

Feature

A Change for the Better on Har Hazeisim

Four years ago, the Lubinsky brothers of the United States reorganized the International Committee for the Preservation of Har Hazeisim. Joined by communal leaders, they decided to preserve the historic site, end the Arab vandalism of tombstones and make it safe for Jews to visit a cemetery that is 3,000 years old

BY BINYAMIN CHINKIS

A dead donkey on the *kever* of Rabbeinu Ovadya of Bartenura. Broken *matzeivos* paving a soccer field. Garbage strewn among the graves. Cement blocks thrown at those accompanying the dead to their final resting place.

Yes, this is what has been taking place for years on Har Hazeisim. The Arabs who live on the mountain desecrate the graves and harm Jews who come to visit the place where their parents and loved ones are buried. It's devastating and shocking — but almost no one cares.

This huge cemetery contains over 150,000 *kevarim*, dating back 3,000 years to the *Bayis Rishon* era. No other Jewish cemetery is as old. And it is still in use today.

Jewish history and heritage lie between the clods of its earth.

Intimidated and fearful, we avoid visiting there, and that invites further Arab desecration. It is a cycle that is only getting worse.

Three months ago, a little before Purim, a child in Yerushalayim tragically drowned in a bathtub. On Har Hazeisim, the *levayah* participants got a taste of the terror the Arabs sow on the mountain and the roads leading to it.

"The *levayah* was held on the day of the *petirah*, as is the custom," one participant related. "We had only a short time to reach the *kevarah* before *shkiah*. We were under pressure, but we hoped to arrive in time. We never imagined the nightmare it would become.

"The trip to the mountain took a long time because of the guards and the traffic jams in the area of the Old City. When we arrived at Har Hazeisim, we weren't able to enter with a vehicle. We took the aron and ran by foot to the grave site. Just six minutes before sunset, we man-

aged to conclude the burial.

"When we got up from shivah we went to set up a monument over the grave. Of course we came with guards. We were shocked to find, opposite the grave where we had just buried the child, a nearby *matzeivah* in pieces [and the grave itself] strewn with bags of garbage.

"It's impossible to let things go on like this. It's such a holy place. The Ohr Hachaim, the Rashash, Rabi Yehudah Hachassid and so many other revered people of our nation are buried here; how can they leave it *hefker*?"

"I have a personal interest now," the man admits, "but there is a clear Jewish interest here. It's important to preserve this place over the generations as the Jewish people's heritage."

This man turned to an activist working on behalf of the International Committee for the Preservation of Har Hazeisim. This is what the two Lubinsky brothers — founders and directors of the committee — said:

"Our parents are buried in the Kollel Polin section of Har Hazeisim. We would come for the *yahrtzeiten*, take a taxi, make sure the driver was legally equipped with a weapon for defense, go to the graves, pray, bring a minyan from the *chevrah haddisha* and say Kaddish, and leave. That's all we had to do with Har Hazeisim."

Things changed four years ago when then-State Comptroller Micha Lindenstrauss produced a thick report on governmental malfeasance. One of its main criticisms was the neglect of Har Hazeisim and the rampant vandalism there.

"After my brother Avrohom read the State Comptroller's Report, the lightbulb went on," says Menachem. "He felt that it was appalling that this was allowed to happen. What neglect and negligence! No caring for it, no allocating resources to it — total disregard! We decided that we had to take the matter into our own hands.

"So," Avrohom continues, "we decided to set up the International Committee for the Preservation of Har Hazeisim. We called on Agudath Israel, Young Israel, the Orthodox Union, etc., with the participation of Malcolm Hoenlein, deputy chairman of the Presidents' Conference, who is very influential.

"A month later, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu arrived in the U.S.," Menachem recalls. "Malcolm and I visited him in his hotel and told him about the neglect of Har



The Lubinsky brothers at Har Hazeisim.



Har Hazeisim breaks up Arab contiguity.

Hazeisim. He told Ron Dermer, his office director [today Israel's ambassador to the U.S.], to investigate what was happening on the mountain and find solutions for the problem."

Repairing *Matzeivos* and Increasing Security

At that time (it was in 2010) the government set aside NIS 80 million for repairing 20,000 *kevarim* on Har Hazeisim, 7,000 a year. Twenty-two thousand have been repaired so far, and 137 cameras have been installed, with a control room that documents vandalism and destruction occurring on the mountain.

"We discovered," says Menachem, "that if no police were in the area, the cameras were worthless. The documentation wasn't effective when there wasn't an immediate response. After the vandalism took place, nothing could be done. This is

why we pressured the government to set up a police station on the mountain. There had been one opposite the mountain, and barriers too, but they were removed for budgetary or political reasons. The situation deteriorated to the point that it became intolerable.

"Arab children on the way to school would step on the graves. A donkey's corpse was left on the *kever* of Rabbeinu Ovadya of Bartenura. Building contractors left their tools on the *kevarim*, and boys took *matzeivos* and used them for the floor of a soccer field.

