elaborate inscriptions over burial places of important people. An example of this is the tomb of the priestly family Hezir, in the Kidron Valley.²² The custom of erecting ornate tombstones for nobility is also due to Greek and Roman influence. Examples of such appear in the Monument for Absalom, the sepulcher of Zacharia in the Kidron Valley. The inscription on the tomb of the Hezir family had been the only known inscription on a tombstone from the period of the Second Temple. Others have been discovered in recent years in Jerusalem, such as the tomb of Jason and Simeon the builder of the Sanctuary.²³

It is possible that this ostentation was thought to be against the Jewish religion; for Rabban Simeon Ben Gamaliel stated that "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).²⁴ Maimonides agreed with Rabban Simeon Ben Gamliel (Yad Avel 4:4).²⁵ However, Solomon b. Aderet regarded epitaphs as a way of honoring the dead (Responsa 375) and Isaac Luria, as contributing to the memory of the dead (Sha'ar HaMitzvot Vayihi).²⁶

There is mention of an epitaph in the Talmud (Horayot 13b), which tells about reading of the inscription on the epitaph. The importance of Kohanim knowing the location of a grave is also 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 that 15th Adar was the date set aside for day for marking graves (Shekalim 1:1). The latter was done with the use of lime (Ma'as Sh. 5:1). There were epitaphs, which were merely simple markers of graves and there were more decorative ones. The first was a structure over a grave (Talmud, Eruvim 55b); the second was similar, but had an entrance to a dwelling chamber, which was possibly for a watchman (Eruvim 5:1).²⁷ As stated previously, this may have been a result of Greek and Roman influence.

After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., from the time of the Byzantine-Roman domination, many epitaphs were preserved. These are discussed in J.B. Frey's

²⁰ EJ, V. 15, p.1218; JV

²¹ EJ, V. 15, pps.1218, 1220; JV

²² HE, V. 29, p. 63; EJ, V. 6, p. 818

²³ EJ, V.15, p. 1222

²⁴ HE, V.6, p.66; EJ, V.15, pps. 1221-2; JV

²⁵ EJ, V.15, p. 1222

²⁶ EJ, V. 15 p.1222

²⁷ EJ, V. 15 p.1221; JV

Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum, V.2. Most of them are from the Bet She'arim catacombs in the Galilee. Usually they contain only the name of the deceased in Hebrew or in Greek; but two of these epitaphs have a lengthy poem in Greek verse.²⁸

In his second volume, Frey discusses the large number of Jewish epitaphs found in Roman catacombs²⁹. Approximately 75% are in Greek, and 25% are in Latin, and only a very few include any Hebrew. The latter have mainly simple phrases such as "Shalom" or "rest in peace". However many of them do contain Jewish symbols, such as the seven-branched candelabra or menorah. These epitaphs cover most of the surface, and usually give such information as the names and possibly the communal position of the deceased (secretary, warden, etc).³⁰

The influence of Jewish tradition on Jewish art was felt when Jewish symbols were added to the epitaphs.³¹ The study of this rich Jewish art rich shows the development of Jewish art from ancient times to the present day.³²

Arabic numerals were used to alleviate confusion.³³

The catacombs in Bet She'an are similar to the Roman Jewish catacombs in Venosa, in southern Italy. However, in Venosa, the epitaphs are longer and more descriptive. From about the year 800 C.E., the epitaphs in Verosa and the surrounding area are even longer and mention Jewish schools and scholars. Hebrew is used more than Latin and Greek. In other places in Europe (Greece, France, Spain) the epitaphs of this late classical period are in Latin and Greek. The Merida, Spain inscription is trilingual: Latin, Greek and Hebrew.³⁴

