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A TALK WITH MATTHEW GOULD, BRITAIN'S FIRST JEWISH AMBASSADOR TO ISRAEL | CHAZZAN MOSHE KRAUS, THE BOY WHO SANG FOR THE MINCHAS ELAZAR

Mishpacha מישפחה JEWISH FAMILY WEEKLY

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HAR HAZEISIM

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Eternal Unrest

An Uphill Battle to Preserve Har HaZeisim

Forty-three years after Jews around the world were horrified by Jordan's extensive desecration of the ancient cemetery on Har HaZeisim (the Mount of Olives), the damage at the burial ground of prophets, rabbis, chassidic masters, and thousands of ordinary Jews has yet to be fully corrected.

Can a coalition of religious and secular Israelis and Americans prod the government to restore Har HaZeisim to its former glory?



No way to treat a national treasure: Rabbi Chaim Wasserman among broken gravestones on Har HaZeisim

Avi Friedman

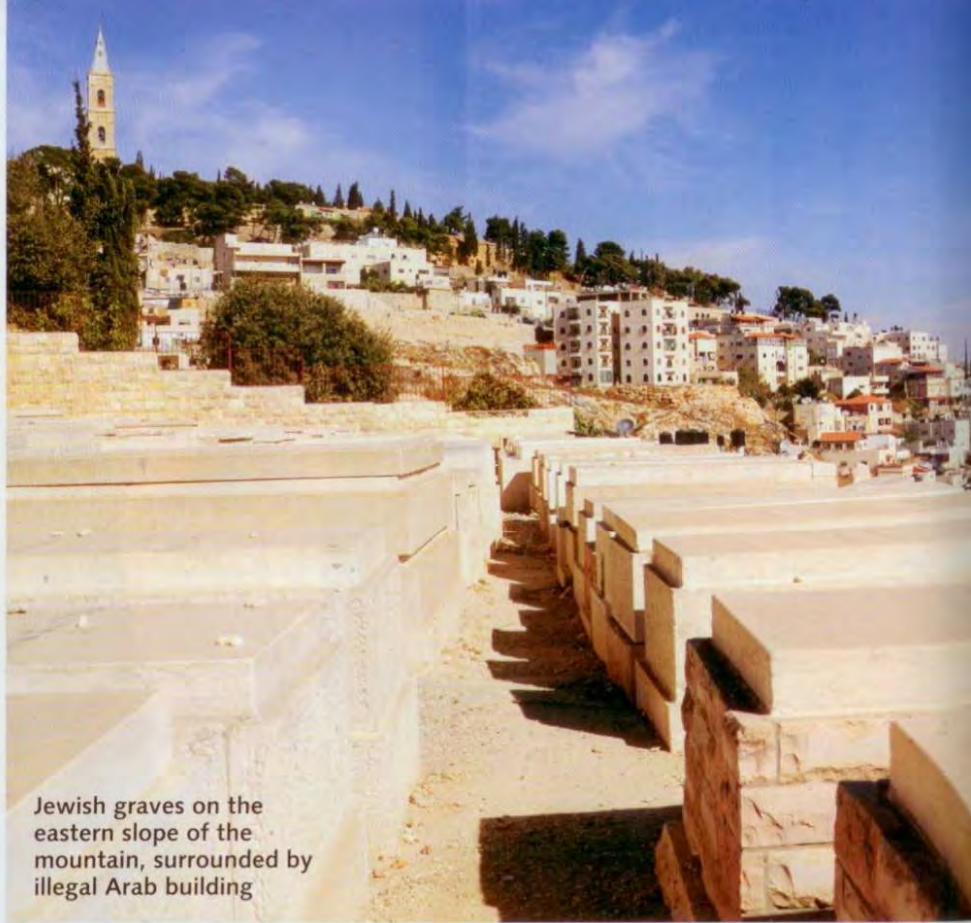
photos: Yinon Fuchs, Moshe Gershbaum

It would be wrong to call Avi, a nonreligious Israeli man in his thirties, a crusader for the restoration of Har HaZeisim. An interior designer and theater set designer by trade, he says he is not politically involved at all, but his eyes go black when talking about the state of the ancient Jewish cemetery.

"It's the most unbelievable thing I've ever seen," he said. "I was there with my family for a memorial service for my grandmother a couple of months ago, but when we arrived the headstone was broken and there was garbage strewn all over the place. Friends told us to get a security guard to accompany us up there because there have been a lot of riots in the area, and that worked out okay, but it made me sad and really angry.

