

Understanding Jewish Cemeteries

Ilene Kanfer Murray
publications@stlgs.org
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Jewish cemeteries are steeped in tradition.

- Bodies must be treated in specific ways: purified, shrouded, and treated with respect.
- The ground on which they are located is consecrated and blessed.
- They are often fenced or enclosed to separate them from the secular world.
- Many are divided into sections for congregations or burial societies.
- Orthodox cemeteries separate men from women.
- Stones tend to be fairly simple, even if they have some symbolic artwork on them
- Most stones include names, dates, and blessings, often abbreviated.
- Jewish burials are within a few days of death and in plain wooden caskets.
- Many Jewish cemeteries include perpetual care out of respect for the deceased.

Children in Jewish Cemeteries

- Are often buried in their own sections
- May not have any markers, and if they do, they are usually small
- Fetuses and very young babies, even those who are stillborn, may be in an area for “untimely births,” and are often in unmarked graves.

Leaving Stones on Gravestones

- Origins for this custom are uncertain.
- It clearly is a mark of remembrance.
- The custom may have begun as a way to mark burial cairns or to keep bodies from being dug up by animals.

Chevra Kadisha and Landsmanshaften

A chevra kadisha is a holy society, an organized, usually volunteer group whose task is to perform burial rites.

- Both men and women participate in these groups.
- They first wash the body and immerse it in flowing water, the ritual of *tahara*.
- Next, the body is enshrouded, preferably in pure cloth of muslin or cotton.
- Finally, the body is placed in the casket, and the casket is closed.

As Jews moved to different locations, one of the first institutions they put in place was a chevra kadisha, so members of the community could be cared for in life and death.

In the U.S., chevra kadisha were known as burial societies, usually organized by synagogues. Large immigrant Jewish populations in American cities formed landsmanshaftn, or mutual aid societies.

- These groups were often from the same shtetl, city, or province in Europe.
- Their purpose was to help immigrants get settled, learn English, find housing and jobs, register to vote, and provide burial plots for families.
- Members paid dues, attended meetings, and enjoyed social events.
- The Workers (Workmen's) Circle (*der Arbeter Ring*) also developed as a mutual aid society but not based on origin.
- Many cemeteries in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, and other cities are organized into sections based on burial societies, such as landsmanshaftn or Workmen's Circles.

Jewish Cemeteries in Large Cities

- Your ancestor may be in a specific section because of membership in an organization or a synagogue.
- Section gates may include your ancestor's name.
- Your family may be buried in an area owned by a landsmanshaft not because they were from that place but because someone close to them was and included them in their membership.
 - Use this has a hint to investigate the relationship your ancestor had with the group.
 - You may want to see if records for the group still exist.

The Jewish Genealogical Society of New York has an index of burial societies in New York City (Manhattan, Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island). The records are part of the collection at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York.

To search the Jewish Genealogical Society of New York's Burial Society Database:

<https://jgsny.org/searchable-databases/burial-society-databases/burialsoc-joodb>

Jewish Tombstones

- Tombstones in Jewish cemeteries are also based on custom and tradition. Most follow a standard pattern of text and decoration.
- Names are often in Hebrew, some in Yiddish, some in a combination along with English.
- Vowel sounds may or may not be on the stones and are represented in many ways.
- Older stones may follow patterns not seen on modern ones.
- Typically, the top will have a decoration, followed by boiler plate describing the person, then their name, father's name, death date in Hebrew, and some kind of epitaph.

Artwork

Art on Jewish tombstones is based on symbolism. Most common, of course, is the Jewish star.

Other common symbols . . .

- Laurel wreath: evergreen memory of the deceased; sometimes heroism or achievement in the arts
- Candlestick/Candelabrum/Menorah: usually on women's stones; women traditionally lit the candles in Jewish homes.
- Hands: ancient symbol of the kohanim/priests; men only; sign of priestly blessings
- Pitcher: symbol of the Levite; males only; assisted priests in holy tasks
- Eternal flame: modern symbol of lasting memory, knowledge, wisdom, faithfulness
- Torah scroll or book: wisdom, knowledge
- Charity box (*Tzedakah*): generosity, helpfulness
- Lions: tribe of Judah
- Tree stump: life ending too soon
- Draped urn: grief
- Lamb: lying down and indicating a child
- Tree of life



Finding Jewish Cemeteries

- Start with Find a Grave (<https://www.findagrave.com/>)
- Check genealogy societies in locations in which you have interest.
- Use JewishGen's Worldwide Online Burial Registry (<https://www.jewishgen.org/databases/cemetery/>)
- For cemeteries vandalized in Europe, use Google to find information.

Additional Resources

A Field Guide to Visiting a Jewish Cemetery, by Rabbi Joshua L. Segal, 2nd edition, Kearney, Nebraska: Morris Publishing Co., 2006.

Jewish Ancestors? A Guide to Reading Hebrew Inscriptions and Documents, by Rosemary Wenzel, Jewish Genealogical Society of Great Britain, Oxford, England: Alden Group Ltd., 2005.

"Reading Hebrew Tombstones," JewishGen,

https://www.jewishgen.org/infofiles/tombstones.html?fbclid=IwAR3TNUoWJuyajWelvboROyCXptoj6ZLWGBvr4cn5t5gIKNMmJt_vyPAO8oA&gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=8107643231&gbr aid=0AAAAAC-GlxkyVPGKmVmhxvP5SvrkQD-qK&gclid=CjwKCAjwvO7CBhAqEiwA9q2YJfHrResbcdLSEQ47g-Oy4t20Jf5elcluferA172ro-UZ9qg4GXH4gBoCMpwQAvD_BwE

“The Complete Visual Guide to Jewish Headstones,” by Harlan Landes, 6 January 2018, Cousinist: Family Tree and Genealogy, <https://cousinist.com/complete-visual-guide-jewish-headstones/>

“Landsmanschaftn,” Courtesy of the Ackman and Ziff Family Genealogy Institute, Center for Jewish History, <https://www.cjh.org/pdfs/Landsmanschaftn.pdf>

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