As Latin became to be known as the language of the Church and the knowledge of Hebrew spread, the use of Hebrew on epitaphs became universal. Epitaphs in Hebrew are preserved from Spain, France, Germany and other places from the 11th century. As time progressed they became more elaborate. Spanish epitaphs, of the 13-14 century (F.Cantera collection) sometimes have writings on all sides of the horizontal stones. There are French medieval inscriptions (collected by M. Shwab). There are Italian epitaphs from the 16th century that contain short poems or a short stereotyped liting meter. Many of the latter were composed by R. Leone Modena, from Venice (published by A Berliner and R. Pacifici). There were no epitaphs from the Papal States in Italy and France (Avignon and Carpentras) during the ghetto period there, for then inscriptions over the dead were forbidden. There are epitaphs from Prague (published by S. Hock), from Frankfurt am Main (published by M. Horowitz) and from Salonika (published by I. S. Emmanuel), which are less literary' but have historical importance.³⁵

²⁸ EJ, V. 6, p. 819

²⁹ The epitaph tablets found there were inside closed, isolated burial alcoves, were decorated with figurative representations and were mostly in Greek. TFT, p. 526

³⁰ EJ, V. 6, p. 819,822

³¹ EJ, V. 6, p. 822; JV

³² EJ, V. 6, p. 822

³³ JEO

³⁴ EJ, V. 6, p. 820

³⁵ EJ, V. 6, p. 820

During the 19th century, the use of the vernacular became more common in the Western world. At first both the secular name appeared; but details were in Hebrew. Then the epitaph was in both languages and then only the name in Hebrew. In some English cemeteries the name must be in Hebrew; and in strongly orthodox groups, no English is permitted.³⁶

The essay "The Jewish tombstones in Southwest England", by Rabbi Dr. Bernard Susser³⁷, describes the Brighton, England local cemetery and incidentally, tells about the changes in all epitaphs.³⁸

Specific Information about Ashkenazi Epitaphs

The Ashkenazi areas referred to in this article, refer to Ashkenazi communities in Western, Central and Eastern Europe. Tombstones from Rhineland area do show some oriental influence. They contained flat designs around the epitaph. The oldest Jewish tombstones from Eastern Europe are from the 3rd and 4th centuries. There are ten of them, and they are from Hungary, Croatia, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. The epitaphs are typically Roman, written in Latin and Greek. Some include a menorah and one includes a word in Hebrew. However, the latter had no influence on the future development.³⁹

Tombstones have been preserved from the 13th century in Poland (1203), Moravia (Eastern Czechoslovakia-1269) and Hungary (1278).

³⁶ EJ, V. 6, p. 821

³⁷ Rabbi Susser formerly served as Rabbi of the Brighton and Hove Hebrew Congregation in Southwest England. UK

³⁸ "It did not take long for me to realize that here was a valuable insight into the nature of the Plymouth Jewish community and the lives of the men and women who belonged to it a hundred and two hundred years ago. Trying to discover more about the individuals whose tombstones gave only a bare minimum of information kindled in me a desire for more and more knowledge of the Jewish communities of the South West of England, until my research was rewarded by a doctorate from the University of Exeter."

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 / כל דוד ב"ר אברהם] /For 50 years a member of the Congregation of this town./⁽¹⁾ 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 nineteenth 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 [בן/בת אברהם אבינו] 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 nineteenth century religious sentiments are to be found.

"The Jewish tombstones in Southwest England", 16.7.2014. UK

³⁹ TP

The gravestones were in a vertical position and rectangular in shape from about the 11th to the 14th century.⁴⁰ Many were made of wood.⁴¹ They were usually made from stone; but a few of cast-iron were found in poor communities, usually in Poland.⁴² Many tombstones from the 14th and 15th centuries have been preserved. They are from Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia (Southeastern Poland) and Hungary. The oldest Hungarian tombstone is from 1130. The oldest Polish tombstones (aside from Silesia) are from the 16th century.