Why in the world do we need security to pay our respects to my *savta*?"

Avi's story is hardly unique, and hardly new. The desecration of Jewish graves on Har HaZeisim (the Mount of Olives) made international headlines in June 1967 when the extent of Jordanian destruction at the site became apparent — 38,000 tombstones used to pave roads and latrines for the Arab Legion; open graves with bones scattered everywhere; an asphalt road running through the middle of the cemetery, trampling thousands of graves; and a parking lot and a gas station. At the top of the hill stood the five-star Intercontinental Hotel, and Jordan's official caretaker of the site, Sadar Khalil, "took care" of the site by using gravestones to build his home on the grounds of the cemetery.



Jewish graves on the eastern slope of the mountain, surrounded by illegal Arab building



But four and a half decades later, the situation in some parts of the cemetery has barely improved. There is no fence to keep out vandals, or security cameras to catch them in the act; illegal Arab housing rings the mountain on land technically zoned as cemetery land intended to ensure future Jewish burials; and animals have been seen traipsing freely over graves. Jewish mourners are regularly attacked on the way to or from funerals or memorial services, and at night, Jewish residents of the nearby Maaleh Zeitim community say local delinquents use the cemetery for illicit purposes. They claim that Jerusalem police have little interest in prosecuting the vandals.

Construction Freeze? Standing on the eastern slope of the mountain looking out at the Jordanian hills in the distance, Aryeh King points out the a-Shayich neighborhood, built illegally on cemetery land. He says building projects like this have sprouted up here on a near-constant basis for years. Since moving here in 1997, King has dedicated his time to documenting the vandalism and encroachment on Har HaZeisim, and to raising public consciousness about the site.

“This entire area was originally slated for the expansion of the cemetery, but buildings have appeared here continuously,” said King, a resident of the Jewish community in nearby Ras al-Amud and the director of the Israel Land Fund. “But the government refuses to put a stop to it. See that apartment building over there? How can you build a six-story building without proper building

“The state of the cemetery today is appalling. It is a disgrace for the Jewish People and for the State of Israel”

— Menachem Lubinsky



felt something hard beneath my feet. I dug a little bit and found a grave that turned out to belong to a previously unknown section of the cemetery, used mainly by Syria's Halabi community until 1886.

“It hadn't been cleaned since then, so I lit a fire there to clear the wild bushes and weeds there — some of them were taller than me — and I discovered a section that many of Jerusalem's top experts hadn't known about.”

Ups, Downs, and Neglect In order to combat the neglect and to restore the ancient cemetery to its former glory, a group of Israeli and American activists have joined together to press Israeli officials to declare the restoration of Har HaZeisim a national priority. Since the Six Day War, Israeli governments have passed a litany of decisions regarding upkeep at the holy site, but little has been accomplished on the ground. One activist, sixty-one-year-old Menachem Lubinsky, says the neglect there has made the site “unmanageable” and adds that Jews around the world must act to press Israeli officials to take control of the situation.

“I've been visiting Har HaZeisim for twenty-five years, since my father was buried there in 1985,” says Lubinsky, the head of the International Committee for the Preservation of Har HaZeisim and president of Lubicom Marketing and Consulting. “I've seen ups and downs, including two intifadas, but the derelict state of the cemetery today is appalling.

The cemetery is divided among various *chevra kadishas*, and there is no individual minister who is responsible for maintaining security and the overall condition of the place. That creates a kind of ping-pong between various ministries and government bodies, all of whom are responsible for one cog in the machine, but none of whom have the authority to oversee a total overhaul of the situation. The only thing I can say about it is that it is a disgrace — a disgrace for the Jewish People and for the State of Israel.”

Lubinsky is not alone in his criticism

of the government's lack of action on the mountain. Last May, Israel's state comptroller Micha Lindenstrauss issued a scathing report blasting the neglect at the cemetery, saying in part, “The restoration of the ancient cemetery continues at a snail's pace. The level of upkeep [at the cemetery] is insufficient, security is poor, and vandalism and criminal acts continue to occur. There is a concern that if security is not increased, the money already invested there will go down the drain.”

Government Lobby As part of the effort to lobby the Israeli government on behalf of Har HaZeisim, Lubinsky, Shlomo Mostofsky (president of the National Council of Young Israel), and Malcolm Hoenlein (executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations), have enlisted support from a variety of religious and secular Knesset members and government ministers, including Deputy Knesset Speaker Danny Danon; MK Yoel Hasson; and MK Rabbi Moshe Gafni, chairman of the Knesset Finance Committee, all of whom have pledged to keep the issue in the public eye.

