

Notes on Rabbinic Epitaphs: I

by: *Shnayer Leiman*

The newly recovered tombstone of R. Yosef Trani (1568-1639), the Maharit, among the greatest of the early *aharonim*,¹ is a truly remarkable event. The discoverer, the noted bibliophile and book dealer R. Shlomo Epstein, had searched all the Jewish cemeteries in Istanbul (formerly: Constantinople), but could not locate the Maharit's grave. On a recent visit to Safed, where he went to pray at the tomb of R. Moshe Alshekh (circa 1520-1593), he noticed nearby a fragmented, barely legible tombstone (see figure 1). As he began to decipher the text, he realized that it was the tombstone of none other than the Maharit. In fact, the Maharit died and was buried in Constantinople, but his sons later transferred his remains to Safed (as he had requested) so that he could be interred near his father, R. Moshe Trani (1500-1580), the *Mabit*.²



There is much to learn from tombstone inscriptions. Often they are the only source of precise information about an ancestor or about a *gadol be-yisrael*. Sadly, tombstones are often neglected, lost, or destroyed. Despite all the claims otherwise, we do not know where Rashi (d. 1105), Ibn Ezra (d. 1164), R. Eleazar b. Yehudah of Worms, author of *Sefer Rokeah* (d. circa 1230), or Don Isaac Abarbanel (d. 1508) are buried.³ Moreover, no one took the trouble to copy their tombstone inscriptions – and they can no longer be recovered. In a much later period, the tombstone of R. Aryeh Leib b. Asher Gunzberg (d. 1785), noted author of the *Sha'agat Aryeh*, was destroyed.⁴ Again, no one took the trouble to copy his tombstone inscription before it was destroyed – and it can no longer be recovered. Similarly, Sarah Schenierer's (see figure 2)⁵ headstone in Plaszow (a suburb of Krakow), erected in 1935 and destroyed by Nazi orders in 1942, was neither photographed nor copied during the seven years it stood undisturbed. When the stone was reset in 2003 (see figure 3), a newly invented text, based in part on eye-witness testimony, had to be prepared for it. We need to learn from these instances that it is crucial that we preserve Jewish cemeteries the world over, to the best of our ability. Moreover, tombstone inscriptions in particular need to be photographed while still legible, and – at least in the case of *gedolei yisrael* – restored or redone so that visitors can read and be inspired by what was said about those *gedolei yisrael*. When tombstones are restored, the original text is always preferable to a newly invented text.





In my travels, I often photograph rabbinic epitaphs, and present some samples in this posting.

I. R. Akiva Eger (d. 1837).

There is no need to rehearse here biographical information about R. Akiva Eger.⁶ Sadly, his grave in Poznan (formerly: Posen), which was still standing before World War II (see figure 4),⁷ was destroyed by the Nazis. Tombstones



from the Jewish cemetery were used to pave roads, and the nineteenth century Jewish cemetery itself – it opened in 1804 – was incorporated into Poznan's Trade Fair grounds after the war.⁸ Ultimately, a housing project and shopping center were built on the grounds of the Jewish cemetery, today at ul. Glogowska corner ul. Sniadeckich. Fortunately, the rabbinic section of the cemetery served as a parking lot (rather than as the foundation of an apartment house), and it



was possible to transform the lot into a grassy knoll and to set new tombstones over the old graves (see figure 5). At best, the tombstones are approximately over the gravesites they describe. Even so, it is a great *kiddush ha-Shem* that this sacred site has been restored. The graves restored include R. Akiva Eger (see figure 6), his second wife Breindel (d. 1836), his son and successor R. Shlomo Eger (d. 1852; see figure 7), and his son R. Avraham Eger (d. 1854). Also restored were the graves of two predecessors of R. Akiva Eger as Chief Rabbi of Posen: R. Yosef b. Pinhas of Posen (son-in-law of R. Yehezkel Landau Prague; see figure 8), d. 1801, and R. Moshe Shmuel, author of בית שמואל אהרון, d. 1806 (see figures 9 and 10 for the original and the restored tombstone inscriptions).⁹

We would be remiss if we didn't mention that R. Akiva Eger's likeness is on permanent display in Poznan's Town Hall (see figure 11). The excerpt in figure 11 is part of a larger mural painted by Julius Knorr (1810-1860) and entitled *Marktplatz in Posen*. The painting was done during the lifetime of R. Akiva Eger and was first displayed in 1838. R. Akiva Eger can be seen at the bottom right, walking with cane in hand and accompanied by the two other members of his rabbinic court.¹⁰





II. R. David Hoffmann (d. 1921).

The recent announcement that R. David Hoffmann's פירוש על ספר שמות (based upon his lecture notes in German) is about to be published by Mosad Harav Kook has brought great joy to biblical and rabbinical scholars alike.¹¹ Yet another *sefer* by the Master! It matters not that more than a century has passed since he first taught Exodus at the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary. Of course modern Bible scholarship has changed drastically in the interim. R. David Hoffmann's commentary will not reflect modern archaeological advance, will not grapple with the textual readings of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and will not deal with the latest philological discoveries of Semitic linguistics. But those who have read his commentaries on Genesis, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, and learned from them, will know that regarding R. David Hoffmann "¹² Master of the Oral Law, he of course read the Torah through rabbinic lenses. At the same time, he listened to dissenting voices, weighed all the evidence, and never disparaged others even as he dismissed their arguments. He always judged judiciously and graciously. And even when one disagrees with him, one always gains insight from his comments.

It is sad that this seminal figure, Rector and Rosh Yeshiva, Bible scholar and Posek, Literary Critic of the Mishnah and Restorer of Lost Tannaitic Midrashim, Defender of the Faith and Public Servant, has never been the subject of an intellectual biography worthy of the name.¹³ Here we publish, apparently for the first time, his epitaph. R. David Hoffmann is buried in the Adass Jisroel cemetery in the Weissensee section of Berlin.