"No Jew in the world should be able to accept this reality. This is the only ancient cemetery which is still in use, with 400 burials a year. We have to maintain it."

The brothers note with satisfaction that they recently managed to get magnates involved in preparing a new huge section in

Har Hazeisim which will have room for more than 6,000 graves.

The committee's activities increased awareness of the cemetery and improved the situation somewhat, but the desecration didn't end. Finally a police presence was established in two caravans, but it was phased out with time. The situation required 24 policemen guarding the place 24/7, but only one or two policemen were on site.

The Key Is Development

The committee sees security as of the utmost importance. But they are also interested in developing the mountain. The other side of the mountain is an active tourist compound — of Christians. "Everything is peaceful, accessible and orderly there. Tourism is flourishing," the committee heads said. "But by us — total negligence."



Vandalism on Har Hazeisim.

To deal with the range of problems and to encourage active involvement, the International Committee for the Preservation of Har Hazeisim has representatives in Israel. Jeff Daub, one of the heads of the committee in Israel, pulls out a series of photos.

"Look at all these illegal structures," he says, pointing at dense construction. "The Arab neighborhoods have sprouted, and they today surround Har Hazeisim and have turned it into a ghetto. Arab construction is spilling over everywhere."

"They don't want to vacate Har Hazeisim? Is that it?!" I am surprised, but it appears that I have stirred up a hornet's nest.

"Vacate it? They want to build on the graves! They want to build houses and neighborhoods on it!"

Jeff pulls out another picture. "Look, these buildings are constructed on graves," he says. "Over recent generations the Arabs have built on top of 40,000 graves! The Seven Arches Hotel they built when they ruled Yerushalayim is at the head of the mountain; part of its foundation was built over 20,000 Jewish graves."

"When we met with Netanyahu the first time," Menachem adds, "I told him that I visited [former Prime Minister Menachem] Begin's grave on Har Hazeisim. I described the filth and neglect there. 'I can assure you,' I told him, 'that there's no prime minister in the world whose grave suffers from such conditions.'"

To add insult to injury, it turns out that instead of overlooking Har Habayis, Begin "merited" that his grave overlook an illegal mosque whose construction was just completed.

It Bothers All Jews

The committee members have organized meetings in Israel, one of which took place this past week when the Lubinskys visited Israel for discussions with Ministry of the Interior and other public figures. Unfortunately, the kidnapping of the three boys that gripped the country during this time prevented the official meetings and they were held in a smaller, informal setting instead.

"Over the years we met with half the Knesset members," the brothers say. "No one is against maintaining and protecting Har Hazeisim. Right, left or center, every Jew has someone buried on the mountain, or some sentiment toward it."

The committee is now working toward a state-of-the-art information center, to include a shul named after the holy Ohr Hachaim. The government has appropriated NIS 10 million to put up the skeleton of the building on the mountain compound, and the committee has committed itself to fixing it up and funding the rest of the construction.

"We hope to reach a situation where Jews can visit the Information Center and get all the information they want about



It is hoped that the beefed up police presence will prevent such destruction.

the tens of thousands of graves on the mountain, and can take part in a moving 'journey' covering 3,000-plus years. Har Hazeisim can become an important tourist destination that will give the visitor insight into our roots."

The heads of the committee mention a number of activities and requests which they are presently working on:

Penal Punishment

Thirty-one American states stipulate prison sentences of several days for desecrating a cemetery. In New York, the law mandates up to four years of prison time for cemetery desecration; in Ohio, seven years. There is no reason why Israel shouldn't impose a jail term on those who vandalize graves and monuments.

A law initiated by the committee that passed with a large majority in Congress stipulates that failing to maintain the honor of a cemetery is a substantive violation of human rights. Not only do the living have rights, but also the dead.

According to the new law, the United States will cut back economic aid to any country that does not maintain its American cemeteries.

"The law passed with a large majority in Congress," says Avraham, "and it is expected to pass in the Senate as well. We Jews taught the world the importance of honoring the dead. The Western world understands this today. Now it's our obligation to act to preserve our own cemeteries."

A Response to Vandalism By Minors

Vandalism by minors, the committee claims, can be deterred. American law requires parents to pay for damage done by their children, and they have to commit in writing that their children will not repeat the offense. "In Israel," they say, "we saw with our own eyes that a man who was arrested was released that same evening and allowed to go home."

A Police Presence

One police station is not enough. There have to be several, particularly on the access roads: in Ras El Amud, at the school set up on the ascent to the mountain, at the A-Tur road, and in other vulnerable areas.

"Sometimes they set up a police van after some incident, but as soon as the area calms down they take it away, and then the troublemakers come back. This game of cat and mouse will never end until there's a permanent police presence on the mountain."

Strategic Cameras

The access roads to Har Hazeisim should have surveillance cameras. The 137 cameras positioned on the mountain itself are insufficient. On the Christian side, where all is calm and peaceful, there are eight cameras, while in the Ras El Amud plaza which sees constant vandalism there isn't even one.

