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Reclaiming a Mother's Name

By Sylvia Herskowitz

There is a compelling demand today to increase women's visibility in Orthodox Jewish life and decision making - and there are significant areas where this can be accomplished gracefully and almost effortlessly. One way is to increase women's visibility in the cemetery by using the mother's name as well as the father's on *matzevot*, or tombstones. Most of us have for some reason which I have been unable to trace, and because it is always reckless to generalize, some Jewish communities followed the unquestioned tradition of citing only the father's name on the tombstone. Today, with our heightened sensitivities, when we visit the cemeteries we are most familiar with, our past generations confront us in silent reproach. The name of the father has been inscribed, but the mother's name is absent. It is important to correct this inequity and reclaim the name of the mother.

nities do inscribe the mother's name on the stone. One example is the large Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn, which used the old Montefiore cemetery in years past, and now has its own Rodfe Sedek section in the Baron de Hirsch cemetery in Staten Island. (My authority for this is Rabbi Zevulun Lieberman, spiritual leader of the Beth Torah congregation in Brooklyn.) In the Ashkenazic community, examples can be found in the Adas Yeraim section of the Beth Israel Cemetery in New Jersey, where many of the original Viennese emigres of the Second World War are buried. There you can find *Veshem Imo* or *Veshem Ima* and the name of his /her mother is There are examples in cemeteries in Europe as well. Outside Amsterdam, in the Muiderberg cemetery, and apparently also in the other two cemeteries there, most of the stones carry the mother's name in addition to the father's. Another illustrious example is found on Har Hamenuchot, in Jerusalem, on the *matseva* of Rav Moshe Feinstein, which reads and the Rabbanit Feya Gitel.

When we mourn the loss of a loved one, we often are not in the mindset to think of correcting the omissions of the past, and sometimes we leave the composition of the text of the tombstone to other members of the family. But think for a moment about who will visit the gravesite and you will realize the appropriateness of inscribing both parents names. The past is history, but we have it in our hands to correct the present and the future.

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