Reading Hebrew Tombstones

Hebrew Alphabet

1	א	aleph
2	ב	bet
3	ג	gimel
4	ד	dalet
5	ה	hay
6	ו	vav
7	ז	zayin
8	ח	khet
9	ט	tet
10	י	yud
20	כ	kaf
30	ל	lamed
40	מ	mem
50	נ	nun
60	ס	samech
70	ע	ayin
80	פ	pay
90	צ	tzade
100	ק	kuf
200	ר	resh
300	ש	shin
400	ת	tav

Jewish tombstones with Hebrew inscriptions have an added value to genealogists, in that they not only show the date of death and sometimes the age or date of birth, but they also include the given name of the deceased's father. This permits you to go back one more generation.

Here are a few helpful pointers if you cannot read Hebrew. At the top of most Jewish tombstones is the abbreviation פנ, which stands for *po nikbar* or *po nitman*, meaning "here lies".

At the end of many Hebrew tombstone inscriptions you will find the abbreviation תנצבה, which is an abbreviation of a verse from the Bible, the first book of Samuel, 25:29, "May his soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life".

If any Hebrew characters at all are written on a tombstone, they are most likely to be the person's Hebrew name. A Hebrew name always includes a patronymic, the person's father's given name. This is a unique feature of Jewish tombstones, and a great boon to Jewish genealogy. The Hebrew word בן, *ben*, means "son of", as in "Yaakov ben Yitzhak", meaning "Yaakov the son of Yitzhak". בת, *bat*, means "daughter of". On tombstones these words will often appear as בר, an abbreviation for *ben reb*, meaning "son (or daughter) of the worthy", followed by the father's given name. The word *reb* is a simple honorific, a title of respect — it does **not** mean Rabbi.

The Jewish Calendar

Dates are written in Hebrew according to the Jewish calendar. This calendar, which starts its "year one" with the Creation of the World, was probably designed by the patriarch Hillel II in the fourth century. He calculated the age of the world by computing the literal ages of biblical characters and other events in the Bible, and came up with a calendar that begins 3760 years before the Christian calendar.

The letters of the Hebrew Alphabet each have a numerical value, specified in the accompanying chart. When a Hebrew date is written, you must figure out the numerical value of each letter and then add them up. This is the date according to the Jewish calendar, not the calendar we use in every day life, known as the Gregorian calendar (also referred to as the Common Era, civil or Christian calendar). In September 1999, for example, the Jewish year was 5759. Given a Hebrew date, you need to do only a little bit of math to change the Hebrew year into a secular year.

Often a Hebrew date after the year 5000 on the Jewish calendar will leave off five thousand. For example, the Hebrew year 5680 will be written as 680 rather than 5680. To compute the civil (Gregorian) year, simply add the number 1240 to the shortened Hebrew year.

Days

א	1
ב	2
ג	3
ד	4
ה	5
ו	6
ז	7
ח	8
ט	9
י	10
יא	11
יב	12
יג	13
יד	14
טו	15
טז	16
יז	17
יח	18
יט	19
כ	20
כא	21
כב	22
כג	23
כד	24
כה	25
כו	26
כז	27
כח	28
כט	29
ל	30

Here's one example: If the year is written as תרפג, the letter ת is 400, the letter ר is 200, פ is 80, and ג is 3.   400 + 200 + 80 + 3 = 683.   The 5000 is usually left off, so the actual year would be 5683.   By using our formula, 683 plus 1240 is 1923. That is the civil year.

Hebrew Months:

תשרי	Tishri	Sep/Oct
חשון	Heshvan	Oct/Nov
כסלו	Kislev	Nov/Dec
טבת	Tevet	Dec/Jan
שבט	Shevat	Jan/Feb
אדר	Adar	Feb/Mar
אדר ב'	Adar II	Mar
ניסן	Nisan	Mar/Apr
אייר	Iyar	Apr/May
סיון	Sivan	May/Jun
תמוז	Tamuz	Jun/Jul
אב	Av	Jul/Aug
אלול	Elul	Aug/Sep

The Hebrew year begins on Rosh Hashanah, which occurs on the Gregorian calendar in September or October. Therefore, the dates listed for the months of Tishri, Heshvan, Kislev and sometimes Tevet must be read as applying to the preceding year of the civil calendar.

