Deciphering Jewish Gravestones

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My 2011 article on [Jewish gravestone symbols](#) has long been one of the most popular posts on my web site. In that article, I discuss the symbols found on Jewish gravestones, but not the text. I wrote in the first paragraph that I will likely write about the text at some point in the future. Unfortunately, I waited nine years to do so, but here's a look at some of the Hebrew text you might find on a Jewish gravestone, and how to decipher it.

We should get some terminology out the way. We're talking about Hebrew inscriptions on gravestones. In Hebrew we call the grave a קבר *kever*, and the gravestone itself a מצבה *matseva* (lit. monument). There isn't a particularly good Hebrew word for epitaph (the inscription), it's just הכתובת על המצבה the writing on the gravestone. We do use the word הספד *hesped* for eulogy, and you can think of some of the inscription to be a eulogy. As this is intended as an introduction to this topic, I'll simply use the English terms most of the time.

Let's jump in with a gravestone I photographed in Warsaw in 2018. I like this inscription because it's fairly clear and it duplicates almost all the information from the Hebrew in Polish, allowing everything to be confirmed. We have here a Professor Markus Zamenof, who was born in 1837 and died in 1907. I've underlined key parts of the Hebrew, and explain it all in the table below the photo. We'll go into the detailed explanations of how to decipher and interpret everything as we go along, such as the day of the week, the day of the month, how to calculate the year, etc. For now, just take it as a quick look at what components of a gravestone inscription could show up.

If you're wondering what the two lines in between items 1–6 and 7–13 are, they mirror the Polish. The first phrase 'יועץ מלוכה' mirrors 'Radca Stanu' and means advisor to the state, and the second line says that he was a teacher in the realschule (a school) in Warsaw. While those details are important, it's impossible to cover every possible Hebrew word in descriptive sentences in this article. In this case Google Translate would work well enough to give you the gist of what it is saying. Now for the parts underlined and numbered in the photo:

	Hebrew	Transliteration	Translation
1	פ״נ	P.N. (po nikbar)	Here is buried
2	מרדכי	Mordeḥai	Mordeḥai
3	ב״ר	B.R. (ben reb)	son of Mr.
4	שרגא	Shraga	Shraga
5	זאמענהאף	Zamenhof	Zamenhof
6	ז״ל	Z.L. (zikhrono livrakha)	of blessed memory
7	נולד	Nolad	Born
8	יום ב׳	Yom B' (Day 2)	Monday
9	ד׳	Dalet	4th
10	ל	Lamed	of (literally 'to')
11	חודש	Ḥodesh	month
12	אדר ראשון	Adar Rishon	Adar I
13	תקצ״ז	Taf Kof Tsadi Zayin	5597
14	נפטר	Niftar	Died
15	כ״ד	Khof Daled	24th
16	ל	Lamed	of (literally 'to')
17	חודש	Ḥodesh	month
18	כסלו	Kislev	Kislev
19	תרצ״ח	Tav Resh Tsadi Ḥet	5668
20	תנצב״ה	T.N.Ts.B.H. (Tehi Nishmato Tsrurah biTsror haḤayim)	May his soul be bound up in the bond of life

Okay, so that's a first look. Let's now break things down further.

Letters

The first thing we need to do is list the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Before Hebrew purists jump on me for this chart, I want to say this is a simplified chart that glosses over some idiosyncrasies in the language, and for that I apologize, but this is intended for people using this for reading tombstones, not for learning the language. Similarly expanding abbreviations will not always list both the male and female versions of the phrase in Hebrew.