Historical literature from the 14th and 15th centuries includes the topic of tombstones. All epitaphs were in Hebrew, though some contained a bit of Aramaic. The Hebrew was written in a square script. The lettering resembles the book-hand style (script used for transcribing books),.Cursive and semi-cursive script began in the 16th-17th centuries.⁴³ The epitaphs of this period contain the basic elements of later inscriptions. However, at that time, the sections of epitaphs (beginning, middle and end) had not yet been separated. At this time the Western and Central and Eastern European epitaphs were similar. In Eastern Europe some were preserved near Lvov (1520), and in Lublin (1521), Lesko, Poland (1548), and Buczacz (1587).⁴⁴

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 (the period from the 14th to the 17th century, which is considered the bridge between the [Middle Ages](#) and [modern history](#)) and afterwards Baroque art (17th-18th centuries) is felt here. The oldest examples are from Krakow (1549), Przemysl (1574) and Prague. The Magen David was a figurative motif used in Prague. The latter referred to as "Jewish Baroque" was dominant until the middle of the 19th century. In the 18th and early 19th century, it was then divided into 3 sections: a pediment (which also contained ornamental and symbolic images), a framed inscription field and a base. Common motifs were: crowns flanked by heraldic lions or deer, a pitcher and bowl, and professional and family symbols. The inscription field often contained decorated epitaphs. The letters varied and were also decorative. The content was sometimes elaborate, containing poetry, acrostics, or chronograms, and biblical phrases. However usually they were quite simple, and sometimes even had spelling or grammar mistakes (examples are in collections of tombstones that are preserved in Satanow, Ukraine, Miedzyt, Poland, Sienawa, Poland and Lesko, Poland). In certain localities in Ukraine, eastern Poland, and Belarus this was the style until the Holocaust.

In the 17th century Ashkenazi epitaphs were only in Hebrew. However, the inscriptions in Ashkenazi cemeteries had become longer, more elaborate and sometimes the name of the deceased was in acrostic form, in crude verses. The inscription for a man usually began with "פ'נ" (פה-Here Lies); and that for a woman began with "פ'ט" (פה-Here is interred). The abbreviation "תנצב'ה" (נפשו)

⁴⁰ TP

⁴¹ Few of these have survived. Some are preserved in museums in Bucharest, Romania, Helsinki, Finland, etc.TP

⁴² TP

⁴³ TP

⁴⁴ TP

May His Soul Rest in Peace [צרוּרָה בצרוּר הַחַיִּים] appears at the end. This is still in use, and sometimes is the only Hebrew that appears in the epitaph.⁴⁵

The development of this style of tombstone in Eastern Poland, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus caused a split in the appearance of gravestones between Eastern and Central Eastern Europe. Tombstones began to resemble Christian sepulchral art in Western Poland, Silesia and Bohemia, due to the influence of the high art styles of Baroque, rococo, and afterwards classicism.⁴⁶

In general, the use of symbols illustrated the religious status of the deceased, his virtues, or his trade. Sometimes, in cases of important people, a "sarcophagus" was formed by placing vertical and horizontal stones together. Also 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, and was sometimes surrounded by a fence.

The most common designs resembled ark curtains. Flora and fauna designs were used for a frame. These 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 which were covered with paintings have not been preserved. The artisans were excellent craftsmen.⁴⁷ This artwork was only done for the wealthier classes, because of the expense, since stonework was very expensive until the 19th century.⁴⁸

Specific information about Sephardi Epitaphs

The Sephardi tombstones were usually in a horizontal position⁴⁹ and rectangular in shape, from about the 11th to the 14th century.⁵⁰ They were often larger and longer than Ashkenazi tombstones⁵¹.