Lubinsky and Hoenlein also met with Prime Minister Netanyahu last July in order to show photographs and other evidence of the cemetery destruction, and to prod the government to take concrete steps to improve the situation. Lubinsky came away from that meeting with mixed feelings. On one hand, he said the prime minister was “pretty disengaged” and felt Netanyahu lacked understanding of the crucial significance of the issues at hand on the mountain. But he also said Netanyahu was eventually receptive to their call for action.

“He said he had no idea that the condition of Har HaZeisim was so bad. It really seemed to pull at his heartstrings, and he pledged to do something about it,” said Lubinsky.

Those efforts have yet to bear fruit on the ground, but Lubinsky says there are definite signs that things will improve soon. He points to the State Comptroller's Report for 2010, which says 84 million shekels has been earmarked for the cemetery restoration and allocated to the Jerusalem Development Authority to get the ball rolling, and says there are concrete plans to install 200 security cameras around the cemetery by February to discourage vandals. Police



Shlomo Mostofsky, Aryeh King and Rabbi Sholom Gold survey the damage



A small attempt to rectify the damage

permits? But they did it, and the government signed off on the building in 2004. The Supreme Court ratified that decision in October 2010.”

As we make our way around the Yemenite section of the cemetery, it is clear that Mr. King is familiar with every headstone, road, staircase, and speck of dirt. It is a knowledge borne of years of exploration, observation, and dedication to preserving the unique tradition of the area.

“One day in 1997, I was standing ‘outside’ the Jewish cemetery here when I

have also promised to dedicate a rapid response team to the area to improve security.

Still, those plans fall short of activists' desire for an individual overseer for the restoration project. Part of the reason the site looks the way it does is that it falls between the cracks of several different government agencies. The Ministry of Religious Services is responsible for upkeep of cemeteries, but the Housing and Construction Ministry would have to build a security fence around the cemetery, and the Ministry of Internal Security and Jerusalem municipality are also involved.

To facilitate the restoration plan, Hoenlein, Lubinsky, Danny Danon, and others have asked the prime minister to appoint a government minister or civilian professional to administer the project.

"The situation at Har HaZeisim stems from the fact that there is no individual in charge of the project," says Danny Danon. "I have asked the prime minister to appoint someone with the authority to see this project through to the end, and he was receptive to the idea."

To date, however, the prime minister has shown no signs of making such an appointment, nor does he appear disposed to do so in the near future. Spokesmen for the prime minister twice declined to answer e-mail questions about Israel's history of neglect at the site, or whether a Har HaZeisim "czar" will be appointed to take responsibility for the project.

Defining Success Committee members say their initial efforts have been successful. Menachem Lubinsky says that while things aren't moving as fast as he would like to see, the glass is definitely more than half-full.

"I'm optimistic about some things, less so about others. I believe the Development Authority will eventually install 200 security cameras around the cemetery, plus a monitoring station. The cameras have worked well in other places, like the City of David, and we're hopeful it will work well here, too. It was supposed to be finished by now, they are talking about February now, but it'll get done. There's been a lot of red tape to wade through. The police are on board to provide a rapid response team, to respond to security or vandalism efforts as well."

Shlomo Mostofsky, who also serves on the Committee for the Preservation of Har HaZeitim, told *Mishpacha* he measures success by the fact that the issue has gotten into the public realm, and that the grassroots effort is obviously having an impact.



Tehillim at the *kever* of Rav Ovadia MiBartenura (above), surrounded by garbage and refuse (below)



"Take Danny Danon," said Mostofsky. "Before we contacted him, Har HaZeisim wasn't really on his radar screen. But by the time I managed to set up a meeting last June to tell him what we knew and to ask for his help, he told me things about Har HaZeisim that the committee didn't know. So here I was, a nonconstituent trying to pique his interest in an issue I had no idea he would care about, and he did his homework before meeting with me. That was really impressive."

Mostofsky also points to the official launch function the committee held at the Jerusalem Great Synagogue in early November. The event drew 1,100 people and inspired people to return to the cemetery, sometimes after years had gone by.



“A friend in Efrat told us that her grandmother is buried on Har HaZeisim but that her mother hadn’t gone in years because she was afraid,” said Mostofsky. “After our launch event, my friend and her husband made plans to check out the *matzeivah*, fix it if necessary and have her mother come to the *kever* for the first time in years. If that’s not a success, I don’t know what is.”

