



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 **פ"נ**, 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 **ב"ר**, 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.

Here's one example: If the year is written as **תרפ"ג**, 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
חשוון	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

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

Son of	<i>ben</i>	בן
Daughter of	<i>bat</i>	בת
Title, i.e. "Mr."	<i>reb, rav</i>	רב ר'
Son/Daughter of the honored	<i>ben reb</i>	ב'ר
<hr/>		
The Levite	<i>ha-levi</i>	הלוי
The Cohen	<i>ha-kohen</i>	הכהן
The Rabbi	<i>ha-rav</i>	הרב
<hr/>		
Dear, Beloved (masc.)	<i>ha-yakar</i>	היקר
Dear, Beloved (fem.)	<i>ha-y'karah</i>	היקרה
<hr/>		
Father	<i>av</i>	אב
My father	<i>avi</i>	אבי
Our father	<i>avinu</i>	אבינו
Mother	<i>eem</i>	אם
My mother	<i>eemi</i>	אמי
Our mother	<i>emanu</i>	אמנו
My husband	<i>baali</i>	בעלי
My wife	<i>ishti</i>	אשתי
Brother	<i>akh</i>	אח
My brother	<i>akhi</i>	אחי
Our brother	<i>akhinu</i>	אחינו
Sister	<i>akhot</i>	אחות
Aunt	<i>dodah</i>	דודה
Uncle	<i>dod</i>	דוד
<hr/>		
Man	<i>ish</i>	איש
Woman	<i>ishah</i>	אשה
Woman (unmarried)	<i>b'tulah</i>	בתולה
Woman (married) = "Mrs."	<i>marat</i>	מרת
Old (masc., fem.)	<i>zakain, z'kaina</i>	זקן זקנה
Child (masc., fem.)	<i>yeled, yaldah</i>	ילד ילדה
Young man/woman	<i>bakhur, bakhurah</i>	בחור בחורה

Died (masc., fem.)	<i>niftar, nifterah</i>	נפטר נפטרה
Born (masc., fem.)	<i>nolad, noldah</i>	נולד נולדה
Year, Years	<i>shanah, shanim</i>	שנה שנים
Day, Days	<i>yom, yamim</i>	יום ימים
Month	<i>khodesh</i>	חדש
First of the month	<i>rosh khodesh</i>	ראש חודש

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. *Abkürzungsverzeichnis hebraischer Grabinschriften*. (Frankfurt am Main: Gesellschaft zur Förderung 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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