As in Central Europe, mentioned above, in Medieval Spain, sometimes a "sarcophagus" was formed by placing vertical and horizontal stones together, in cases of important people.⁵²

The communities that were established by ex-Marranos in the 17th century, in Western Europe and in the New World, reintroduced the use of vernacular (local language) on tombstones. Examples are in epitaphs from Amsterdam (published by D. Henriques de Castro), from Hamburg (M. Gruenwald collection), Curacao

⁴⁵ EJ, V. 6, p. 820

⁴⁶ TP

⁴⁷ EJ, V. 6, p. 822

⁴⁸ TP

⁴⁹ See Illustrations: E. A photograph of a Sephardic section of the Altona Jewish Cemetery in Hamburg, Germany.

⁵⁰ TP

⁵¹ JFT, p.527

⁵² JV

(published by I. S. Emmanuel), Barbados (published by E. M. Shitstone), Jamaica (included in J.A.P.M. Andrade's *A Record of the Jews in Jamaica*, 1941), New York (published by David D Sola Pool), London, Venice, Leghorn, Bordeaux, Bayonne, etc.⁵³

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/Portuguese and Hebrew). The English language began to appear in epitaphs in the 17th century. An example of this appears in the epitaph of Isaac Alvarez Nunes, the English court Jeweler, in 1684. It contains an English poem in alexandrine couplets.⁵⁴

The Jewish cemeteries of Padua Italy give information from the ghetto period until the arrival of Napoleon's army (1797) the 16th to 18th centuries. Tradition was followed; but the influence of Renaissance and Baroque was definitely present. Poems constitute the majority of epitaphs, from 1529 to 1830. This fact corresponds with the development of medieval Hebrew literature. The verses in the acrostic letters⁵⁵ give 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 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 poetry⁵⁶ flourished in early modern Italy. The poems on these epitaphs were written by the best poets. Hundreds of epitaph poems from the Venice Lido Cemetery have been published.

The epitaphs of Mediterranean and Ottoman communities all contained Sephardic constituents; but also contained local traditions and influence.

The Portuguese Jewish Community of Amsterdam was one of the most prosperous Sephardi communities in the western Sephardi diaspora. Their dead were buried in the Ouderkerk cemetery, which was founded in 1614. The literary structure of the epitaph poems is quite special. It is somewhat similar to that of Italy. The original model for this style of Hebrew poetry is based on Muslim poetry in Spain, from the 10th to the 12th centuries.⁵⁷

In the period of 1611 to 1871, the Sephardi section of the Altona Jewish cemetery in Hamburg, Germany⁵⁸ contains many horizontal marble tombstones and triangular "tents" (ohel⁵⁹). Baroque influence is felt in the decorations. The epitaphs are usually

⁵³ EJ, V. 6, p. 820

⁵⁴ EJ, V. 6, p. 820

⁵⁵ An example of such can be seen in the modern epitaph in [Illustrations: E:3 Tombstone of Simcha Cohen](#).

⁵⁶ This is also found outside of Italy, but not in Northern and Eastern Europe. PJ, p. 49

⁵⁷ This article gives a detailed coverage of the literary development on epitaphs. PJ

⁵⁸ See [Illustrations: A photograph of a Sephardic section of the Jewish Cemetery in Altona](#), p.

⁵⁹ JFT, p.529

in Portuguese⁶⁰, Spanish and French, in addition to Hebrew.⁶¹ Sometimes these epitaphs read as if the dead were speaking. It was written as if they wrote it themselves, even if someone else wrote it for them. Sometimes they contain biblical quotations. The style is similar to that of medieval Sephardi poetry or Italian Renaissance poetry. The influence of the time and the location is felt; but there usually is also something from tradition. The cemetery was in use until 1862, and 376 epitaphs survived.⁶²

The art work on the epitaphs became more elaborate in the Renaissance Period especially in Sephardi Communities in Northern Europe (for example in Amsterdam) and the West Indies (especially Curacao). However, in North Africa and the Orient and London, simplicity continued. The tombstones were then often decorated with relief scenes, which showed the connection between the name of the deceased and the biblical character by that name. In Italy vertical tombstones were often decorated with the family badge.⁶³

Information on regarding books about Sephardic Cemeteries can 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, which was compiled by Mathilde Tagger^{64, 65}.

