

# Bury Me There

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

On a recent trip to Israel I made a tour of burial grounds. Not the great archaeological sites, although I did spend some magical hours at the Western Wall when almost no one was there. Neither did I make pilgrimages to the graves of venerable rabbis. I have never felt comfortable with the idea of visiting relics and tombstones of saints. It's true there is a rabbinic tradition of praying at the graves of our great and good but it has never made any rational sense to me. After all, it is the soul and spirit that animates and inspires us, not some earthly remains. Even the graves of my own parents, great Jews and human beings by any standards, on Mount of the Olives in Jerusalem, mean little to me compared to their constant inspiration and presence in my mind and heart. This time I went looking for somewhere to be buried myself.

It's not that I care, to be honest. Yes I adhere to Jewish tradition and want to have a traditional burial. But that's for convention, not because I think I will notice any difference. After all, I do believe that when my soul returns to its Maker, the physical me will disappear into the eternal cycle of molecules and atoms. And I certainly do not believe in the kabalist's idea of gilgulim, that our souls are recycled into other bodies. As if spiritual souls retain physical characteristics. Even resurrection seems to me to be an abstract concept. The great Maimonides conceded that he neither understood how it worked nor what it entailed. To me it has always meant that soul, spirit, is indestructible, precisely because it is not physical. I always liked the way the Talmud dealt tongue-in-cheek with Cleopatra when she asked Rebbi Meir (Sanhedrin 90b) if she would come back to earth dressed or naked.

Pascal 's famous wager was that it makes sense to bet on God. If He doesn't exist, what have you lost? And if He does, you'll look a right fool when you die. Perhaps I should worry about missing out on all the resurrected bodies marching up to Jerusalem. But I can't believe that being buried on Mount of the Olives gets me there quicker than being buried in Bnei Brak, Bushey or Long Island. Do I worry that great rabbis such as Rebbi Akiva or those who were burnt to a cinder will miss out for not being buried near the Temple? No sir, I do not. I have much more faith in the Almighty's capacities than I do in abstract traditions dressed up in human language.

If the Almighty wants my physical remains, He will come for me wherever they are. If not, it will be too late anyway. Finding a burial place was caused by wanting to save my children the expenses and by what would be most convenient for them should they be interested. They and my grandchildren are, bless them, scattered over four continents. Who knows what migrations, marriages, or moves might take place over time. But the one place that will always be the center of Jewish life is Israel, no matter what the government's policies are. That's where all Jews are expected to visit at regular intervals, if not to settle permanently. So it makes sense to be buried there, according to my way of thinking. But exactly where there?

Mount of the Olives is crowded and expensive and at this moment in time not all that safe. Har Hamenuchot, the massive Jerusalem burial mountain to the west, is an industrialized mausoleum. In some parts it is multi-tiered, a car park for the dead. There are one or two favored spots one has to bargain for, and nearby are the graves of heroes who died for the state as well as rabbis and criminals. But it's too big, too impersonal, and finding a grave is like a treasure hunt.

I looked in Bnei Brak at places revered for the great scholars buried there. But the tombstones were crowded barely inches apart, littered with planks and cardboard, the detritus of people scrambling over stones, through mud and dust to get to a barely accessible slab. Surely the souls of the dead do not hang around on earth to have friendly conversations with old friends from the Carpathian mountains or sit at the feet of dead scholars studying Talmud together (or playing cards).

The nicest place I found was Ramat Beit Shemesh. Set up on a hill amongst pine trees about half way between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, it is nicely kept and much more aesthetic and personal. The people who run it are humane and considerate. It even has special sections for foreigners, as if the Americans prefer not to be buried too near the English or the Israelis. My kids could always pop in on the way up to Jerusalem or down to Tel Aviv if they were minded to, without having to worry about traffic. And they could breathe in the heady pine scents of the hills our ancestors once walked. Christianity might have pretty country churchyards. We are more concerned with life than death. But this is a good compromise.

Part of me says, "Concentrate on living, to value and enjoy every breath one takes now." And the other part of tells me to be practical, make preparations, "repent one day before you die." Isn't that paradox what being religious is about? The spirit, the grand ideas, the delights of special days and great religious experiences still need the support of dull mundane habits and rituals. You can't have a house without foundations. As for me, if I haven't passed anything on from my forebears to my children by now, I doubt I'll do it after I'm gone.