Victim of Realpolitik? One possible explanation for Netanyahu’s lack of action at Har HaZeisim (and his refusal to answer questions on the topic) is a possible clash that a major restoration project would likely cause with both US president Barack Obama and the Palestinian Authority, given the cemetery’s location in “disputed” eastern Jerusalem. Activists like Aryeh King say thousands of homes have been illegally built on cemetery land since 1967, and two recent court decisions appear not only to have confirmed the State’s intent not to remove Arab residents from their homes, but also to pave the way for more building.

Professor Eytan Gilboa, director of the Center for International Communication and an expert in US–Israel relations at the BESA Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University, said if the issue at hand

were strictly a cemetery restoration project, no one in the American administration or the international community would object, but he called into question the motives of people like Aryeh King and others who are fighting the battle on the Israeli side.

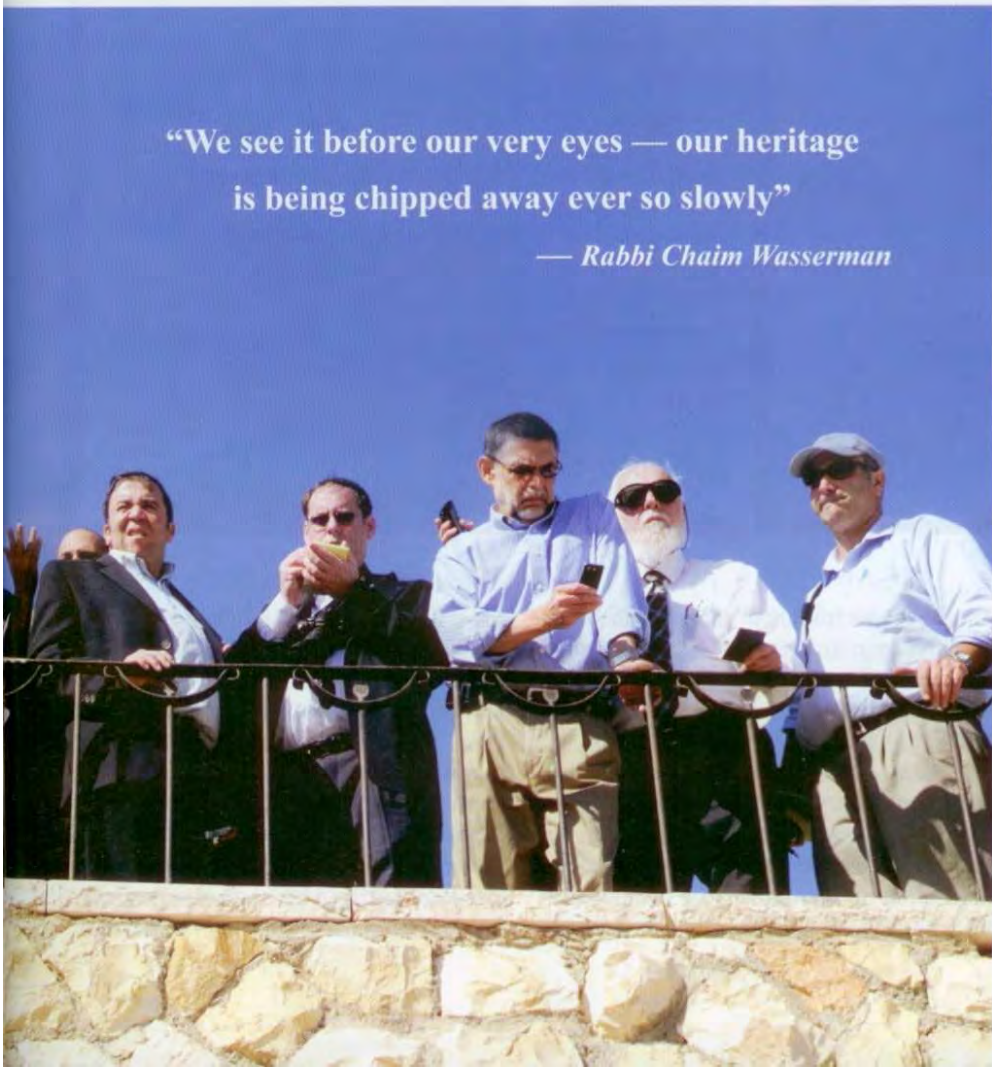
“I don’t think anyone at all would object to a restoration project to improve the situation at such an important Jewish site,” said Gilboa. “No one considers paying respect for the dead controversial, and I don’t think such a project would make waves for Bibi with the Americans.”