Hebrew Letter	Sofit	Transliteration of Letter Name	English Equivalent
א		Alef	A
ב		Bet	B
ג		Gimel	G
ד		Dalet	D
ה		Hey	H
ו		Vav	V
ז		Zayin	Z
ח		Ḥet	Ḥ
ט		Tet	T
י		Yud	Y
כ	ך	Kaf/Khaf	K / Kh
ל		Lamed	L
מ	ם	Mem	M
נ	ן	Nun	N
ס		Samekh	S
ע		Ayin	E
פ	ף	Pay/Fay	P / F
צ	ץ	Tsadi	Ts
ק		Kof	Q
ר		Resh	R
ש		Shin/Sin	Sh / S
ת		Tav/Sav	T / S

On the left you see the Hebrew letter. In some cases (five to be exact) there is a second form of the letter when the letter shown up at the end of a word. This final letter form of the letter is called sofit (final), and thus the final form of the מ (Mem) which is ם is called Mem Sofit. Some letters are pronounced differently depending of the vowel used. Vowels in Hebrew are called nikud, and are not letters but diacritical marks. Thus the letter פ by itself is Fay, but with a nikud like פּ (note the dot in the middle of the letter) is Pay (switched the sound from an F to a P).

It's unlikely, however, that vowels will be found on gravestones, so you need to know which version of the letter it is through context.

For transliterations I'm not using a specific system, so I apologize if there are inconsistencies. I am using H with a dot underneath it (Ḥ) to represent the ח and Kh to represent כ, by convention, even though to my ears the sound is the same. I don't use Q for ק even though I list it as the letter equivalent above, but rather the more conventional K.

There is a ligature (combination of letters) used on some gravestones, specifically the ligature of א (Alef) and ל (Lamed), which becomes ﭏ. If you see this, just expand it to the two letters. This ligature is probably used since the letters together constitute one of the names of God. Another ligature used (for a similar reason) is a combination of the letters in the abbreviation לפ״ק which can be seen in the section below.

Let's take a look at some actual letters from gravestones. Each row in the following graphic is from either a single gravestone, or from two very similar ones (usually from spouses). Not every letter shows up on every stone, in particular many end (sofit) letters don't show up, so in those cases there is no image for them in that row.

Hebrew letter samples from different gravestones

Easily Confused Letters

Some Hebrew letters are easily confused, especially when the letters have eroded over time and parts are not visible. Here are a few letter pairs to watch out for:

Hebrew letters	English equivalents
ב and כ, and sometimes פ	B and Kh, and sometimes P
ד and ר	D and R
ו and ז	V and Z
ס and ם	S and M (at the end of a word)

There are other letters that can be confused, especially when parts of the letters are lost. For example, ך can be confused with ד or ר if the bottom part of the letter is lost. So keep these letters in mind when reading inscriptions, especially if the words don't seem to make sense. It's also worth noting that sometimes the wrong letter is used. This is especially true in areas where the engraver might not actually know Hebrew. Sometimes they work from a template, and copy the letters as they see them, and they actually put in the wrong letter from the beginning.

It's useful to remember certain letter forms only show up at the end of a word, so if you're trying to figure out if it's a ס or a ם, and it's not the last letter of the word, then it's going to be a ס because the ם can't show up in the middle of a word. Similarly when trying to figure out if it's a ב or a כ and it's the end of the word, then it's likely the ב since the כ doesn't show up at the end of a word.

How Hebrew acronyms and abbreviations are formed

A very important aspect of Hebrew in general, and Hebrew gravestone inscriptions in particular, is the widespread use of acronyms and abbreviations.

Acronyms in Hebrew are formed a number of different ways, such as with the first letters of each word, several letters from each word, or some combination thereof. A symbol, usually a *geresh* (similar to an apostrophe) or a *gershayim* (a double-geresh, similar to a double quote mark), is placed between the last two letters of the non-inflected form of the acronym. In most cases there won't be inflected forms of acronyms on gravestones, so you can assume that the symbol will show up before the last letter of the acronym. Common acronyms on gravestones include פ"נ for פה נקבר (Po Nikbar) and ב"ר for בן רב (Ben Reb).

If an acronym is read as a word, then it will usually use the end (sofit) form of the last letter (if one exists). If the acronym is always read as the full phrase, or read as the individual letters, then the regular (non-sofit) form of the final letter is used. An example that shows several of these factors is the acronym for חול המועד (Ḥol HaMoed) which is חוה"מ, where the first two letters are from the first word חול (Ḥol), the third letter is the modifier ה (Ha), and the last

letter from the word מועד (Moed), and since the acronym is usually read as the phrase itself, the last letter is in the regular מ form on not the end (sofit) form ם.