The complete transposition of a Hebrew date to a Gregorian date uses a very complex formula. It is easiest to simply refer to one of the published or online reference works, such as: *The Comprehensive Hebrew Calendar, 5703-5860, 1943-2100* by Arthur Spier (Jerusalem, New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1981); or *150 Year Calendar* by Rabbi Moses Greenfield (Brooklyn: Hotsaat Ateret, 1987). Most synagogues and Jewish libraries possess one of these works. Another alternative is to use one of several computer programs: CALCONV, JCAL, LUACH (shareware); Zmanim, HaYom, Itim (http://www.davka.com); or JewishGen's online JOS calculator (http://www.jewishgen.org/jos). These programs can convert Hebrew to Gregorian dates and vice versa, as well as display calendars and Yahrzeit dates for any year.

For more information about the Jewish calendar, see the JewishGen InfoFile Introduction to the Jewish Calendar.

Some Hebrew Phrases

In addition to names and dates, here are the common Hebrew words which appear on tombstones:

Here lies	*po nikbar*	פ׳נ
Son of	*ben*	בן
Daughter of	*bat*	בת
Title, i.e. "Mr."	*reb, rav*	רב ר׳
Son/Daughter of the honored	*ben reb*	ב׳ר
The Levite	*ha-levi*	הלוי
The Cohen	*ha-kohen*	הכהן
The Rabbi	*ha-rav*	הרב
Dear, Beloved (masc.)	*ha-yakar*	היקר
Dear, Beloved (fem.)	*ha-y'karah*	היקרה
Father	*av*	אב
My father	*avi*	אבי
Our father	*avinu*	אבינו
Mother	*eem*	אם
My mother	*eemi*	אמי

Our mother	*emanu*	אמנו
My husband	*baali*	בעלי
My wife	*ishti*	אשתי
Brother	*akh*	אח
My brother	*akhi*	אחי
Our brother	*akhinu*	אחינו
Sister	*akhot*	אחות
Aunt	*dodah*	דודה
Uncle	*dod*	דוד

Man	*ish*	איש
Woman	*ishah*	אשה
Woman (unmarried)	*b'tulah*	בתולה
Woman (married) = "Mrs."	*marat*	מרת
Old (masc., fem.)	*zakain, z'kaina*	זקן זקנה
Child (masc., fem.)	*yeled, yaldah*	ילד ילדה
Young man/woman	*bakhur, bakhurah*	בחור בחורה

Died (masc., fem.)	*niftar, nifterah*	נפטר נפטרה
Born (masc., fem.)	*nolad, noldah*	נולד נולדה

Year, Years	*shanah, shanim*	שנה שנים
Day, Days	*yom, yamim*	יום ימים
Month	*khodesh*	חדש
First of the month	*rosh khodesh*	ראש חדש

Hebrew Abbreviations on Tombstones:

There are many many different Hebrew abbreviations that are found in tombstone inscriptions and Hebrew literature. Abbreviations are usually indicated by a quote mark or an apostrophe. Often, the apostrophe is used to abbreviate a single word, whereas the quote mark indicates an abbreviated phrase. For more information, see the following works:

- "Hebrew Abbreviations for Genealogists", by Edmund U. Cohler, Ph.D., in *Mass-Pocha* (Newsletter of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston). Part I: IV,1 (Winter 1994/95), pages 4-7.   Part II: IV,2 (Spring 1995), pages 14-18.   Part III: IV, 3 (Summer 1995), pages 16-17.
- Hüttenmeister, Frowald Gil. *Abkurzungsverzeichnis hebraischer Grabinschriften*. (Frankfurt am Main: Gesellschaft zur Forderung Judaistischer Studien in Frankfurt am Main [Society for Furthering Judaic Studies in Frankfurt am Main], 1996). 349 pages. {Frankfurter judaistische Studien, Volume 11. In Hebrew and German. Hebrew title: *Otsar rashe tevot ve-kitsurim be-matsvot bate ha-almin*}. ISBN #3-922056-08-3.

Symbols on Tombstones:

In addition to the inscription, symbols on the tombstone can be clues. Two hands, with four fingers each divided into two sets of two fingers, is the symbol of a priestly blessing — this signifies a Kohen, a descendant of Aaron. A pitcher signifies a Levite — the Levites were responsible for cleaning the hands of the Temple priest in ancient days. A candle or candelabra often is used on the tombstone of a woman; and the six-pointed Star of David on that of a man. A tombstone with the motif of a broken branch or tree stump often signifies someone who died young.