Still, Gilboa said that American and international observers would draw a sharp distinction between a cemetery restoration project and efforts to expand Israel’s residential presence in the area.

“There’s a difference between the ancient cemetery — I’ve got relatives buried there, as do so many Israelis, and we had to fix them up when we visited the site just after the Six Day War, so I’m certainly not oblivious or insensitive to this issue — but you’ve got to distinguish between the ancient cemetery and areas slated for future Jewish burials. I suspect that Jewish groups in the area have another agenda here, to uproot Arab housing in the area, and that they are using the Har HaZeisim issue as an excuse. It won’t work,” said Gilboa.

“We see it before our very eyes — our heritage
is being chipped away ever so slowly”

— Rabbi Chaim Wasserman



HAR HAZEISIM:

A Virtual Tour

Har HaZeisim has a rich history and holds tremendous significance for Jews. It is mentioned in the Navi's narrative of King David's escape from his rebellious son Avshalom, and referred to by the prophets Yechezkel and Zecharia. The *parah adumah* (red heifer) was burned on Har HaZeisim. Burial on Har HaZeisim is considered auspicious, and is said to spare the deceased from several forms of suffering after burial. When the dead come back to life at the End of Days, the process will begin on Har HaZeisim.

Jewish burial in the general area of Har HaZeisim — more specifically, the area of neighboring Silwan — goes back to the era of the First Beis HaMikdash. In earlier times, burials were carried out on the western flank of the Kidron Valley, but those graves have disappeared due to the ravages of time. For many centuries, a lack of Jewish presence in Eretz Yisrael, and specifically in Jerusalem, made for few Jewish graves on the mountain. With the modern Jewish settlement of Jerusalem by the disciples of the Vilna Gaon in the early 1800s, Har HaZeisim began to reclaim its former status as the desirable burial spot for Jews.

Between 1948 and 1967, when Jordanians controlled the area, Jerusalemites would bury their dead in the cemeteries of Sanhedria, Sheikh Badr, and Har HaMenuchos. After the Six Day War, they returned to find the mountainside in shambles. Graves had been desecrated and bones scattered. Those bones were collected and buried in a mass grave.

Har HaZeisim currently contains about twelve Jewish cemeteries, with tens of thousands of graves.

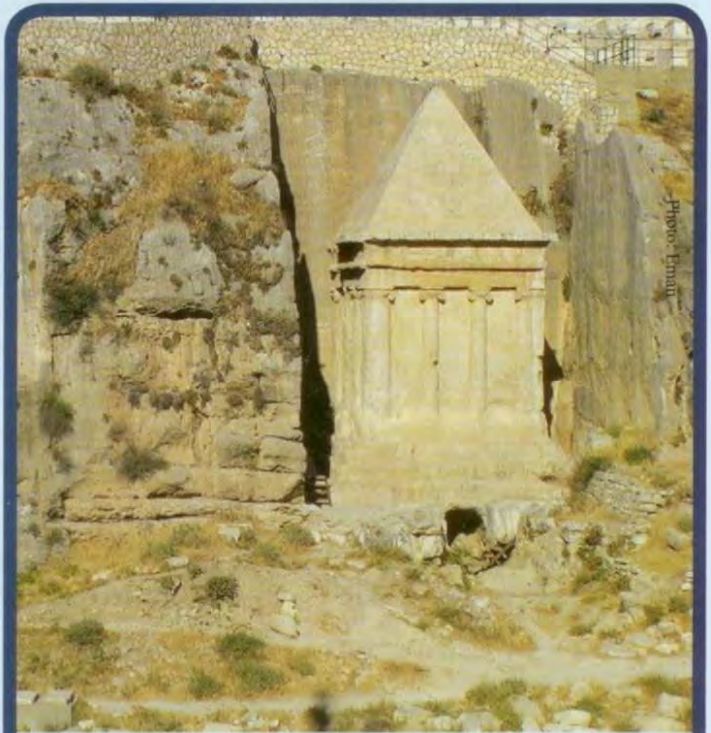
The oldest of the mountain's four major cemeteries is the ancient Sephardic cemetery, which was used for all of Jerusalem's Jews from as early as the fourteenth century until 1856, after which it was used almost exclusively for Sephardic Jews. The Ohr HaChaim is buried here, along with Rav Shalom Sharabi.

The year 1856 saw the founding of two new cemeteries: the Perushim cemetery, founded by students of the Vilna Gaon; and the chassidic cemetery, use by chassidim of many different courts.