Abbreviations for the most part are shortened versions of a word, and end with a geresh ('). There are sometimes different abbreviations for the same word. For example, one word that is commonly found on gravestones is נפטר or נפטרה (died, in male and female forms) can be abbreviated as either נ' or נפ'. With rankings like first and second, or ראשון (rishon) and שני (sheni), those words are abbreviated as the letters that correspond to the numbers 1 and 2, with an added geresh, א' and ב'. For example, when writing the month Adar Rishon, it could be written as אדר ראשון or it could be written אדר א'.

The formatting of acronyms and abbreviations can vary by gravestone, and even on the same gravestone. In the illustration below you can see three acronyms common on gravestones: תנצב"ה, פ"נ, and ב"ר (usually on men's stones), and a number from the date for each stone. Each column represents the elements from a single stone. All of these came from a single section of a cemetery in Queens, and the middle two come from a couple, which is why one has no ב"ר since that is usually only on a man's gravestone.

פ"נ
ב"ר
תנצב"ה
#

The inscription on the far right uses a gershayim (") mark for the first two acronyms, and for the number at the bottom, but for the longer acronym תנצב"ה it uses a geresh (apostrophe) after each letter (ת'נ'צ'ב'ה').

All three examples of ב"ר are different, one using a gershayim ("), one using a dot (·), and one using a caron (˘). Similarly, two of the instances of פ"נ use a gershayim ("), one uses a caron (˘), and one uses a geresh (') after each letter (פ'נ').

In short, don't get hung up on how the abbreviations are formatted, just try to recognize when you are looking at an abbreviation, and figure out what it means.

Prepositions and other Prefixes

Most prepositions in Hebrew consist of a single letter added to the beginning of a word. In gravestone inscriptions you'll find standard Hebrew prepositions, but also some from Aramaic. Here are the most common Hebrew prepositions, and the words 'the' and 'and' which also modify words using a single letter prefix:

Preposition/Prefix	Transliteration(s)	Translation
ב	b', bi, ba	in, at, by
ל	l', li, la	to, for
כ	k', ki, ka	as, like
מ	mi, me	from
ה	ha	the
ו	v', vi, va, oo	and

On gravestones it is also common to see the Aramaic preposition ד (D) which means 'of'. We see this preposition in other fairly common phrases such as בסייעתא דשמיא (Besiyata Dishmaya) which is usually abbreviated as בס"ד, which means 'with the help of heaven'. ד is frequently seen on gravestone inscriptions before the name of a holiday, so you might see ה' דפסח meaning the 5th (ה) day of (ד) Pesach (פסח).

In practice you might see ל before the word חודש (month) which could show up before a month's name (although this is doesn't have to happen) like ה' לחודש כסלו, meaning the 5th (ה') of (ל) the month (חודש) Kislev (כסלו).

If the gravestone lists where the person was from, it would likely use the preposition מ followed by the name of the town. The location given might not be accurate. Sometimes the location might be the large city near where they were from, or in at least one relative of mine's case, the location given wasn't where they were born, nor where they died, but where lived for a few years in between, maybe because it was a respected location.

Basically if you're trying to figure out a word and it's not making sense, see if it starts with one of the above letters, and if so, try to remove that letter and see if the word makes more sense. This is particularly true with ד which isn't going to translate properly if you throw the word into Google Translate since it's not actually Hebrew (in this context).

