

## Cataloging Jewish Burials in Western Massachusetts

by Jeff Kontoff

*This is a story of how adding burial records for my family to on-line burial registries, and subsequently fulfilling a photo request at a local Jewish cemetery, became an ongoing project to research, catalog, and photograph gravestones for burials at the Jewish cemeteries in the Springfield area (and beyond).*

In 1976 I began a career in Springfield and lived in Chicopee. I discovered that not far from where I lived are two Jewish cemeteries, Sons of Zion and Rodphey Sholom. I always wanted to stop at the cemeteries just to see what they looked like and who was buried there, but never did until many years later.

When I began to delve into my own family genealogy, I was aware of JewishGen and their JOWBR burial registry, but was disappointed to see so few of my relatives in the system. My maternal relatives are buried in Fairfield, Connecticut. We would visit their graves annually.

I was hoping to find where my paternal relatives were buried. They lived near Boston, but I never asked about where they were buried, and I can't remember my father making any trips there to visit their graves. All I knew was that they were somewhere in one of the Jewish cemeteries in West Roxbury.

Around that time, I discovered the existence of burial registry Findagrave.com. I began by adding my maternal-side relatives onto the database, with grave photos. I liked the website, because of its ease of use and its ability to link other family members., In essence, it re-connected family members after death. Eventually, I found the graves of my father's side of the family and entered them as well.

One of the nice things about Findagrave is that photo requests can be made for gravestones for any memorial. There is a large network of volunteer photographers. This is great if you do not live near a memorial of interest. Since I was retired at the time, I became a volunteer photographer. I had lots of experience with photography and editing using Photoshop, so I was able to create photos after the fact to get the best image possible.

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So, I asked myself, why not start with photo requests at the Chicopee Jewish Cemeteries? In 2011, some 35 years after discovering this cemetery's existence near where I lived, I went to fulfill a photo request for Leo Solin, buried at Sons of Zion. Knowing nothing about the cemetery, I decided to find him the hard way, by walking up and down the rows. Fortunately, it's not a particularly large place.

And there he was:



Well, I got the bug! Being a detail-oriented, retired engineer, this was right up my alley. After spending time fulfilling photo requests, I asked myself: why stop there? Shouldn't all these burials be in Findagrave and

JOWBR? "Never forget the dead" struck a chord with me. How many others are looking for deceased family members and don't know where they are, or can't visit them? How many do not have family to visit them anymore? I noticed very few gravestones had visitation stones placed on them.

I decided the information already in JOWBR would be a good starting point. When I looked through the JOWBR database, however, I discovered that though burials for all of the nearby Jewish cemeteries were in the system, they had not been updated since 1999! I took on the challenge of updating all the records, and more. Thus began an ongoing project to catalog and photograph graves for all the Jewish Cemeteries within reasonable driving distance from Springfield.

I also decided to take it one step further, to help out prospective genealogists. Many gravestones have incomplete information, like no date of birth or just the year of birth and death, etc. Additionally, who were their parents? What is the maiden name for married women? Who are their siblings?

Having a subscription to Ancestry.com for all kinds of family records, and access to GenealogyBank for obituaries, allowed me to "fill in the blanks" for missing, or incorrect information. (Yes: there are incorrect dates and spelling mistakes on gravestones).

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The biggest challenges are for old, worn stones and ones written all in Hebrew. One nice side benefit for me was to refresh, to some extent, my level of competence reading Hebrew, something I hadn't used since I was 13. Even though it's limited mainly to names and dates, it's better than nothing. Fortunately, the ViewMate translation service on JewishGen.org came in handy a few times.

One important side benefit of this project was the discovery and addition to each database of Jewish burials for which there are no gravestones or markers to be found. Many burials at Sons of Zion are late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the databases available on-line is Massachusetts Death Records covering deaths through 1920. This was invaluable to identify Hebrew only inscribed gravestones, which only had the date of death and first names of the deceased and his/her father.

These early graves at Sons of Zion are mostly for Jews who lived in Holyoke. From dates of death, it was possible to find death certificates in the Holyoke sections of the Death Records database, matching these individuals. This allowed inclusion of birth dates not inscribed on the stones and parental information for the memorials.

This opened up the possibility to expand the search to include multiple cities (Holyoke, Springfield, and West Springfield, for example) going backwards from 1920 until the first recorded Jewish burial in the area in 1892. Eventually this would include cemeteries in Hampshire, Franklin and Berkshire counties, in addition to those in Hampden county.

Finding Jewish burials, although time consuming, was not that difficult going back to 1903, since the name of the burial cemetery is included on the forms. Earlier than 1903, it gets tricky. You have to look for typical "Jewish" surnames who have parents listed from Russia or Poland, and are buried in "Springfield", "West Springfield", or "Fairview, Chicopee".

Many death records were found for people with gravestones at the local cemeteries. However, I was shocked to find so many death records for burials for whom there are no gravestones or markers. The totals were: Northampton – 9, Chicopee – 86, Springfield – 55, and West Springfield – 363.

Most are for stillborn births or infant children dying of various early 1900's illnesses. A smaller percentage are for adults who apparently could not afford a gravestone. These are individuals unaccounted for in previous database collections.

I asked myself, where are all these people actually buried? None of the Jewish cemeteries has an obvious place where they might be. The older sections of each cemetery are occupied by burials with erected

gravestones. Were infants interred in a special place? Were new burials put on top of old ones? Though these are unanswered questions, at least now their existence is acknowledged.

So, one by one, I took on each Jewish cemetery, adding new records, expanding old records, and, in some cases, correcting old transcription errors for previous work. As of this writing, some 12,000+ memorials and 19,000+ photos have been added to Findagrave, with updated records sent to JewishGen.org for updates to the JOWBR database.

The work is ongoing, with additions to Findagrave as deaths occur, and updates to JOWBR every few years. This is the ultimate perpetual project! As the saying goes: the two things that are certain are death and taxes!

In closing, if you, or someone you know, has relatives buried in any of these cemeteries, please look up their memorials in Findagrave, and let me know if there are any edits required. by email to the Western Mas

The cemeteries included in the project are:

<p><b>Chicopee</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sons of Zion</li><li>• Rodphey Sholom</li></ul> <p><b>Greenfield</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Greenfield Hebrew Congregation (Temple Israel)</li></ul> <p><b>Great Barrington</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ahavath Sholom</li></ul> <p><b>Northampton</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hebrew Home Cemetery</li><li>• B'nai Israel</li></ul>	<p><b>Shutesbury</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Jewish Community of Amherst Association</li></ul> <p><b>Springfield</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sinai Memorial Park</li><li>• City of Homes</li><li>• Sons of Israel</li><li>• Kesser Israel</li></ul> <p><b>West Springfield</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Beth El (old and new)</li><li>• Kodimoh</li><li>• B'nai Jacob</li><li>• Beth Israel</li></ul>
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