Obverse (see figure 12):

פ"נ

[14](#) גאון ישראל נר המערב מורה מהור"ר

דוד צבי

בן מוה"ר ר' משה יהודה

למשפחת

האפפמאן

ראש בית המדרש

לרבנים בברלין זכרונו לברכה

נולד ביום ב' דר"ח כסלו התר"ד

ועלה למרום ביום תשעה עשר

לחדש מרחשון ה' תרפ"ב לב"ע

דור לדור ישבח אורו

ותורתו ילמדנה

דעתו שפטה תועי דורו

צדקת עמו יגידנה

באר תורה ללבב עמו

יסד עז במשנת קדומים

זך מדעו נעם טעמו

לנצח יחיו בעלומים

תנצב"ה

Reverse (see figure 14):

Professor

Dr. **DAVID HOFFMANN**

geb. 24. November 1843.

gest. 20. November 1921.



NOTES

- [1.](#) According to R. Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz (d. 1953), "גדול האחרונים הוא, המהרי"ט." See Z. Yabrov, מעשה איש, Bnei Brak, 2001, vol. 4, p. 90.
- [2.](#) See E. Zalman, "המהרי"ט קבור בצפת," *Qulmos* 65 (2008), pp. 18-21. The photograph in figure 1 is taken from the Zalman essay.
- [3.](#) In the case of R. Eleazar b. Yehudah of Worms, he was certainly buried in the Worms Jewish cemetery, standing to this very day. The portion of the cemetery he was buried in was appropriated by the non-Jewish authorities. See R. Juspa Shammes, מעשה נסים, Amsterdam, 1696, p. 20.
- [4.](#) See N. Netter, "Les Anciens Cimetieres Israelites de Metz," *REJ* 51(1905-6), pp. 280-281. Cf. S. Schwarzfuchs, (תנאי הרבנות של השאגת אריה) 1986)15 מוריה "מורי"ק", pp. 81-90.
- [5.](#) The only extant authentic photograph of Sara Schenierer, which scholars in Israel and the United States have kept under wraps for years, was recently published in T. Lesniak, J. M. Malecki, J. Purchla, and A.B. Skotnicki, eds., *Swiat przed katastrofa: Zydzi krakowscy w wudziestoleciu miedzywojennym (A World Before a Catastrophe: Krakow's Jews Between the Wars)*, Krakow, 2007, p. 128 – and is reproduced here.
- [6.](#) See, e.g., Y. Strasser and A. Perl, eds., מאורן של ישראל: רבינו עקיבא איגר, New York, 1990, 2 vols. Cf. J.H. Sinason, *The Gaon of Posen: A Portrait of Rabbi Akiva Guens-Eger*, Jerusalem, 1991.
- [7.](#) Figure 4 is taken from T. Sztyma-Knasiacka, *Miedzy tradycja a nowoczesnoscia: Zydi poznanscy w XIX i XX wieku*, Poznan, 2006, p. 23.
- [8.](#) See Z. Pakula, , *The Jews of Poznan*, London, 2003, pp. 1-21 and 109. Cf. anonymous, "Jewish Poznan," *Poznan in Your Pocket*, July-October 2008, p. 6.
- [9.](#) The photograph of the original tombstone inscription is taken from Sztyma-Knasiacka, p. 22.
- [10.](#) See Sinason, pp. 100-103; cf. Sztyma-Knasiacka, p. 13.
- [11.](#) See A. Wasserteil's introduction to R. David Hoffmann, שיעבוד בני ישראל, 2008)48 המעין, במצרים, number 3, p. 25.
- [12.](#) R. David Hoffmann used to apply this Talmudic phrase to the רש"ש, but it surely applies to Hoffmann as well. See his שו"ת מלמד להועיל, Frankfurt, 1932,

vol. 3, §71. Cf. R. M. Roth, מבשר עזרא, Jerusalem, 1968, p. 167.

13. Useful information can be gleaned from the following:

H.J. Bechtoldt, "David Hoffmann," in his *Die jüdische Bibelkritik im 19. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart, 1995, pp. 363-438; D. Ellenson and R. Jacobs, "Scholarship and Faith: David Hoffmann and his Relationship to Wissenschaft des Judentums," *Modern Judaism* 8(1988), n.1, pp. 26-70; L. Ginzberg, *Students Scholars and Saints*, Philadelphia, 1928, pp. 252-262; L. Jung, *The Path of a Pioneer*, London, 1980, pp. 20-27; J. Marmorstein, "David Hoffmann, Defender of the Faith," *Tradition* 8(1966), n.4, pp. 91-101; A. Marx, *Essays in Jewish Biography*, Philadelphia, 1947, pp. 185-222; *Idem*, *Studies in Jewish History*, New York, 1944, pp. 369-376; M. B. Shapiro, "Rabbi David Zevi Hoffmann on Torah and Wissenschaft," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 6(1995-6), pp. 129-137; C. Tchernowitz, מסכה וזכרונות, New York, 1945, pp. 244-264; and Y. Wolfsberg-Aviad, "David Hoffmann," in L. Jung, ed., *Guardians of Our Heritage*, New York, 1958, pp. 363-419 (cf. Wolfsberg-Aviad's דיוקנאות, Jerusalem, 1962, pp. 57-66). Much more bibliography can be added; the items listed here are intended to get the interested reader started.

14. For the honorific title מורה מורנו, see figure 13, also from the Adass Jisroel cemetery. Cf. the very interesting responsum in 2:56 שו"ת מהרש"ם.