In the Beginning

At the top of most Jewish gravestones will be an acronym, frequently פ״נ, an abbreviation for פה נקבר (Po Nikbar), meaning 'Here is buried'. Sometimes this abbreviation is part of a design at the top of the stone, and sometimes it is at the beginning of the text on the stone. Here are some variations:

Abbr.	Hebrew	Transliteration	Translation
פ״נ	פה נקבר	Po Nikbar	Here is buried
פ״נ	פה נטמן	Po Nitman	Here is concealed
פ״ט	פה טמון	Po Tamun	Here lies (is hidden)
פ״מ	פה מנוח	Po Manoaḥ	Here rests
פ״ש	פה שוכב	Po Shokhev	Here lies
ב״ה	במקום הזה	Bamakom Hazeh	In this place
מ״ק	מקום קבר	Makom Kever	Place of Burial
נ״פ	נקבר פה	Nikbar Po	Buried here

Honorifics and Relationships

It's common to introduce the person buried with some kind of title, honorific, and/or relationship. Here are some words to look out for at the beginning of the gravestone text. Some words have variants shown – keep in mind that Hebrew is written right to left, so the first version is on the right in Hebrew, and on the left in the transcription and translation. These phrases are likely to be found before the name. For those phrases that are likely to be found after the name, see the [Post Name Blessings](#) section below.

Hebrew	Transliteration	Translation
איש	Ish	Man
אשה	Isha	Woman/Wife
אב/אבי/אבינו	Av/Avi/Avinu	Father/My Father/Our Father
אם/אמי/אמנו	Im/Imi/Imeinu	Mother/My Mother/Our Mother
אח/אחי/אחינו	Aḥ/Aḥi/Aḥinu	Brother/My Brother/Our Brother
אחות/אחותי/אחות שלנו	Aḥot/Aḥoti/Aḥot Shelanu	Sister/My Sister/Our Sister
בעל/בעלי	Baal/Baali	Husband/My Husband
ר׳ or רב	Reb	Mr.
הרב	HaRav	The Rabbi
מור״ה or מורנו הרב	Morenu HaRav	Our teacher the master
אשת/אשתי	Eshet/Ishti	Wife/My Wife
הא׳ or האשה	HaIsha	The woman/wife
מרת	Marat	Mrs.
אלמן/אלמנה	Alman/Almana	Widower/Widow
כלה	Kalah	Young married woman (lit. bride)
בתולה	Betula	Unmarried woman (lit. virgin)
אברך	Avreikh	Young married man
נער/נערה	Naar/Naara	Young man/young woman
עלם/עלמה	Elem/Alema	Young man/young woman
בחור/בחורה	Baḥor/Baḥora	Young man/young woman
ילד/ילדה	Yeled/Yalda	Boy/Girl
בן	Ben	Son
בת	Baht	Daughter
ב״ר or בן רב	Ben Reb	Son of Mr.

Hebrew	Transliteration	Translation
בר	Bar	Son (in Aramaic)
דוד/דודה	Dod/Doda	Uncle/Aunt
סבא/סבתא	Saba/Savta	Grandfather/Grandmother
זקן/זקנה	Zaken/Z'kena	Elder (male/female)
הכהן	HaCohen	The Cohen
הלוי	HaLevi	The Levite

Descriptive Phrases

The are many common phrases used to describe the deceased. Here are are few common phrases with translations.

