

Matzeva (Tombstone) Deciphering Workshop

Madeleine Isenberg

Beverly Hills, CA, USA

madeleine.isenberg@gmail.com

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This overview focuses on how to find information of genealogical value from Ashkenazi tombstones of central Europe, for early 19th century through World War II. If you know little or no Hebrew, here are basics to help read what is on a *matzeva* (tombstone)--much of which may be pattern recognition--and how to decipher what you see.

Recognize, Learn, and Decipher:

- Letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Fortunately, Hebrew is a phonetic language, learning them you can then know how to pronounce them. The letters also have numerical values.

The Hebrew Alphabet

# Value	א	ב/בב	ג	ד	ה	ו	ז	ח	ט	י	כ/כפ	ל	מ	נ	ס	ע	פ/פפ	צ	ק	ר	ש/שש	ת	ך	ם	ן	ף	ץ
	Alef a/o	Bet/Vet	Gimel	Dalet	Heh	Vav oo/oh	Zayin	Chet	Tet																		
1s	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9																		
	י	כ/כפ	ל	מ	נ	ס	ע	פ/פפ	צ																		
	Yod i/ee	Kaf/Khaf	Lamed	Mem	Nun	Samekh	Ayin eh	Pe/Feh	Tzadi																		
10s	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90																		
	ק	ר	ש/שש	ת	ך	ם	ן	ף	ץ																		
	Qoof	Resh	Sin/Shin	Tav	Final Khaf	Final Mem	Final Nun	Final Peh(F)	Final Tzadi																		
100s	100	200	300	400	20	40	50	80	90																		

Blue = Hebrew letters

Red = consonant sounds

Green = indicates how some consonants are also used for some of the vowel sounds.

(Note: Not all vowel sounds can be simulated with single letters! For transliterating other languages, some consonants might require two or even three Hebrew letters.)

Practice pronouncing **family** names to gain facility with transliteration.

(e.g., קליין (Klein), אלעקסאנדער (Aleksander), וואלף (Wolf), עלעפאנט (Elefant))

- Some common **given** names found by decreasing frequency of occurrence are still mostly Biblical, others Yiddish, or adapted from the culture of country where they were living. (Examples below, from Slovakia).
 - F: Rachel (רהל), Chanah (חנה), Rivka (רבקה), Sara (שרה), Esther (אסתר), Miriam (מרים)
 - M: Jacob (יעקב), Joseph (יוסף), Abraham (אברהם), Yitzhak (יצחק), Shmuel (שמואל), Hirsch (הירש), Shlomo (שלמה), Dov-Ber (דוב-בער), Moshe (משה)
- The numerical equivalents for days, years, and age, and with the Jewish months, how to calculate **dates**.
 - Days** 1-30: add 10s and 1s, e.g., 13=10+3= ג + י, but numbers 15 and 16, are written as 9+6 (ט + ו) and 9+7 (ט + ז), to avoid writing a holy name of G-d.
 - Years** (for Ashkenazim) mostly use the "short date", with the 5000 understood, indicated by special symbol, 3-letter ligature ק (e.g., ק (תרע"ה) = 400+200+70+8=678
Rough estimation of year, add 1240: 678+1240=2018. (Note: year may be off by a one because Rosh Hashana and new Jewish year start ~ September for days through 12/31.)
 - Convert Hebrew **dates** to Gregorian calendar dates (see Resources Tools, item 7, below)
 - For recognizing **ages**: How old was s/he?

If you see these letters: שנה (*shanah* = year), or abbreviated as 'ש, or sometimes, שנים (*shanim*, pl. of shanah = years), then look to see if nearby are the words: בן or בת.

Yes, these do also mean "son" (בן) and "daughter," (בת) but they are also used to indicate age, or in a sense, ownership, as in "s/he has xx years." The age is usually the number found between these pairs of words: (e.g., שנה (54) בת נ"ד; שנים (82) פ'ב (בן פ'ב)).

4. **Rashe Tevot (Acronyms/Abbreviations), "RTs"**

Hebrew word or abbreviation/acronym? Look for unusual marks (RT Indicators, "RTI"), such as:

(') An apostrophe (*geresh* in Hebrew) usually after a single letter, an abbreviation for a word.

(") The quotation mark (*girshayim* plural of *geresh*) is for an abbreviated phrase of two or more words. (cf. LOL might look like LO"L)

(^) A caret, or inverted (v), mainly used to highlight that something is missing from the original text, or needs to be inserted.