Bibliography:

- Kurzweil, Arthur. *From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Personal History*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1994). Chapter 9, pages 342-358.
- *DOROT*, The Journal of the Jewish Genealogical Society (New York):
  - XI, 2 (Winter 1989-90), pp 2-3: "Getting the Most Out of Your Cemetery Visit".
  - XI, 4 (Summer 1990), pg 16; and XII, 1 (Autumn 1990), pg 8: "Tools of the Trade".

- Krajewska, Monika. *A Tribe of Stones: Jewish Cemeteries in Poland*. (Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers, 1993). 242 pages, mostly illustrations.
- Rath, Gideon. "Hebrew Tombstone Inscriptions and Dates", in *Chronicles* (Newsletter of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Philadelphia), Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring 1986), pages 1-4.
- Schafer, Louis. *Tombstones of Your Ancestors*. (Heritage Books, 1991). {160 pages, paperback. Doesn't deal specifically with Jewish tombstones}.
- Schwartzman, Arnold. *Graven images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone*. (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1993). 144 pages.
- Strangstad, Lynette. *A Graveyard Preservation Primer*. (Nashville, Tenn.: Association for Gravestone Studies, 1988, 1995). 126 pages.
- Association for Gravestone Studies, 278 Main Street, Suite 207, Greenfield, MA 01301.   (413) 772-0836.   Produces a quarterly newsletter, *Markers*, and access to a lending library. http://www.gravestonestudies.org.
- Caplan, Judith Shulamit Langer-Surnamer. "Tombstone Translation Topics: How to Decipher and Read a Hebrew Tombstone". In: *19th Annual Conference on Jewish Genealogy: Syllabus*. (New York: Jewish Genealogical Society, 1999), pages 217-221.   Also In *Jewish Genealogy Yearbook 2000* (20th International Conference on Jewish Genealogy, Salt Lake City, IAJGS, 2000), Section 1, pages 80-84.

Links:

- International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) Cemetery Project: http://www.jewishgen.org/cemetery.
- JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry (JOWBR): http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/cemetery.
- Jewish Cemeteries in the New York Metropolitan Area (JGSNY): List of Cemeteries, Directions, Burial Societies.

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Some Gravestone Rubbings Do's and Don'ts

Gravestone rubbing is fun. It is possible to collect some beautiful artwork that can be framed and displayed. A carver's skill can be preserved, or an ancestor's stone recorded and appreciated through this craft. However, gravestone rubbing is also controversial. Especially in cemeteries where a restoration project is in progress, rubbing is often banned. This is to enable the restorers to have an opportunity to preserve all the stones possible before more damage occurs. Even if a restoration project is not in progress, if the those who care for the cemetery have determined there are very fragile stones there which may be damaged if pressure is applied to the surface as happens in rubbing, there may be prohibitions in place. So be sure to check.

Below are some Do's and Don'ts that will make your experience in the cemetery a good one.

*Please **Do***

- Check (with cemetery superintendent, cemetery commissioners, town clerk, historical society, whoever is in charge) to see if rubbing is allowed in the cemetery.
- Get permission and/or a permit as required.
- Rub only solid stones in good condition. Check for any cracks, evidence of previous breaks and adhesive repairs, defoliating stone with air pockets behind the face of the stone that will collapse under pressure of rubbing, etc
- Become educated; learn how to rub responsibly.
- Use a soft brush and plain water to do any necessary stone cleaning.
- Make certain that your paper covers the entire face of the stone; secure with masking tape.
- Use the correct combination of paper and waxes or inks; avoid magic marker-type pens or other permanent color materials.
- Test paper and color before working on stone to be certain that no color bleeds through.
- Rub gently, carefully.
- Leave the stone in better condition than you found it.
- Take *all* trash with you; replace any grave site materials that you may have disturbed.

