

ISRAEL



Mount of Olives, Israel

David Betesh

I've traveled to Israel four times in my life and each time I make it a point to visit the Mount of Olives. The trip to Israel for me would be incomplete if not for my pilgrimage to this holy place.

The Mount of Olives (Har HaZeitim) is a mountain range named for the large olive trees on the sides of the mountains. It is located in eastern Jerusalem—not the safest location in the world. This location is very holy and is adjacent to the Temple Mount, the former site of the Beit Hamikdash, and the current site of the Dome of the Rock, a site holy to Islam.

This mountain is the location of one of the world's largest Jewish cemeteries. Jews have always wanted to be buried on the mountain

because it is written in the Book of Zechariah that the Mount of Olives is identified as the place from which G-d will begin to redeem the dead at the end of days. According to our tradition, those whom are buried there will be the first to be resurrected when the proper time comes. Today there are an estimated 150,000 graves on the Mount, including those of many famous figures such as Zechariah, who prophesied there; Yad Abshalom, David's rebellious son who was killed there; and a host of great Jewish people from the 15th century until today. Among them is my great grandfather and my role model, Hazzan Gabriel A. Shrem, who has been buried there since his passing in August of 1986. Within a few meters

of his grave is his first cousin, Gabriel A. Chehebar; other family members; his friends Joseph E. Sitt, Mr. Mark and "Grandma" Sarah Benun; and the great Torah Sages, the Or HaHayim (Hayim Ben Atar) and the Ben Ish Hai.

It makes me very proud to see that our community has many plots and graves in this specific area of the mountain. Other notable people buried there include: Nachmanides (the Ramban), Rabbi Avigdor Miller, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, Eliezer Ben Yehuda (who established modern Hebrew) and Hebrew writer Shai Agnon. The reason why I know that all of these graves are located on this mountain is because

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*Ilan High School
Purim Chinese Auction*

*Tuesday evening, March 11
Wednesday, March 12*

HOSTED BY

Joy and Elliott Mahara

911 EAST 9TH STREET

(CORNER OF AVENUE 1)

Tuesday evening, March 11 AT 8:00 P.M.

WINE AND COCKTAILS FOLLOWED BY OUR GUEST SPEAKER

RABBI ELI MANSOUR

Wednesday, March 12

DOORS OPEN AT 11:00 A.M.

GUEST SPEAKER

RABBI SHLOMO DIAMOND AT 1:00 P.M.

