

Halting Harassment at Har Hazeisim

CREATING EASIER AND SAFER ACCESS BY NESANEL GANTZ

The seriousness of thought, usually inspired by the serene tranquility of the air in Har Hazeisim, was shattered by the view of desecrated *kevarim* we had just passed by: The resting place of Yidden decades long gone, destroyed, never to be reassembled again—eternal unimaginable anguish.

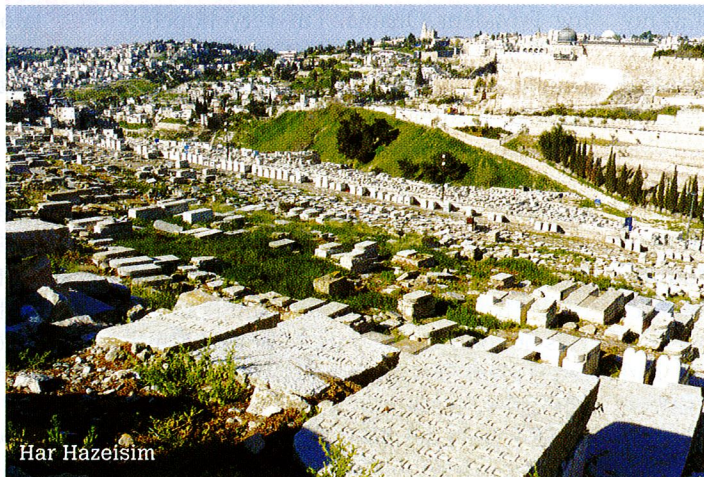
I wanted to find the burial place of my great-grandfather in Har Hazeisim (Mount Olives). We had been given approximate directions to the *kever*, yet it was difficult to pinpoint the exact location; we were lost. There is no GPS for *kevarim* nor is there a map where one can look up a loved one's final resting place in Har Hazeisim. I asked some of the passersby for help or guidance, and I was told the same thing several times, "Wait for the person."

"What person?" I wondered? Apparently, there were several people who walked around Har Hazeisim with profound knowledge of every single name of every *kever* in certain areas. Luckily, after 20 minutes, I had found my grandfather's *kever* before I could find "the man."

Interestingly, in the main *bais hachaim* (cemetery) in Bnei Brak, where Rav Shach, the Chazon Ish, the Steipler, and other *tzaddikim* are buried, I encountered the same dilemma, yet *there* I found the man who knew every *kever* in the whole cemetery (there are several hundred), and I was directed to where I needed to go. It is hoped that, by the end of 2012, there will be a GPS of sorts for Har Hazeisim.

Finding one of the over 140,000 *kevarim* on Har Hazeisim is fraught with difficulty and even danger. Since Israel regained control of the land in 1967, there has been a never-ending onslaught of damage to the *kevarim* and physical danger to the mourners as well. Avrohom Lubinsky, founder of the International Committee for the Preservation of Har Hazeisim, provided fascinating insights on how they are combating these evil-minded hooligans.

Mr. Lubinsky explains: "When Har Hazeisim was under Jordanian rule, from 1948 until 1967, over 40,000 *kevarim* were destroyed forever. A hotel was built over the burial places of



Har Hazeisim

Jews, and many tombstones were unfortunately used by the Arabs as either bricks or walkways in their new structures. It is impossible for us to undo the past, but our goal is to preserve Har Hazeisim as it is now *ad bias goel*."

The organization is in the final steps of putting up 167 security cameras throughout the cemetery, as well as establishing a police station solely dedicated to Har Hazeisim patrol. Working with the government, they hope to have 30 policemen on

patrol at all times. "In fact," continues Lubinsky, "Recently the attacks have gone down significantly, as a result of the increased detective presence; they know there is a great chance they are being watched and can get into trouble."

Recently, a dedicated team of individuals have begun strategically mapping every *kever* in Har Hazeisim. A labor-intensive task, the group has mapped nearly 50,000 *kevarim*. They hope to be finished by the end of next year. The surveyors use several sources for their information. They use any photographs available of Har Hazeisim, some dating back to the late 1800s. They are researching city ledgers and other sources where burial of the dead on Har Hazeisim is mentioned. This is besides the attempt to decipher the tombstone inscriptions; some tombstones are only fragments. Of the close to 150,000 *kevarim* on Har Hazeisim, only around 100,000 remain intact. While there are many Arabs and gentiles buried throughout Har Hazeisim, the organization is only attempting to categorize Jewish resting places. Interestingly, Har Hazeisim is one of the oldest cemeteries in existence still being used today. One of the oldest burial plots is that of Rav Ovadya of Bartenura, author of the acclaimed *peirush* (commentary) on Mishnayos. The goal of mapping the burial plots of the Jews of Har Hazeisim has political significance as well. By documenting the vast amount of Jewish presence on Har Hazeisim, they hope to show a Jewish claim to the area. The hope is that soon, Har Hazeisim will once again be a place of serene tranquility, with access to the cemetery and opportunities for undisturbed prayer.