Hebrew	Transliteration	Translation
איש אמונים צדיק וישר	Ish Emunim Tsdik v'Yashar	A faithful, righteous and honest man
איש זקן ושבע ימים	Ish Zaken uS'va Yamim	An old man full of days (meaning he lived a long life)
איש ישר בדרכי צדיקים	Ish Yashar b'Darkhei Tsadikim	An honest man who followed the path of the righteous
איש ישר וכשר	Ish Yashar v'Kasher	An honest and pure man
איש צדיק ישר הוא	Ish Tsadik Yashar Hu	A righteous and honest man is he
איש תם וישר	Ish Tam v'Yashar	A modest and honest man
כל ימיו הלך בדרך הישר	Kol Yamav Halakh bDerech HaYashar	All his days he walked the straight path
נפלה עטרת ראשנו	Naflah Ateret Rosheinu	The crown has fallen from our head
עזב אותנו מורנו ורבנו	Azav Otanu Morenu v'Rabeinu	Our teacher and rabbi has left us
כל ימיו הקדיש עתים לתורה	Kol Yamav Hikdish Itim lTorah	All his days he devoted time to Torah study
אישה ישרה ונעימה	Isha Yishara v'Neima	An honest and pleasant woman
אישה תמה וברה	Isha Tama v'Bara	A modest and pure woman
אשה יראת ה׳ היא תתהלל	Eshet Yirat Hashem Hee Tithalel	A woman with fear of God shall be praised ([Proverbs 31:30](#))
אשה צנועה וחשובה	Isha Tsnuah v'Ḥashuva	A modest and important woman
אשה צנועה עטרת בעלה	Isha Tsnuah Ateret Baala	A modest woman the crown of her husband
אשת חיל מי ימצא	Eshet Ḥayil Mi Yimtsa	A woman of valor who can find? ([Proverbs 31:10](#))
האשה הצנועה והחסידה	Halsha HaTznuah v'HaḤasida	The modest and devout woman
פאר בעלה הוד בניה	Pe'er Baala Hod Baneha	Splendor of her husband, glory of her children

Names

Probably the most important part of the inscription is the name. Without that how would we know we're even looking at the correct gravestone? Usually, however, there's a lot more we can learn from the name. While this varies by time, location, and by whether the people buried were Ashkenazi or Sephardi, there is almost always important genealogical information to be learned from the names in the inscription.

The average Ashkenazi inscription includes the Hebrew name of the deceased, along with the Hebrew name of their father. Sometimes the name of the mother is also included, although this is uncommon in Ashkenazi inscriptions, especially older ones. Sephardim, on the other hand more commonly include the mother's name on their gravestone, many times instead of the father's name.

In the gravestones on the Mount of Olives that were transcribed by Rabbi Asher Brisk and published over a hundred years ago (many of the stones subsequently destroyed by the Jordanian army when they occupied Jerusalem from 1949 to 1967) in the book חלקת מחוקק, roughly 1500 of the burials were Sephardim, and 6500 were Ashkenazim. Among Sephardi inscriptions, roughly 90% include the family's surname, while among the Ashkenazi inscriptions, only 20% include a surname. In more recent Ashkenazi gravestones, it's common to have the surname of the deceased, although sometimes that is only in the local language, and not part of the Hebrew inscription.

This article is focused on the Hebrew inscriptions found on gravestones, but one point concerning English or other languages that you might find on Jewish gravestones is important. The name in Hebrew may be related to the name in another language, but it may not. There is no definitive translation of Hebrew and Yiddish names to English or any other language. Sometimes English equivalents were chosen (Rebecca for Rivka, Elisabeth for Elisheva, etc.) but sometimes they were not. Sometimes names sound or are spelled similarly to their original names. Sometimes the chosen English names sounded like a name or nickname in another language (like Polish or Hungarian) that you may not know. Sometimes there is not even that tenuous of a connection. The important point here is that whole you can use these types of connections between names to make a guess at what a relative's name was on the other side of the ocean, it may be completely wrong. Chaim from Poland might have named himself Charles in the US like many others, but he could have named himself anything Bob or Jon or Jim as well. Don't get stuck on a name because it makes sense to you. Names chosen by immigrants didn't always make sense.

In order to help with some of the Hebrew names you might find on gravestones, and not be familiar with, I've transcribed several lists of Jewish given names that were published many years ago. The earliest one is from 1866 in Poland (male, female), the next from 1928 in Poland (male, female), and the most recent one from 1939 in the US (male, female). For more modern names, you can see my published lists of the most popular Israeli given names, such as the recent ones from 2017-2018 (male, female). Other useful articles on my site include Variations in Jewish Given Names and Animals and Name Pairs in Jewish Given Names.

I mention several useful books in the Bibliography section below, but the most useful are probably Alexander Beider's *A Dictionary of Ashkenazic Given Names* and Rabbi Shmuel Gorr's *Jewish Personal Names*.

Here are some names I've taken from actual gravestones. I'll go through each one below.