Modern Times

Epitaphs were carved on stone in the 19th and 20th centuries. Some were made of artificial stone (terrazzo, concrete). The tombstones that contain much artwork are not representative of the common people, for they were expensive and also could not be preserved well.⁶⁶ Punctuation marks were usually not used. If they are used now, this is considered modern detail and shows a hint of assimilation.⁶⁷

In large cities in Western and Central Europe, Jewish sepulchral art sometimes became closer to Christian artistic traditions in the 19th and 20th centuries, as historical styles began to be used and Jewish symbolism almost entirely disappeared. In general, a style of more traditional sepulchral art began in the 19th century. Bilingual inscriptions became widespread. German inscriptions became more popular, and 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 more moderate.⁶⁸

⁶⁰ JFT, p. 527

⁶¹ SE, p. 60

⁶² SE, p.65-6

⁶³ JV

⁶⁴ PMT

⁶⁵ Mathilde Tagger was also a member of IGRA. GMT, IGRA, SSO

⁶⁶ TP

⁶⁷ JEO

⁶⁸ TP

As understood, in the "New World ", the local language was used in addition to the basic Hebrew epitaph⁶⁹.

In the interwar period, even the most traditional Jewish communities used prefabricated tombstones, and this caused deterioration in Jewish sepulchral art. In Eastern Europe today the tombstones are made with generic stone-working models; and Jewish symbolism is usually only the Magen David, and Hebrew is usually used only for the closing epitaph⁷⁰.

In World War II, most of the Jewish Cemeteries in Central and Eastern Europe were destroyed. Then the Nazis gave orders to use the gravestones for paving roads, yards⁷¹, etc. Therefore this was the fate of a wealth of interesting and informative epitaphs. However today, a number of these Jewish Cemeteries are being re-organized.⁷² Examples are:

1. Sveksna, Lithuania- This depicts how local youth help to clean the cemetery and the gravestones. An example is shown in the Lithuanian Jewish Cemetery Project (Maceva).^{73, 74}
2. Prostejov, Czechoslovakia- This depicts a project began by Hassidic New York businessman, whose father was a Holocaust survivor. **Czech Republic: discovering and recovering a lost Jewish cemetery in the town of Prostejov**⁷⁵
3. Vilkaviskis, Lithuania- This depicts how the Israeli, Ralph Salinger, went to the town of his family and cleaned the tombstones with shaving cream. Vilkaviskis Cemetery Project⁷⁶

There are several million old Jewish tombstones in Eastern Europe today. Many of them have been moved from their original locations, and have been severely damaged. Though there is an increasing interest in this subject, it is still poorly researched. Very few individual cemeteries have been inventoried, documented and studied. This could be considered an urgent task because of vandalism and atmospheric pollution.⁷⁷

In recent years, the tendency has been (at least among the Orthodox) for tombstones and epitaphs to be simple.⁷⁸ In Israel epitaphs are usually simple⁷⁹ and of course,

⁶⁹ I used photographs of my family, and the area of the cemetery where they were buried, for I do not have to get permission from the family. See photographs of the tombstones of my grandmother and Uncle, Illustrations: F

⁷⁰ "תנצב'ה", TP

⁷¹ JCC

⁷² EJ, V. 6, p. 822

⁷³ LIC

⁷⁴ See photograph, Illustrations: C

⁷⁵ JCC

⁷⁶ RS

⁷⁷ TP

⁷⁸ JV

⁷⁹ However, this is up to the desire of the person /family. See examples of modern tombstones: Illustrations: Photographs from the Cemetery in Masuot Yitzchak, Israel (Kibbutz Ein Zurim section);

they are in Hebrew.⁸⁰ Every person, family, and community can write whatever they feel fitting on the epitaph.⁸¹

Conclusion

I am glad that I decided to research the Inscriptions on Jewish Tombstones. Since I am interested in Jewish genealogy; I realize that this is a way to find much important information. Also, by the use of "Billion Graves", such information has become easier to find. The work that is being done in the restoring and recording of old Jewish cemeteries also makes genealogy research much easier.

