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Matos-Masei

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Gravesite View

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

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Gravesite View

The story is told that, years ago, there was a dispute among some of the Chasidic elders over who would merit to be buried closer to the Previous Rebbe's resting place. Since they couldn't decide, they turned to the local rabbi.

The rabbi listened to all the arguments patiently, and then issued a ruling: "first come, first served."

However, this is not the first time in history that where you're buried is important. Even in Talmudic times, we find that people were ready to do anything so that they would be buried next to kin.

In those days, the custom was to be buried in caves, like the Meoras HaMachpelah, the famous Double Cave in modern-day Hebron, Israel in which are buried our ancestors Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and their righteous wives, our Matriarchs Sarah, Rivkah and Leah.

In those days, every family would have its own burial cave. In one of his talks, the Rebbe even quotes a source in Jewish law that says that it is permissible to bury someone in a standing position inside such a family cave, since it is more valuable to the dear departed person to be buried with his or her family, even in an undignified manner, than it is to be buried somewhere else lying down.

Even today, we find the concept of going to great lengths to get the burial place of choice. For example, in New York, many Lubavitcher Chasidim want to buy plots near the Ohel, the Rebbe's resting place, and are prepared to pay any price for it.

Now, the ideal place for a Jew to be buried, and the burial place most desired by Jews for millennia, is Har HaZeisim, the Mount of Olives in modern-day Israel. This extremely ancient cemetery has been in operation for close to 3,000 years, and many holy Jewish leaders are buried there.

At the foot of Har HaZeisim is Yad Avshalom, the Avshalom Monument. This is a monument built by Avshalom, son of King David, during his own lifetime, since he did not have children to keep his memory alive.

At Har HaZeisim, one can also find the tomb of Zechariah HaNavi, the Prophet Zechariah. He is the same Prophet who revealed what is so special about Har HaZeisim.

In the Book of Zechariah, there is a prophecy about the Moshiach Era, saying (Zechariah 14:4) "And G-d will go out and battle against those nations... and His legs shall stand on that day on the Mount of Olives." Concerning that day, the Prophet tells us, G-d shall "stand" on Har HaZeisim—and from this mountain, the Redemption shall begin.

On this verse, the Midrash adds that Techiyas HaMeisim, the Resurrection of the Dead, will begin from Har HaZeisim—which is one of the reasons why Jews have always wanted to be buried there: so that when the Resurrection comes, they'll be among the first to rise and return to physical life. That is why Jews always dreamed of making the one-way pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the sunsets of their lives—so that they could be buried on Har HaZeisim. And indeed, many great Jews are buried there: the Ramban, the Ohr HaChayim and others. Even famous Jews like the late Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin are buried there.

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, the rabbi of the Israeli city of Efrat, tells the story of one Sanford Bernstein, a secular Jew who became observant. This Mr. Bernstein was an assimilated Jew who lived in New York and had started a very successful investment firm in the 1970s. At that time, he began a weekly study session with Rabbi Riskin, and slowly began getting close to Judaism.

So one day, Mr. Bernstein turned to Rabbi Riskin and said that he wanted to be buried in the Land of Israel, the Holy Land—and on the Mount of Olives. Rabbi Riskin responded that he was actually going to be visiting Israel that summer and that he knew the burial society handling such requests, and that he would be happy to help Mr. Bernstein with this.

Rabbi Riskin got to Israel, clarified the details, and notified his friend Mr. Bernstein that as soon as he sent 5,000 dollars, the matter was taken care of.

A few days later, Rabbi Riskin got a telegram stating that Sanford Bernstein would be arriving in Israel for 12 hours to personally inspect the plot that had been purchased for him. (Maybe he wanted to see if it was the right size?)

So Rabbi Riskin met him in Jerusalem and, together with the burial society members, went to check out the grave. Rabbi Riskin, being a Kohen, remained outside the cemetery in the car (Kohanim are not allowed to enter cemeteries), and the rest of the group started climbing the hill. (Remember, Har HaZeisim is a hill and all the graves are on a slope.)

Suddenly, Rabbi Riskin heard shouting. He then saw his friend Sanford running from grave to grave, shouting and cursing. Rabbi Riskin didn't know what was going on, but one thing was clear—Sanford Bernstein the big millionaire was very angry and was letting the world know in a way that only he knew how.

Finally, Mr. Bernstein calmed down and came down the hill. He then told Rabbi Riskin, "I can't see the Temple Mount from the plot I bought! I do not agree to this in any way, shape or form! I found a different plot, but they don't want to sell it to me!"

So one of the burial society members told Rabbi Riskin, "He wants to buy a plot extremely close to the grave of Rabbi Kook," who was the first Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel. And the burial society people felt that it wasn't right for a person like him to be buried next to Rabbi Kook.

Rabbi Riskin tried to reason with him, saying that after 120 years, which is how we refer to death, he won't see anything from underground, and besides, the view from the grave doesn't really matter. But Bernstein wouldn't hear of it, and he left Har HaZeisim and the country angry and frustrated.

A week later, Rabbi Riskin got a letter from Sanford Bernstein filled with words of amends and explanation. Bernstein apologized for embarrassing him with his behavior, but also tried to explain that he wasn't concerned for his own plot but rather, for his kids.

Bernstein explained that his kids had grown up and left the house before he began studying the Torah, thus not allowing him to leave them with any Jewish tradition and connection to Judaism. So he thought that maybe after his passing, when they would come to visit his resting place, they would look out from there over the Har HaBayis, the Temple Mount, the holiest place in the world—and perhaps that would inspire them to return to Judaism, or at least give them some connection to Judaism.

So Rabbi Riskin translated the letter from English to Hebrew and showed it to the burial society—and indeed, they sold him the plot. When he died, Mr. Bernstein left billions of dollars for Jewish educations, and it was he who founded the Avi Chai Jewish education foundation.

And this leads us to this week's Torah portion.

This week, we read in the Torah how G-d tells Moshe, "Take revenge for the children of Israel against the Midianites; afterwards you will be gathered to your people."

In the course of the most recent parshios, from the parshah of Chukas onward, G-d is clearly preparing Moshe for his impending passing. Just last week in Parshas Pinchas, as a matter of fact, we read how G-d tells Moshe, "Go up to this Mount Avarim and look at the land that I have given to the Children of Israel." Which mountain is Mount Avarim? In the Parshah of Haazinu, the Torah reveals to us that Mount Avarim is Mt. Nevo, as G-d says, "Go up to this Mount Avarim, Mount Nevo... and see the Land of Canaan... And die on the mountain upon which you are climbing..."

Here we discover something interesting: Moshe Rabbeinu was buried on a mountain from which one could see the entire Land of Israel. And indeed, at the end of Parshas V'zos Habrachah, we are told that this is what Moshe Rabbeinu did: he went up the mountain, gazed at the whole Land of Israel, and there he remained.

What we can learn from these two stories is that a person must always put himself in a place from which he can see holy places.

What does that mean? It means that when a person sits in his office, he should have a photo of the Western Wall opposite his desk to constantly remind him of those inspired, spiritual moments he felt when he actually visited the Western Wall, which will help him deal with life's daily problems.

And for the same reason, Chasidim typically have the custom of putting up a portrait of their Rebbe in their homes, in their offices, and everywhere—because that photo reminds them of sacred moments shared with the Rebbe, putting them on a higher level and lifting them up to a more spiritual atmosphere. The photo reminds the Chasid who he is and what is expected from him.

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