Sterling Silver Megillah Raffle

ADVANCE TICKET SALES 732•663•1150

LIGHT LUNCH

VALET PARKING

WRITER'S THOUGHTS

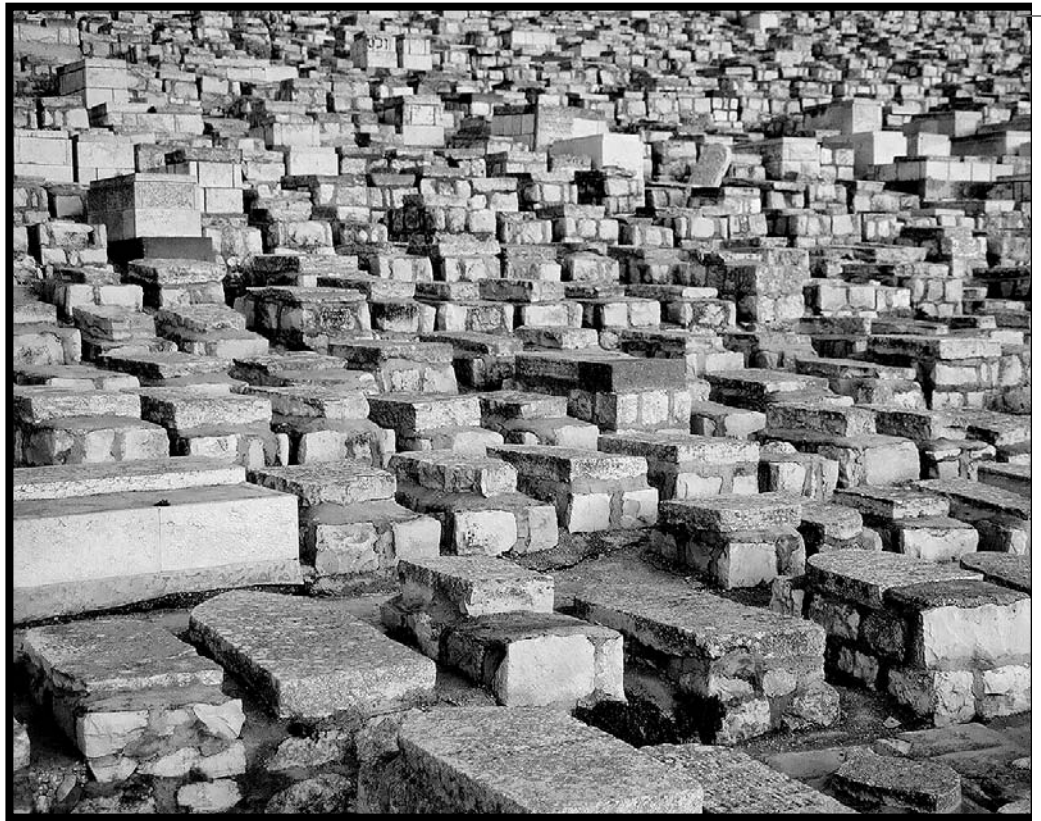
Mount...*Continued from page 230*

it took me four hours on a hot July morning to find my grandfather's grave! In order to find what you are looking for in this cemetery, you need a very detailed map or an experienced guide. While looking around, I even stumbled into some "Betesh" last names from the 1500-1600s on some broken-up tombstones on the floor.

This mountain range has four summits or peaks: (1) the "Galilee" peak, (2) the "Mount of Ascension" (it is called this because some Christians believe that this is the site of Jesus's ascension); (3) the "Prophets' Tombs" (Yad Abshalom and Zecharia's tomb) and (4) the "Mount of Corruption."

King David ran though here when escaping Jerusalem from his son's rebellion, and it is here that Roman soldiers from the 10th Legion camped during the Siege of Jerusalem in the year 70 CE, which led to the destruction of the city.

Unfortunately, the location was lost from the new State of Israel in 1948 and this had a heavy price. Major damage was suffered while the Mount was controlled by Jordan between 1948 and 1967, with Jordanians using the gravestones from the cemetery for construction of roads and army latrines, including gravestones from millennia-old



Jewish gravestones are sprawled along the mountainside

graves. The late King Hussein permitted the construction of the Intercontinental Hotel at the peak of the Mount of Olives together with a road that cut through the cemetery which destroyed hundreds of Jewish graves, some of which were from the time of the First Temple. Some 50,000 Jewish graves out of a total 70,000 were destroyed or defaced during the 19 years of Jordanian Arab rule. After the Six-Day War, the Israelis painstakingly repatriated as many of the surviving gravestones as possible. Today the situation seems to be where we want it to be. Israeli watchguards are constantly supervising, maintaining and watching the cemetery, and are even assisting visitors find the appropriate tombstones. Status quo is acceptable but it will be difficult to maintain.

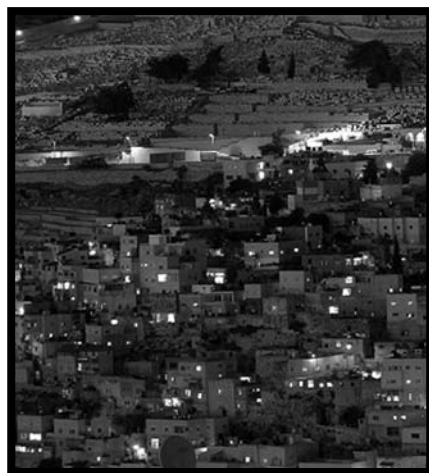
History repeats itself. The reason why I am writing is because I am scared that I will not be able to visit this holy site and other holy sites of the West Bank in the future. As we watch the Israeli government talk "peace" with the Palestinian Authority, our Prime Minister, under great pressure from the United States, has no problem giving portions of Jerusalem to the Palestinian Authority. The Mount of Olives, the

location of this holy cemetery, would be on the dangerous border of this terrorist entity, not allowing us to safely visit our loved ones without fearing for our lives. This already happened to us when the Palestinians destroyed the Tomb of Joseph in Nablus, a holy place revered by the Jews, where we can no longer visit without bulletproof buses and trained bodyguards. It goes without saying that the Palestinian Arabs have no respect for anything Jewish, as we can see by watching them trash and discard ancient Jewish artifacts dating from the First and Second Temples on the Temple Mount.

I hope that I am wrong, but it is not far fetched to imagine the Israelis giving away the Mount of Olives to the Palestinians.

I am suggesting that members of our community get more vocal in their opposition to giving back unnecessary concessions in the West Bank, and especially the Holy City of Jerusalem. □

David Betesh, a contributing writer of the IMAGE, is the President of the Sephardic Pizmonim Project and is a student at Tufts University School of Dental Medicine. You can read his past IMAGE articles on www.pizmonim.com.



Mount of Olives at night