

Introduction

What is the purpose of a cemetery? Cemeteries are mini-museums. Of course, a cemetery is a place that is a repository for human remains, and a place to memorialize those buried in them. But they have also become a *de facto* museum of a very special type of art in the form of cemetery monuments.

The name of the memorial to the Holocaust in Jerusalem is *Yad Vashem* (Isaiah 56:5, *inter alia*) often translated "a memorial and a name", but literally, "*Yad Vashem*" translates to "a hand and a name". The "name" part on most cemetery monuments is simple. Consider the monument that follows: The name part is: Mitchell Rubin, Born: 1916 Died: 1997.

To understand the "*yad*" part, (i.e. "hand" or "memorial") we look to the Psalms which state: "establish the work of our hands (Psalms 90:17)." On some level for the monument to be a memorial it needs to communicate something about "the work of our hands", specifically who was the person behind the name? And that is what is missing from the monument below:



Adath Israel, Massena, NY

This book is intended for many audiences including the following:

1. If you are contemplating your own mortality and are thinking about how you want to be remembered by a passerby in another 100 years, Section 1 of this book will give you a road map to design your own monument that will provide a meaningful memorial and perhaps, even be written about! Appendix A provides a "monument designer's checklist." What's more, Section 2 will give you an idea of what to be careful of, the importance of editing and the uncontrollable coincidences that one can't plan for. Section 3 is a combination of a summary, exceptions and things that just didn't fit into the earlier sections.

2. If you are in the position of designing a monument for someone else and recognize that this is more than a perfunctory responsibility, this book will allow you to transform a "*Shem* (a name)" into a "*Yad Vashem* (a memorial)."

3. If you are a cemetery hobbyist, the kind of person whose car would be equipped with the bumper sticker, "I Brake for Old Graveyards," this book is for you. But I suspect for that kind of person, any book on cemeteries would do!

4. And if you are the type of person who just enjoys funny things, Section 2 will offer you humorous sayings, iconography and errors, in a context in which you might not have expected to find humor.

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Monuments (Hebrew: *Ma-tsei-vah* – מצבה) are a custom, not a requirement of Jewish law. Some suggest that the

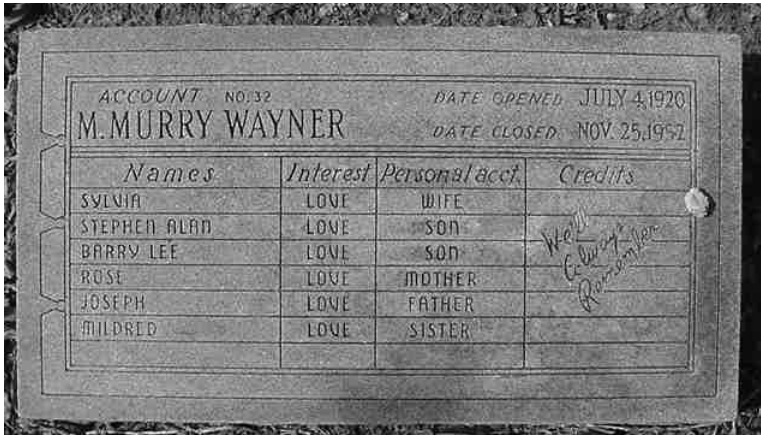
practice was begun by Jacob, when he set up a pillar on Rachel's grave (Genesis 35:20). Many reasons are offered for the placing of a monument, but the most common is to mark the spot for future visits by friends and relatives of the deceased.

The subtitle of this book, "Ordinary and Unusual Jewish Cemetery Monuments and How to Create Them" might cause some a problem citing Psalm 49¹ and other sources which suggest that we are all equal in death. By this standard, all monuments should be the same or similar. And there are certain cemeteries whose rules encourage and even enforce this kind of conformity. The truth of the matter is that Jewish cemeteries from Orthodox to the most liberal have monuments that include inscriptions of every imaginable length, monuments of every imaginable size and artwork from minimal iconography to museum quality art.

The next few examples in this chapter are offered to help provide a context, the breadth of opportunities that people have taken to assure themselves a "*Yad Vashem*," a lasting memorial.

Many monuments give us no insight into the person buried there, beyond name, dates and a standard epitaph. The photo below is an example where the person symbolically lays out his tombstone as a ledger page with the names of his survivors in the ledger!

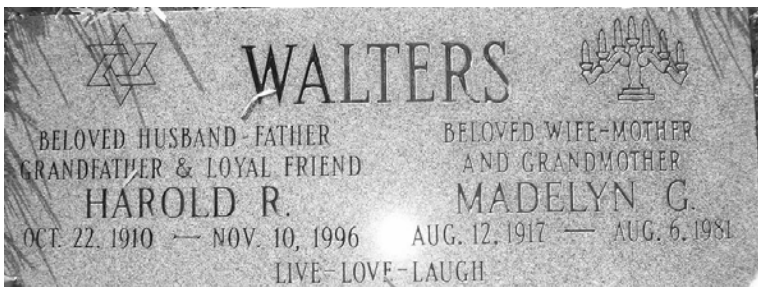
¹ Psalm 49:18 For when he dies he shall carry nothing away; his glory shall not go down after him.



Mt. Nebo, Miami, FL

Occasionally someone will take the time to write something extensive. Sometimes, it is a description of the individual's accomplishments, sometimes it is about the individual's survivors, and sometimes it is a quote from the Bible or other literature giving us insight into the person and the person's life.

The following tombstone includes the epitaph: *LIVE-LOVE-LAUGH*. The epitaph may be based on the song, "When the Red, Red, Robin Comes Bob, Bob Bobbin' Along" written by Harry Woods which includes the words, "Live, love, laugh...".



Star of David, Fort Lauderdale, FL

There are very few inscriptions that truly generate a belly laugh. But in a world where so many of our lives are given meaning by our families and friends, career and *mitsvot*, there is something special about those inscriptions that go in a different direction.

I was going to suggest that cemetery studies are not "rocket science" but then I found the following with a picture of the space shuttle in the lower left:



Emanu El, San Bernardino, CA

Perhaps he worked on the Space Shuttle and/or he saw the shuttle as his personal conveyance to his heavenly home (the *o-lam ha-ba*).

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One observation that I've made is that tombstones that are intentionally funny are relatively recent and are becoming more common. Perhaps it is a reflection that our society and our standard of living have made life so much more pleasant than ever before. Therefore, we are willing to reflect on the deceased with an appreciation that they had good lives. And when visiting the cemetery, the use of humor allows us to keep the focus on the upbeat aspects of the lives we are remembering.