I found it quite interesting to see the how influence of the particular periods in our Jewish history and in secular history influenced Jewish epitaphs. The Jewish and secular literature and art also influenced the development of these epitaphs. The local influence is also felt, as is the differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities and the various communities in each of the latter. What is most important was the simultaneous influence of Jewish tradition.

Three important facts that I learned while doing this research are:

1. There is no Jewish law that states that there should be a tombstone.⁸²
2. It is forbidden to receive material benefit from a tombstone (Sha. Ar [Shulchan Aruch] YD [Yore Deah] 364:1).⁸³
3. The Jewish Epitaph is usually composed of standard components:
 - A. The opening abbreviation
 - B. Title and given name
 - C. Paternal Lineage
 - D. Surname
 - E. Date of Death (Dates are usually according to the Hebrew calendar)
 - F. Closing Abbreviation

The above may vary because of the individual, the family, cause of death, and/or regional influences.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ EJ, V. 6, p. 821

⁸¹ See Illustrations: E Photographs from the Cemetery in Masuot Yitzchak, Israel (Kibbutz Ein- Zurim section)

⁸² TRT

⁸³ EJ, V. 15 p.1222, JV ; **Yoreh Deah 364:Seif 1: It is forbidden to benefit financially from the building-grave, but the earth/land of a grave is not forbidden.**

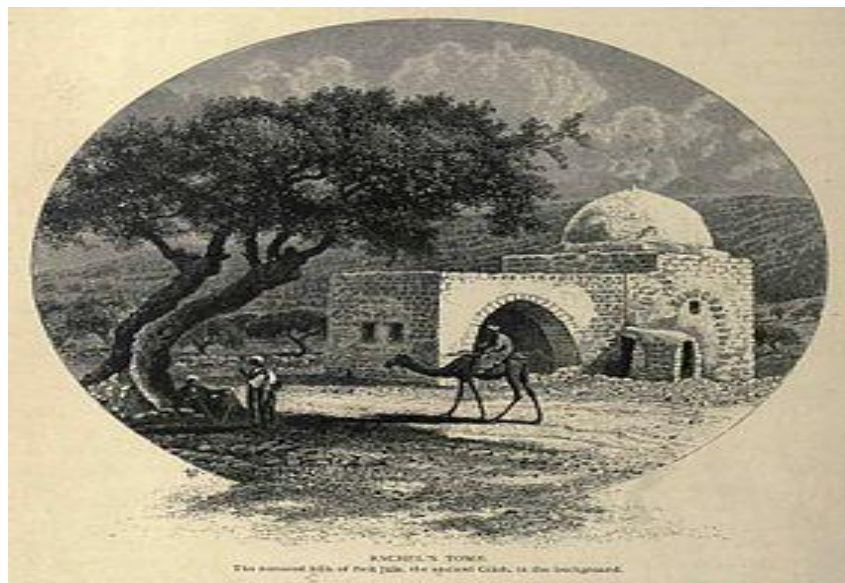
(Rama :The Mapah. (Table Covering) is usually a little stricter and was written primarily for the Askenazim. The Shulchan Aruch was based upon the Arbah Turim of which one was Yoreh Deah.] : And there are those who say that it is forbidden to derive benefit from the land that is removed from the gravesite and then put back [onto the grave after the body is buried], since [the earth] is [initially] removed but in the end combined [back with the grave].Rabbi Hank Skirball kindly looked for these sources for me. HS

The cemetery in Holon was also photographed by volunteers from "Billion Graves". The reason I am mentioning this is that this is the cemetery where my parents (Oscar and Nettie Heschman [Z"L]) are buried. I suppose that someone has taken a photograph of their graves. I suppose that someone has transcribed or will transcribe (maybe even me) the information on their tombstones. After what I learned from transcribing tombstone information, and from my research for this article, I am glad that I put the information that we did on their tombstones. I am referring to having the names of both their mothers and their fathers there. Not only does this give more information; but it has become a way to have my grandparents names commemorated in Israel. I am sorry though that the following sentence "**He loved the Jewish people, the Land of Israel and his family very much.**" does not appear on my father's tombstone, for it would be the best way to sum up his life.