5. A few of the most common acronyms/abbreviations, "**rashe tevot**" (RTs) found on stones.

a. Top: Introduction, these are most common and mostly at top

פ"נ = פה נקבר(ה) = Here is buried

פ"ט = פה נטמן(ה) = Here is interred

b. Bottom: (final blessing, most commonly at bottom) 'תנצ"ב'ה = תהא נפשו/נפש'ה צרוּרה בצרוּר הקיים = *May his/her soul be bound in bonds of eternal life (adapted from Samuel I, 25:29).*

c. Some of the respectful **titles/honorifics**, typical for Ashkenazim, generally below "the introductions.": 'ר (*reb*, NOT a rabbi, = Mr.); הרב (*harav*, the rabbi); מרת, מר' (*marat* = Mrs.);

כה"ר, כ"ה (*k'vod harav*, honored rabbi); Note, below, *sof*=son of; *wof*=wife of

Male: <title/hon.> <his name(s)> sof <title/hon.> <father's name>

Female: <title/hon.> <her name(s)> dof <title/hon.> <father's name>

wof <title/hon.> <husband's name> ...

Sometimes a mother's name may also be found, following the *rashe tevot* ש"א

(שם אמו/ה) meaning *his/her mother's name* and followed by her given name.

6. Some **imagery** or symbols that provide hints for interpretations.



Cohen's Hands



Levite's Pitcher



Weeping Willow (WW)



for F: Candlesticks, Birds, WW

7. Other Rashe Tevot (RTs) provide useful genealogical hints, that I call an "Existential Indicators" as to whether person predeceased parent, or generally the father. So after the father's name,

Not alive: ע"ה (עליו השלום) = peace be upon him

ז"ל (זכרונו לברכה) = of blessed memory

זצ"ל (זכר צדיק לברכה) = may the memory of the righteous be a blessing

Alive: נ"י (נרו יאיר) = may his candle yet shine

ש"י'ט"א (שיזכה לאורך ימים טובים אמן) = may he merit to live long, Amen

Examples: כה"ר אברהם בן משה ז"ל = father is deceased:

מ' רחל בת שמואל נ"י = father is alive:

Some Books about Cemeteries and Tombstones

1. *The Old Prague Jewish Cemetery*, by Jindrich Lion, Photography by Jan Lukas, Praha Artia, 1960. (English, German, & French)

2. *Jewish Cemeteries in Bohemia and Moravia*, author/photographer, Jan Herman, Dec. 1980

3. *Haus Des Lebens, Judische Friedhöfe*, Herbert Liedel & Helmut Dolhopf, Würzburg, 1985

4. *Old Bohemian and Moravian Jewish Cemeteries*, by Arno Parik and Jiri Fiedler, Photography by Petr Ehl, Paseka Prague, 1991

5. *A Tribe of Stones, Jewish Cemeteries in Poland*, by Monika Krajewska, Polish Scientific Publishers Ltd., Warsaw 1993.
6. *Graven Images*, by Arnold Schwartzman, 1993
7. *Carved Memories, Heritage in Stone from the Russian Jewish Pale*, David Goberman, New York, 2000.
8. *Houses of Life, Jewish Cemeteries of Europe*, by Joachim Jacobs (Author), Hans-Dietrich Beyer (Photographer), 2008.



What's on a Tombstone? ^{בס"ד}

Here's a readable, well-made, engraved stone with useful genealogical information:

- Classical shape, e.g., Torah- or portal-like
- What's on top? Symbol/Indicator (e.g., weeping willow tree)
פ"נ (or **ט"ו**, here is buried)
- Given name(s) – very visible, large letters, cartouche, **שמואל דוד** (Shmuel David)
- Family name below that **שטיינער** **STEINER**
- Son (**בן**)/daughter (**בת**) of father **שלמה**
- person's age (**בן**) (dual role of word) ...**צ"ז**
- day (**א**), mo. (**אלול**), year of death with dots, *geresh*, or...(**ת.ר.פ.א.ק.**) 29 Aug 1927
- **ת'נ'צ'ב'ה'** (or, dots on top) – both Ash./Seph.
- mother's name, **שם אמו = ש"א** (**העננע**)