Please **Don't**
- Don't attempt to rub deteriorating marble or sandstone, or any unsound or weakened stone (for example, a stone that sounds hollow when gently tapped or a stone that is flaking, splitting, blistered, cracked, or unstable on its base).
- Don't use detergents, soaps, vinegar, bleach, or any other cleaning solutions on the stone, no matter how mild!
- Don't use shaving cream, chalk, graphite, dirt, or other concoctions in an attempt to read worn inscriptions. Using a large mirror to direct bright sunlight diagonally across the face of a gravemarker casts shadows in indentations and makes inscriptions more visible.
- Don't use stiff-bristled or wire brushes, putty knives, nail files, or any metal object to clean or to remove lichen from the stone; Soft natural bristled brushes, whisk brooms, or wooden sticks are usually OK if used gently and carefully
- Don't attempt to remove stubborn lichen. Soft lichen may be thoroughly soaked with plain water and then loosened with a gum eraser or a wooden popsicle stick. Be gentle. Stop if lichen does not come off easily.
- Don't use spray adhesives, scotch tape, or duct tape. Use masking tape.
- Don't use any rubbing method that you have not actually practiced under supervision.
- Don't leave masking tape, wastepaper, colors, etc., at the grave site

http://iajgs.org/cemetery/ukraine/index.html

--Overview: Ivano-Frankivska Oblast Cemeteries Condition Information--

JANUARY 2009: Information in this table derived from Jewish Preservation Committee of Ukraine survey forms (1995 to 2000) . Other cemeteries may exist in the country. U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad

Survey #	Town	Oldest	Walls/Gates, Markers/Signs	# of Gravestones	Current Use
UA08070101	Bohorodchany	20th c.	none	1 to 20	recreational (park,

					playground, sports); industrial or commercial; dump
UA08170101	Bilshivtsi	20th c.	none	1 to 20	agriculture
UA08250101	Bukachivtsi	1930	none	1 to 20	fire station along railroad
UA08090101	Burshtyn	19th c.	none	101 to 500	agriculture
UA08260101	Deliatyn	15th c	none	501 to 5000	agriculture, dump
UA08180101	Dolyna	1920	none	21 to 100	agriculture
UA08080101	Halych	19th c.	none	21 to 100	agriculture
UA08280101	Horodenka	18th c.	broken fence	501 to 5000	agriculture, dump
UA08010103	Ivano-Frankivsk	1927	none	501 to 5000	Jewish cemetery
UA08010102	Ivano-Frankivsk	n/a	none	0	recreational (park, playground, sports)
UA08060101	Kalush	19th c.	broken fence, gate that locks	101 to 500	Jewish cemetery
UA08220101	Kolomyja	n/a	broken fence	0	recreational (park, playground, sports)
UA08220102	Kolomyja	n/a	none	0	recreational (park, playground, sports)
UA08220103	Kolomyja	1930	none	1 to 20	recreational (park, playground, sports)
UA08020101	Kosiv	1742	broken fence, gate without lock	501 to 5000	Jewish cemetery, agriculture, dump
UA08030101	Kuty	1810	broken masonry wall	501 to 5000	Jewish cemetery, agriculture
UA08140101	Lysets	18th c.	broken fence	101 to 500	agriculture
UA08230101	Nadvirna	1709	none	101 to 500	Jewish cemetery, industrial or commercial
UA08130101	Nyzhniv	1930	none	1 to 20	agriculture
UA08210101	Obertyn	n/a	continuous fence, gate without lock	0	industrial or commercial
UA08040101	Pechenizhyn	1810	none	501 to 5000	Jewish cemetery, agriculture
UA08200101	Rohatyn	19th c.	none	1 to 20	agriculture
UA08200102	Rohatyn	1930	none	1 to 20	dump
UA08110101	Rozhnyativ	18th c.	none	101 to 500	agriculture
UA08270102	Sniatyn	19th c.	broken masonry wall, gate with no lock	501 to 5000	agriculture, dump
UA08270101	Sniatyn	n/a	none	0	industrial or commercial, storage
UA08150101	Solotvyno	unknown	none	501 to 5000	Jewish cemetery, agriculture
UA08120102	Tlumach	n/a	none	0	residential
UA08120101	Tlumach	n/a	Signs or plaques in	0	dump, memorial site

		Ukrainian			(mass grave
		mentioning Holocaust			
UA08290101	Tysmennytsia	n/a	none	0	industrial or commercial
UA08190101	Vojnyliv	1930	none	1 to 20	agriculture
UA08240101	Zabolotiv	18th c.	none	501 to 5000	agriculture

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