The general *chevra kadisha* opened its own cemetery in 1939. This cemetery holds the remains of many famous personalities of the State's early days, such as Shai Agnon, and *rabbanim* such as Chief Rabbi Yehuda Unterman.

Eight other cemeteries hold the remains of smaller Sephardic communities.

Mishpacha thanks Rabbi Yisrael Gellis for his enlightening tour of Har Hazeisim



KEVER ZECHARIAH This is a huge monument, close to 43 feet (13 meters) tall. It is estimated to date back to the time of the Second Beis HaMikdash. Legend has it that it is the burial place of the prophet Zechariah, who was killed by angry masses and whose blood boiled in the courtyard of the Beis HaMikdash.

Jews began burying their dead in the area of this monument as early as the seventeenth century, and would spend Tisha B'Av evening there, mourning the Churban. They also prayed there for rain when faced with severe drought.

None of the historic gravestones are visible today, because in 1961, the Jordanian authorities permitted archaeologists to uproot all the graves. The ruins still lie scattered around the monument. Despite the desecration, the dedicated work of Rav Asher Leib MiBrisk, who painstakingly documented all the graves, affords us a precise record of all those buried there. In 1900 he recorded the epitaphs on 800 graves. Later, archaeological work unearthed older graves that were not recorded by Rav Asher Leib. Some of those buried in this area include Rav Moshe of Lelov and Rav Avraham ben David Yitzchaki, an early Rishon L'Tzion.

Braving the Crowds Perhaps the greatest danger to Har HaZeisim is the prevalent threat to mourners and tourists who visit the cemetery to pay their respects to past generations, or simply to pray at the site that accepted tradition says will mark the beginning of *techiyas hameisim*, the eventual revival of the dead that will herald the Messianic era. The day I visited the mountain, our tour bus was turned back by border police on the way out of the Old

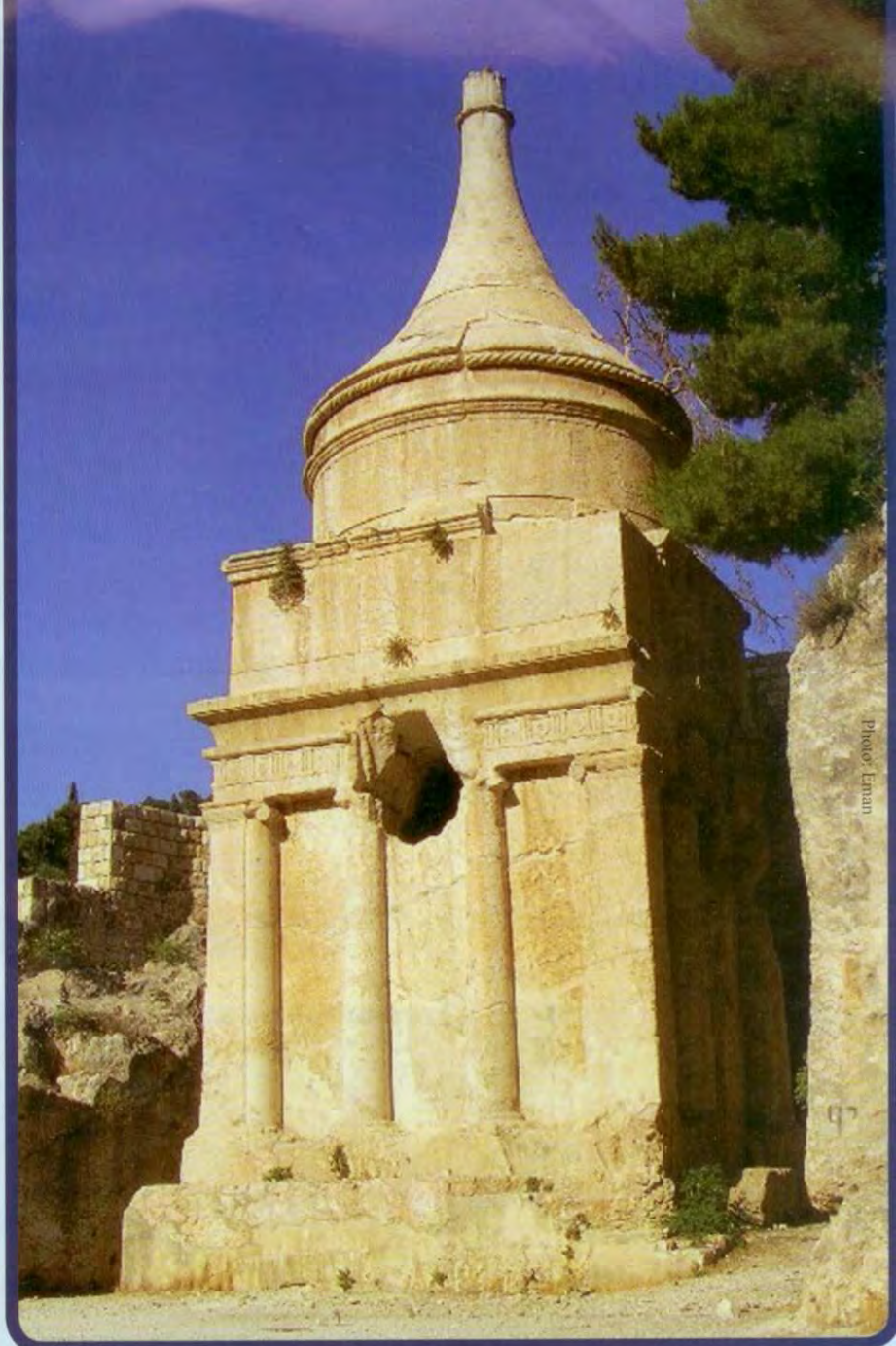
City, because security analysis showed the five-minute drive was simply too dangerous.