Illustrations

A. Rachel's Tomb⁸⁵

1. This photograph reminds me of the picture that my maternal grandfather, Zacharia Marcus, had on top of his bookcase.



2. This is what the entrance to Rachel's Tomb looks like today. Unfortunately today it is heavily guarded by Israeli soldiers for security reasons.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ JEO

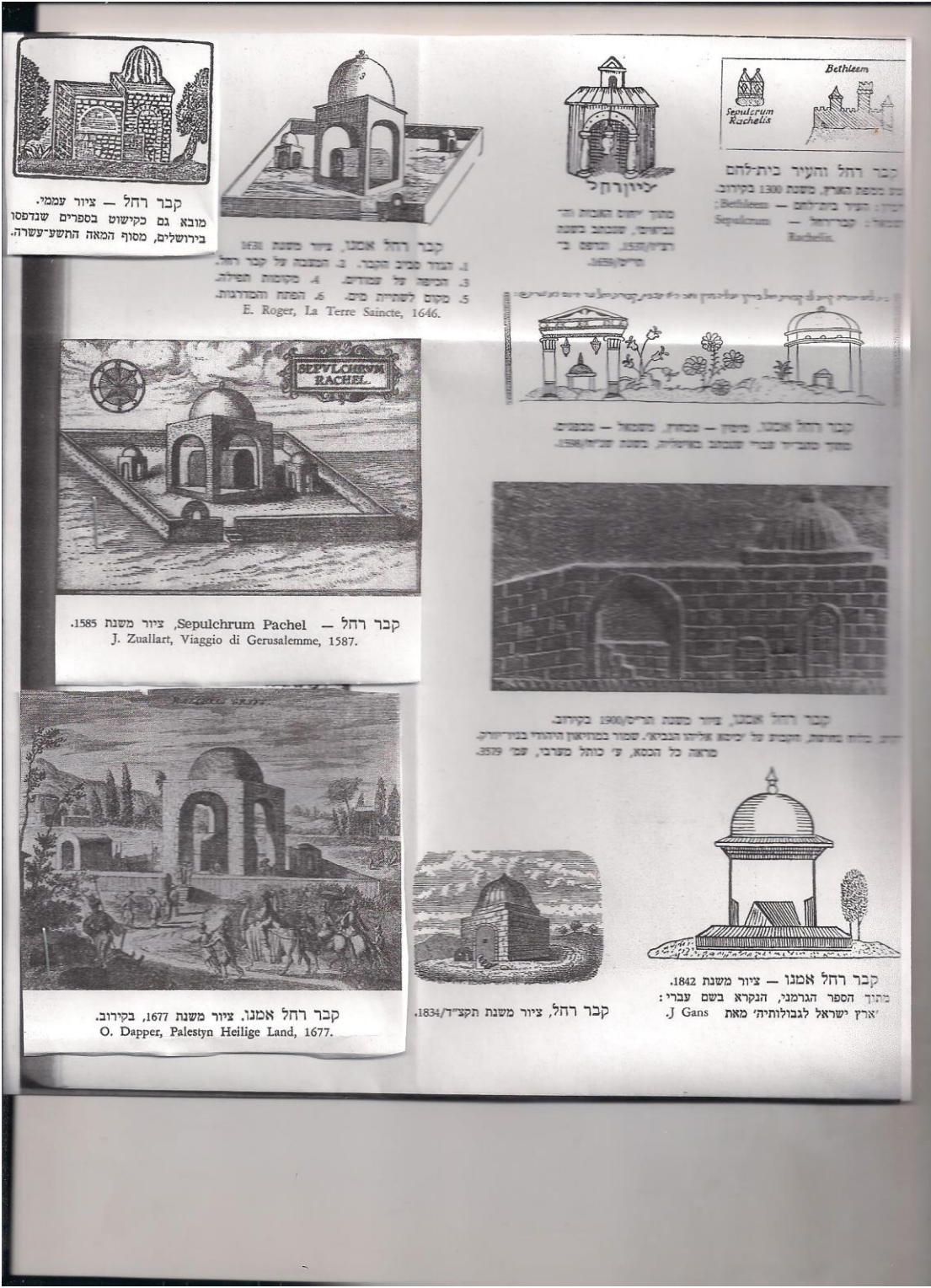
⁸⁵ RT

⁸⁶ For a synopsis of Rachel's Tomb today, see RA.



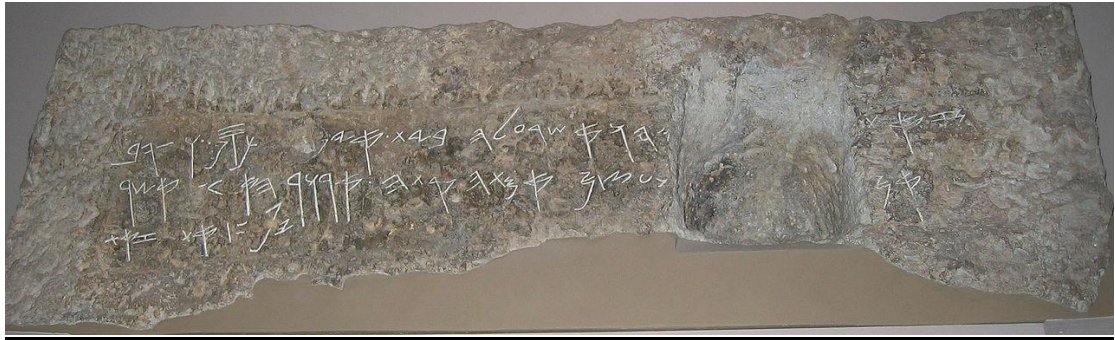
3. Historical Illustrations of Rachel's Tomb⁸⁷

⁸⁷ EA pps.6453-6



B. Shebna Inscription: material-limestone, size-160 cm long, 52 cm high, created 7th century BCE, present location-British Museum, London, identification 1871,1107 1 WA 125205.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ SI



C. Volunteers from Alicija Rugytė Scout Group Working on Sveksna Jewish Cemetery in 2012⁸⁹ (Sveksna is the town that my maternal grandfather came from).⁹⁰



D. A photograph of a Sephardic section of the Jewish Cemetery in Altona⁹¹



E. Photographs from the Cemetery in Masuot Yitzchak, Israel (Kibbutz Ein Zurim section)⁹²

⁸⁹ LJC

⁹⁰ LJC

⁹¹ JCA

⁹² The respective families have given me permission to use these photographs. They were photographed by Eldar Shimron of Kibbutz Ein-Zurim.

1. Tombstone of (Chaim) David Ben Dov "BENDI"



2. Tombstones of a few members of Kibbutz Ein-Zurim



3. Tombstone of Simcha Cohen



F. Memorials for Congregations that were destroyed in the Holocaust in Holon Cemetery, Israel⁹³

⁹³ HM



G. Montrepose Cemetery, Agudas Achim - old section (Jewish section), Kinston, New York, U.S.A.⁹⁴

Photograph of part of the old section of the cemetery



Photograph of the graves of my grandmother Esther Herschman and my Uncle Meyer Herschman



⁹⁴ Photographs courtesy of Avraham Itkin, AI

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