The Results on the Ground

"What have you accomplished?" I ask, and the committee heads explain: "We have built goodwill. There is still a political side, because the issue involves eastern Yerushalayim. But from all sides of the political spectrum, they are interested in strengthening security and access to the mountain. Even Labor party chairman MK Yitzchak Herzog has family buried on Har Hazeisim. Every Jew has some connection to it."

"Dovid Hamelech fled to Har Hazeisim when he was pursued by his enemies. The *kohanim* went there through a bridge that stretched from Har Habayis to its peak; the cemetery was located below, so the *kohanim* had no halachic problem. *Shluchim* went up the mountain to see and sanctify the new moon. A huge market for animals designated for sacrifices was located there. Har Hazeisim was a pulsating Jewish center. Today it has become the final resting place of the dead, but those who are alive are obligated to watch over them.

"Many Israeli Jews think Har Hazeisim is a kind of slum, a place you're afraid to go to because it's dangerous. They should feel instead the same security they feel when going to the Kotel.

"It's important to transmit the idea that this is a historic and holy place, a part of Israel's tradition until the coming of Moshiach. This is where Moshiach will appear at the time of the *Geulah*."

"I have met many people while traveling around the U.S.," Menachem adds. "I notice that even if they are not religious, they know what Har Hazeisim is."

The committee heads note that the situation is better now than it was four years ago. There is a fence, there are cameras, there are walkways, and graves have been repaired. But from the reports they get the

Har Hazeisim

Master Plan for Security and Development
2014-2019

Over the next five years there are plans to transform Har Hazeisim into a major, important site for Jewish visitors the world over. The following is a review of some of these plans (and who will be responsible for the funding), submitted by the International Committee for the Preservation of Har Hazeisim.

SECURITY (adopted by the Cabinet as part of new NIS 300 million allocation for eastern Yerushalayim, NIS 100 million for Har Hazeisim)

- Construction of a new, major police station for eastern Yerushalayim, to be known as Merhav Kedem (Israeli government)
- Assignment of 40 Yasem officers to Kedem (Israeli government)

- Upgrade of police substation on Har Hazeisim (Israeli government)
- Installation of 160 additional technologically advanced cameras in eastern Yerushalayim, including all of the access roads to Har Hazeisim (Israeli government)

- Upgrade of surveillance monitoring in new Kedem police station — take over monitoring of Har Hazeisim from private security on Har Hazeisim (Israeli government)
- Regular police and border police patrol in "hot spots" (Israeli government)

MAINTENANCE

- Private contractor to pick up garbage and keep Har Hazeisim clean (Jerusalem Development Authority)

DEVELOPMENT

- Construction of major Visitors' Center (Israeli government)
- Construction of permanent police substation on Har Hazeisim (Israeli government)
- Construction of museum, computer database, information center, café, comfort station within Visitors' Center (International Committee for

the Preservation of Har Hazeisim)

- Construction of Ohr Hachaim Shul inside Visitors' Center (International Committee for the Preservation of Har Hazeisim)
- Restoration of 30,000 of 60,000 graves destroyed by Jordanians (1948-1967) (International Committee for the Preservation of Har Hazeisim/Israeli government)
- Construction of new section of cemetery, Netzach Hazeitim, with 6,000 graves (Rovaim Lightstone Developments)

(This does not include such government initiatives as fencing, repair of roads, other infrastructure projects, signage etc.)

TRANSPORTATION

- Construction of new cable car to Har Hazeisim (Israeli government, Jerusalem Municipality)
- Addition of new line in Jerusalem's light-rail system (Israeli government, Jerusalem Municipality)

LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES (supported by government)

- Reduce age of minors from 16 to 14
- Mandatory jail terms for anyone over the age of 14 (5-7 year terms). Dismissal from any jobs immediate until trial. Judges will not have leeway in giving short revolving-door sentences.
- Parents of children under the age of 14 throwing rocks will be fined NIS 2,000-NIS 3,000 per incident
- Every six months police must report to Security Cabinet on its progress.

OTHER INITIATIVES (funded by Israeli government)

- Local Arab schools will be provided with extracurricular programs and children will have the opportunity to spend more time in school.
- Children will be provided with after-hours sport activities.

picture is still grim, as vandalism, desecration and even physical attacks are ongoing.

"The government is planning to strengthen security there. That was the goal of our present visit to Israel: to apply pressure for greater security, more cameras, more police, police stationed on the access roads too, etc."

Last Tuesday the committee heads toured Har Hazeisim. "I note with satisfaction that

we've seen real progress," Reb Menachem concludes. "A new, energetic police commander has been appointed. We visited the police point set up in the Ras El Amud plaza and another on the A-Tur road. The police presence certainly appears effective and is clearly felt. We hope that this trend will be strengthened, to continue to provide individual and national security for the benefit of all the Jewish people."