The bus driver ignored the warning and continued up the hill, but the warning was reasonable. Stonings and attacks are common, particularly as mourners make their way out of the cemetery and back towards the Old City and western Jerusalem. In September, the head of the Almagor Terror Victims Association and

his wife were nearly lynched by a mob of Arab youths who stoned the car while it was caught in traffic. Meir Indor, who was injured by a rock, told the *Jerusalem Post*, "I saw them organizing and I didn't know what to do. I just kept driving and kept praying, but there were no police," Indor said.

Indor's experience may have been extreme, but it is by no means isolated. Rabbi Yitzchak Shurin, *rosh midrashah*

KEVER BNEI CHAZIR This site marks the burial grounds of a wealthy family of Kohanim (actually named Bnei Chazir) dating back to the end of the Second Beis HaMikdash era. The lintel of the pillars is engraved with their names, originally deciphered in 1864 by a French researcher in tandem with a Jerusalemite *chacham* and completed during the British Mandate by a young archaeologist, later known as Professor Nachman Avigad. It lists the names of eleven Kohanim spanning five generations, all of whom were buried here.



YAD AVSHALOM Yad Avshalom is the popular name for a towering monument, about 66 feet (20 meters) tall, which also seems to date back to the era of the Second Beis HaMikdash. No one knows who built it, but for centuries it has been considered the gravesite of Avshalom, King David's rebellious son. Unlike Kever Zechariah, this area does not contain Jewish graves; apparently Jews did not want to bury their dead in proximity to someone infamous for his rebelliousness. There was a custom, however, to bring rebellious children to the monument and have them throw stones at it.

of Midreshet Rachel V'Chaya College of Jewish Studies for Women, says his car has been stoned several times while visiting his father's grave on Har HaZeisim.

The security situation leading up to the mountain has led the Jerusalem Development Authority to develop an on-call security detail to escort mourners and tourist to the site free of charge. But Menachem Lubinsky says the security

detail sends the wrong message to Jews, and to the world.

"First of all, it appears that the government is washing its hands of the security situation here, and by extension in the rest of the eastern half of the city. Second, it lets people know clearly that it isn't safe to come here. Nothing will discourage people from coming here faster than a security requirement."

Lubinsky says developments in

recent years — one police precinct near the Mount closed last year, and another border police checkpoint was removed — contribute to the problems, and he says the current proposals on the table are insufficient to provide overarching security for Jewish mourners.

"The cameras and rapid response teams will be a big improvement over what we've got now, but they aren't enough. We need a full-time police presence, with



Photo: Marunya

ME'ARAS YEHOSHAFAT This façade of this burial cave (to the left of Yad Avshalom) is famous for its detailed sculptures. Its exterior is embellished with carvings of leaves and fruits. Archaeologists estimate that it was built around the same time as Yad Avshalom, but unlike the Bnei Chazir gravesite, we do not know who was buried here. The legend is that this is the grave of Yehoshafat Melech Yehudah, who reigned during the time of the First Beis HaMikdash. Other legends have it that Uziyah spent his period of solitary confinement in this area after being stricken with *tzaraas*.