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Figure 1 Matzeva Example #1



Another Tombstone ^{בס"ד}

Here's one with helpful larger letters

The introduction at the top, with "trident" √ (another RT indicator)

here is interred (**פה טמונה**) **פ"ט**

- 1) Given name, visible, large letters, but as vertical acrostic, with (√) RT indicator
ר' ח' ל' ל' ר' ח' ל' ל'
- 2) daughter (**בת**) of ...
- 3) **שמואל דוד** Shmuel David
- (4a) **ג** לחדש אייר 3rd of the month of Iyar
- (4b) **ק' ת.ר.מ.ט.** = 5649 = ?
Calculate Gregorian date
3 Iyar 5649 = xxx 5649 + 1240 = 1889
(use <https://stevemorse.org/jcal/jcal.html>)
4 May 1889

xx August 2018
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Figure 2 Matzeva Example #2

Some Reference Materials

Books:

1. *From Generation to Generation*, by Arthur Kurzweil. Several editions, Chapter 9: "Jewish Cemeteries"
2. *Jewish Personal Names*, by Rabbi Shmuel Gorr (Hebrew/Yiddish first names – English transliteration/meanings)

3. *Ozar Rashe Tevot (Thesaurus of Hebrew Abbreviations)*, by Shmuel Ashkenazi and Dov Jarden (*Hebrew Acronyms -- Hebrew*)
4. *A Practical Guide to Jewish Cemeteries*, by Nolan Menachemson
5. *A Field Guide to Visiting a Jewish Cemetery*, by Rabbi Joshua L. Segal (several printings)
6. *Hebrew English Dictionary* (Megiddo, or some other good Hebrew-English dictionary)
7. *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature*, by Marcus Jastrow
8. *Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from xxx (several large volumes for different places)* by Alexander Beider, e.g.
 - a. *Dictionary of Ashkenazic Given Names*
 - b. *Dictionary of German-Jewish Surnames*
 - c. *Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from Galicia, ... Kingdom of Poland, ... Russian Empire, ...*
9. *Dictionary of Sephardic Surnames: Second Edition* by Guilherme Faiguenboim, Paulo Valadares, Anna Rosa Campagnano

Research Tools

1. IAJGS International Cemetery Project: <http://www.iajgs.org/cemetery/>
2. Other Searchable Cemetery Websites
 - a. <http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Cemetery/> (JOWBR search)
 - b. Billiongraves.com <https://billiongraves.com/> (also, through FamilySearch.org)
 - c. Findagrave <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi>
3. Jewish Given Names: <http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/GivenNames/>
4. Google translate or <http://webtranslation.paralink.com/English-Hebrew-Translation/> (phonetically type in English to get potential Hebrew spelling.)
5. Ladino alphabet <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/ladino.htm>
6. Hebrew months, alphabet and its numerical values (*Warren Blatt*)
<http://www.jewishgen.org/infofiles/tombstones.html>
7. Calendar Converters:
 - a. Hebrew-secular calculator: <http://www.jewishgen.org/jos/josdates.htm>
 - b. Hebrew-Date converter: <http://www.hebcal.com/converter/>
 - c. Steven Morse's calendar: <http://stevemorse.org/jcal/tombstone.html>
8. Youtube Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W18e0nMUHvk> on patronymics and reading tombstones/date calculations

Rashe Tevot (Acronyms)

1. Rashe Tevot (Hebrew acronyms in Hebrew & English),
2. Dr. Ronald Doctor's compilation including former abbreviations from Judi Langer-Surinamer-Caplan, Ada Holtzman, and others, dated 24 June 2008,
<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~orjgs/Abrrrev.pdf>
3. *Ada Holtzman (3 Nov. 2006)*: <http://www.zchor.org/heritage/abbreviations.htm>
4. List of Hebrew Abbreviations: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Hebrew_abbreviations
5. All Hebrew: <http://library.princeton.edu/departments/tsd/katmandu/hebrew/open.html> (transliterated into English but without English definitions)
6. http://www.kizur.co.il/search_group.php?group=1, all Hebrew. Select category of "יהדות" (*yahadut*); this is first page beginning with aleph.
7. RAV-SIG website: <http://www.jewishgen.org/Rabbinic/infofiles/main.htm>, Information about rabbis, their acronyms, books, etc., (*Thanks to Chaim Freedman*)
8. Honorifics for the Dead: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honorifics_for_the_dead_in_Judaism