



# Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

## This Issue Contains:

1. Tombstone, Costa Rica
2. Picking Up Where We Left Off
3. New Yiddle Riddle



Gabriel Dalfin <dalfin@sol.racsa.co.cr> wrote:

*Hi. The custom in my country is that when a person dies, the inscription on the matzeiva (grave stone) is written in Hebrew and Spanish. I've heard that you can only write in Hebrew on a matzeiva. Should we follow the custom of our country, or only write in Hebrew?*

Dear Gabriel,

The universal custom of building a *matzeiva* over a grave dates back at least as far as Jacob: "And Jacob erected a monument on her grave; this is Rachel's Tomb, a monument till today." (Genesis 35:20) Another famous *matzeiva* is Absalom's Pillar, which we here in Jerusalem can see from the window of the bus on the way to the Western Wall.

To answer your question, we need to understand some of the reasons for a *matzeiva*:

- To show that someone is buried there, so people will avoid passing over the grave and becoming spiritually impure. This was especially important in Temple times, when purity and impurity had many halachic applications in everyday life. Some authorities maintain that for this reason, a *matzeiva* is virtually a Biblical command.
- To show respect for the departed, especially a parent. Kabbalistically, it benefits the soul, giving it a place — an address, so to speak.
- To glorify the name of the deceased and perpetuate it.

Concerning the lettering, one should use Hebrew only. Hebrew is the Holy Language. It's the language of the Torah and the language with which the world was created. Since the *matzeiva* shows respect for the soul of the departed, it's proper to use Hebrew, since it has this spiritual component.

In deference to local custom, however, you can write something in Spanish, too. I suggest that the Hebrew inscription be more prominent than the Spanish. If at all possible, use only the Jewish date of death (and birth, if included), and not the secular date.

In any case, the *matzeiva* shouldn't be gaudy or ostentatious. Rather, it should conform to the average *matzeiva* in the community. The Chafetz Chaim writes that rather than buying an elaborate monument, children wishing to perpetuate their parents' names and benefit their souls would do much better donating the extra money to a charity which helps people do *mitzvot* and study Torah.

Sources:

- Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 348:2, 364:1 Rama ad loc.
- Gesher Hachaim 2:25
- Tractate Kiddushin 32a
- Igrot Moshe, Yoreh Deah III:154.3
- Kol Bo Aveilut
- Ahavat Chesed 11:15 - footnote ad loc.

**Clarification:** In 'Ask the Rabbi' for Parshat Noach (Issue #122) we asked this YIDDLE RIDDLE:

*"On Tisha B'Av morning, we sit on the floor as a sign of mourning. However, one person in every synagogue publicly sits down on a chair. Who is this person?"*

Our answer: *The person honored with 'hagbah' — lifting the Torah after it is read. This person lifts the Torah from the 'bima' and sits with it in a chair.*

As pointed out by David Adatto <aj563@lafn.org> and others, this is true only in Ashkenazic synagogues. According to the widespread Sefardic custom, nobody sits down with the Torah; rather, the Torah scroll remains on the *bima*.

True Story: A certain person claimed that his father's departed soul returned to this world every Shabbat, and attended synagogue services. Week after week, he would call his father to the Torah, listening attentively to what he claimed was the faint sound of his father's blessing.

When word of this reached the ears of Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, *z atzal*, he smiled and said, "Next week, tell him to give his father *hagbah*."

## Yiddle Riddle

Which weekly *Parsha* is never read (*outside of Israel*) on Shabbat afternoon.

(Thanks to MOSHEEMES@aol.com)

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