

JEWISH CEMETERIES AND THEIR IMPORTANCE

From a Lecture by Alex Schwarz, Summer 2008

In Poland there are at least 1554 cemeteries. In the Warsaw region, (sound like a word that ends in ski) is 160x170 Km), there are 130 cemeteries. Many of them look like parks, are empty or have buildings on top of them.

Matzevah – headstone

People should not just walk through a cemetery as a short cut. It is disrespectful. They should walk around. The Jewish community has had complaints from people when they are trying to build walls around the cemetery. Once there was a bike path through a cemetery. They were building a wall, and someone came up to them and asked “How could they be doing this?” The question was asked back. If your grandparents were buried here, “Would you want me to make a path through the cemetery?” (Something like that.) He also said that some of the laws just use common sense.

When people do work in the cemetery, others around see that it is a cemetery.

He did not want us to get confused about what was important. He explained that what was important is what important is not what is above the ground, but what is below, the bones/grave.

Tradition in Judaism matters/ Jewish Law(The Hebrew word for Jewish Law is Halahe[sp?]). Jewish Law is based on 613 statements which are noted or written down laws among the Torah. These laws were written by wise rabbis who are able to look at the text then derive laws. The 613 laws are in 2 parts: Derigha, which are drawn directly from the Torah, and Rabbinic Work. A small group of wise people wrote down these guidelines for understanding.

Aspects of Judaism - Intelligent and non intelligent/common. Example: Most laws are associated with stories from the Torah. However, there is very little is written about the cemeteries and how they are to be treated. It does say that a cemetery must be purchased first and not bargained for. Example: Abraham bought a small cave, maepella, to bury Sarah for 400 sheckels, He is not sure how much that is today. There was no negotiation over price. He reiterates the fact that a cemetery must be bought.

JEWISH CEMETERIES AND THEIR IMPORTANCE

Jews believe the bone of a human being have greater meaning that appears after death. A person's spirit is connected to the bones. This is why the Jews treat the dead as if they are living. They call the cemetery (We're not sure if it is cemetery or something else?) Beit Attighen(sp?) which means house of the living. After years the Jews came to treat the dead as if they were living. They are not supposed to do anything within seven steps of a grave that the dead person cannot do. Not all Jews observe this rule. Example: When they enter a cemetery, they are to hide the tsiti(sp?), strands on a prayer shawl that hang down on an orthodox Jew, in some way. They do this because the dead can no longer pray/observe the laws for themselves and the strands have knots for praying the 613 laws. Observing the 613 laws should bring pleasure. People who are dead are not able to observe the law. The living should not cause the dead to be jealous, having the strands showing and praying would do that. They should act appropriately toward the dead and treat the dead as if they were living.

Once the cemetery is purchased, they designate the borders.

The family of Cohen were to take care of the temple. Anyone who is a descendant of the family of the priests, Aaron's descendants, had the hands on their gravestones. Not all Levites are descendants of Aaron. Levites have a picture of water on their gravestones. Other family names are Levites, Lenard Cohen, Katz, Keplan, and Rappaort.

Leonard Cohen was a songwriter and also a member of the family of priests. A person by the name of Cohen does not have the right to come into contact with a grave; therefore, he cannot come into contact with a cemetery even to today.

Tuma describes the ritual uncleanness at graves. The tuma starts at the ground and extends up to the heavens. At times the crowns of the trees will be removed as not to retain the tuma. If a Cohen came into contact with a tomb or the dead, it would be a difficult washing. So, one of the purposes of a wall was to warn the priests that he could not enter. If a high priest finds the body of a dead person in the country where there is not a city near, he must bury the dead person and then be cleansed. The body is important to remember and care for the person. Another purpose the wall is that it protects what is above and below the ground. Bones have an important meaning.