Until 1924, the façade was covered with a layer of dirt that obstructed the opening. After it was opened, Yitzchak ben Zvi (later Israel's second president) was permitted to visit. He described graves that seemed to date back to the nineteenth century.



THE GERRER ME'ARAH Two Gerrer Rebbes, the Beis Yisrael and the Lev Simchah, are buried in a cave hewn into the mountainside of Har HaZeisim. Tens of thousands flock to the site, which is generally locked, on their *yahrtzeits*.



THE CHEDER TAHARAH in the Perushim section of Har HaZeisim, now used as a storage room. In 1856, a wealthy woman named Rivkah Pollack, who had immigrated to Eretz Yisrael from Koenigsberg, bought the largest section of Har HaZeisim and donated it to the Chevra Kadisha of the Perushim, making it the first area on Har HaZeisim under control of Ashkenazim. Tens of thousands are now buried in this area. A stone in the upper left corner of the building (inset) memorializes her largesse.



a police station to provide security against violence and vandalism. There are signs that the police could take on that role as early as next March, but that remains to be seen," said Lubinsky. "We want a permanent police presence here to ensure security, to arrest vandals and to ensure that the Mount of Olives is accessible to all Jews, at all times."

National Scandal In order to keep the pressure on Netanyahu and the

government to make good on their promises to clean up Har HaZeisim, committee members say they will keep doing what they've been doing — writing letters, making phone calls, holding public events — in order to push Israeli officials to follow through on plans to refurbish the cemetery. Mr. Lubinsky said the project has even grown larger than the current government because "too many ministers and MKs have been energized to let this fail."

It's a claim that does little to calm the passion of Rabbi Chaim Wasserman, the president of the Council of Young Israel Rabbis and long-time *rav* of the Young Israel community in Passaic and Clifton, New Jersey. Four days after the visit to the site, Rabbi Wasserman's frustration at the sorry state of Har HaZeisim had not dimmed.

"Can you imagine? We had the opportunity to recite Tehillim at the grave of Rav Ovadia MiBartenura! It should



RABBANEI YERUSHALAYIM Two of the greatest *rabbanim* of Jerusalem were Rav Shmuel Salant and his successor, Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld. The latter was a disciple of Rav Avraham Shaag, with whom he emigrated from Hungary in 5633 (1873). Rav Shaag passed away within days of arriving in Eretz Yisrael.

Rav Salant's rounded tombstone (inset) was originally a pillar in the *Churvah* shul in the Old City of Jerusalem, upon which he would lean when studying Torah and deliberating *halachic* issues that were addressed to him.

The other round tombstone is that of Rav Meir Auerbach, the *Imrei Binah*, another great rabbinic authority in Jerusalem.



Some of the thousands of gravestones destroyed by the Arab Legion between 1948 and 1967. When Israel regained control of Har HaZeisim after the Six Day War, they erected this long grave out of the broken tombstones and reburied the bones found scattered on the mountain. An epitaph on another stone (inset) tells the sad story of the defilement and reburial.



Photo: Yisrael Malka / 24 news

BARDAKI FAMILY GRAVES Rav Yeshayah Bardaki was the son-in-law of Rabbi Yisrael of Shklov, one of the first disciples of the Gaon of Vilna to move to Eretz Yisrael, and the *chazzan* in Rav Yehudah HaChassid's shul.



have been a high point for everybody there, but the area around the *kever* is strewn with garbage. At one of the homes overlooking the site, a goat was walking around. It is scandalous, treacherous, and absolutely outrageous. I've been to the Mount of Olives several times, but never to these sections. I've heard through a third party that Benny Begin, the son of former prime minister Menachem Begin, has had to replace his father's headstone several times, but I'd never witnessed the situation for myself.

"What I cannot understand is how we can demand the world recognize and respect our heritage here and our claim to this land when we do not seem to respect it ourselves. Har HaZeisim is a national treasure, with the national treasures of the Jewish People — prophets, Zionist visionaries, Israeli leaders. Even if secular Israeli leaders don't care about the Torah leaders who are buried at Har HaZeisim, you would have thought that they would care a bit more about the

Zionist visionaries and Israeli statesmen who founded and led this country, people like Eliezer Ben Yehudah and Menachem Begin," he fumed.

Rabbi Wasserman is frustrated as he considers the future of Har HaZeisim should the government continue to neglect the holy site.

"We see it before our very eyes — our heritage is being chipped away ever so slowly." ■