JEWISH CEMETERIES AND THEIR IMPORTANCE

Burial Rituals. Beit Tohomna means House of Purity and is where the body is washed before the burial. Men wash men and women wash women. The people who do the washing are carefully selected. In every community there is a brotherhood of burial. This is an important group, not outcasts. In Jerusalem, you must be someone important and must represent humanity in this group. Washing the body is a detailed process. In Warsaw, there are men and women who do this. After the body is washed, the burial is done within two days unless there is a Shabbat or a holiday that interferes. Even when there was a public execution, the body was taken care of. The body was not allowed to be out over night even if it was the body of a criminal. Unimportant people were buried to the sides of the cemetery. Once the body is cleansed, it is buried and put in the ground lying on their back. In Poland, some people believe that the body is buried sitting up. This is because the body is buried in a prayer shawl and not a casket; therefore, the body will naturally bend at knees and hips. After the cleansing, a person is buried in a complete outfit. (Beit Tahama – sp & meaning?). The upper and lower parts of their body are clothed, and then they are wrapped in a prayer shawl. They cannot be buried in a prayer shawl that is still able to be used for prayer; it must be an old one. If there is not an old one they will sometimes pull off the corners of a prayer shawl to make it unusable. Death is important, but so is life. That is the reason you do not put something into the grave that can be used by the living.

There are some things that can be buried underneath people. There is a place in every Synagogue to keep everything that has been used for God or has his name that is no longer good for using or broken. This material cannot be destroyed; it is collected and then buried under the bodies.

Example: Someone had put the name of God on towels used for washing hands, but because it bared the name of God, they would not use it. The towels were given back and put into the room to be buried. The highest honor to give this material is to be buried. The material must be buried either under a body or separately. Example: prayer books, Talmud, and the Torah.

People are buried on their back with their feet facing Jerusalem. Often the priests are buried in front so that they can lead the people. On the metaphysical side there is a vision of Israel being gathered and being resurrected and the bones will roll themselves to Jerusalem.

JEWISH CEMETERIES AND THEIR IMPORTANCE

Grieving Rituals. Jewish Laws point to the Honor of those who died. After burial, earth is put on them and the Jews pray. This make some time since there is a time of contemplation. Usually, it takes 12 months before the tombstone is placed. The mourning period is a difficult time due to the loss. It involves saying the Caddosh(sp?) and a person must be 10 or older and Jewish to say it.

There are three grieving periods. Immediately after the burial, there is no shaving, bathing, or perfume use among other things. The mourners look like shadows of other people. The people in mourning are to rip their clothes which is based upon the Torah. The Shivah is the second time period. It allows the griever to go to the synagogue and the law complicates the Jewish life at this time. The last time period is for one year after death and they say the Caddosh(sp?) (Not sure if he said it was 10 people 3 times a day for a year or something else.)

Graves. The cemetery is divided into sections: the religious vs. non religious, women and men, and children. The vision of men and women were later changed so that husband and wives may be buried together. Candlesticks on the gravestones denote a woman's grave and one of the candle sticks may be broken. Women may also have a fruit tree on their gravestone. If someone did not live a religious life, but died caring out one of the 613 laws, they could be buried with the religious people. Example: If a woman did not live religiously, but died giving birth, she may be buried in the religious section of the cemetery. A man who was not religious liked to wash his hands before he ate which means he was following one of the 613 laws. He was washing his hands before eating and a bear killed him. He may be buried in the religious section.

Treblinka is a mass burial. They had died for being Jews and that makes the place Holy. People say it is holy because of Tuma. We have a holy obligation for caring for these people.

Matzevah (Headstones)

We treat a person's grave as if he were living. We do not lean on his tombstone, or sit on it or eat at the grave site because they cannot share the meal with you. Religious people place prayers at a Rabbi's tombstone. They believe is that since he was a great religious figure in life he will strengthen their prayers. This is similar to what is done with the papers put in the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. For this reason, you may find

JEWISH CEMETERIES AND THEIR IMPORTANCE

papers around a cemetery. If a fruit tree grows around a tombstone, that tree belongs to the dead person. So, if it is cut down, a profit cannot be made from it. Anything made from it must be given to the grave or to the cemetery. By law no one can profit from the dead; therefore, a Rabbi cannot take money for a burial.

Jewish Tradition is precise. You must be seven and a half steps from the grave to do anything that might make a dead person jealous. Eating and drinking is not permitted in part because a person must pray and the dead cannot pray. Any prayers must be on behalf of the dead, saying the Caddosh(sp?) or lighting a candle. The trees of the cemetery belong to the dead because the roots belong to the dead. The Talmud cannot be read near the dead. In some areas, large stones are place on top of the graves to keep animals from taking the bones. Small stones are used as markers of remembrance. You cannot take a shortcut through a cemetery. You should not even pretend to be visiting when taking this shortcut. If a priest dies, his family cannot come into the cemetery.