1		אליעזר ליפמן בר **יצחק אריה** הלוי
2		רבקה בת ר׳ **שלמה**
3		ר׳ **אלטער מנחם** ב״ר **אשר משה מרדכי**
4		מרת **מלכה** בת ר׳ **ארי׳ ליב**
5		יוסל ב״ר **פישל**
6		חיה רחל בת ר׳ **מנחם מניס**
7		יאכעט בת ר׳ **יחזקאל**
8		ר׳ **יהודה אריה** בן הרב **יצחק ורויזה** ע״ה
9		מ׳ **מלכה לאה** בת ר׳ **דוד** הלוי שטולץ ע״ה

1 On the top line we have the name אליעזר ליפמן (Eliezer Lipman). If you were not familiar with the second name ליפמן, you could search in the previously mentioned lists and you'll find it shows up in both the 1866 and the 1939 lists. You can in fact search in the site-wide search at the top right of the site, and it will show you which lists it is in. Next we have the word בר which is either the acronym of בן ר׳ (son of Mr.) or the Aramaic word for son, so either way it is saying the next name is the parent of the person. The father's name is יצחק אריה. The name is followed, in slightly smaller text, with the text הלוי (the Levite).

2 The woman's name is רבקה (Rivka), the phrase בת ר׳ means daughter of Mr., and her father's name is shown as שלמה (Shlomo).

3 The inscription starts with ר׳ which simply means 'Mr.' (sometime people confuse ר׳ to mean Rabbi, but a rabbi would have הרב or other honorific), and the name is אלטער מנחם (Alter Menachem). The next line start with ב״ר which is the acronym of בן ר׳ (son of Mr.), and then has the father's name אשר משה מרדכי (Asher Moshe Mordechai).

4 Starting with the word מרת which is 'Mrs.', followed by her name מלכה (Malka). Her name is followed by בת (daughter of). The next line starts with ר׳ which is again just 'Mr.' and then the name ארי׳ ליב which is interesting because it seems to abbreviate the first name. ארי׳ is likely the abbreviation of אריה which is reinforced by the fact that אריה ליב (Aryeh Leib) is a common name pairing (they are the Hebrew and Yiddish words for Lion). See my [article](#) on animal names and name pairs on this topic.

5 The name is יוסל ב״ר פישל (Yosel son of Mr. Fishel). Note that יוסל is a form of יוסף (Yosef/Joseph). If you didn't know that, you could search for the name on my site, and it shows up in both the 1866 and 1939 lists, both indicating the connection to the name Joseph (and in fact on this grave the man's name in English is Joseph).

6 The name מנחם מניס (Menachem Menis) בת ר׳ (daughter of Mr.) חיה רחל (Chaya Rachel). Note that the last letter is hard to differentiate whether it's a ס or a ם. See the section above on Easily Confused Letters. Searching on my site you will actually find the name in the 1939 list, which shows the name Mennis, and indicates it is a form of Menachem. This means both names are actually the same, and might be a way of showing his halachic name (מנחם), and the name he used (מניס). Another way of saying this is that his *shem kodesh* was מנחם and his *kinnui* was מניס.

7 The name יוכעת wasn't a name I was familiar with, nor is it in any of my lists, but searching online showed it to be a form of יוכבד (Yocheved). See [this photo](#) on the Beit Hatfutsot web site. She is בת ר׳ (daughter of Mr.) יחזקאל (Yechezkel).

8 ר׳ יהודה אריה (Mr. Yehuda Aryeh). Yehuda Aryeh is also a common name pairing, whose origin in is Jacob's blessing to son Yehuda in Genesis 49:9, גור אריה יהודה (Yehuda is a lion's cub). He is בן הרב (son of the Rabbi) יצחק (Yitzchak/Isaac), and then ורויזה which is the letter ו (and) followed by the name רויזה (Roza) his mother. Lastly there is the abbreviation ע״ה which in this case (with both parents listed) likely stands for עליהם השלום (May they rest in peace).

9 מ׳ is the abbreviation of מרת (Mrs.). Her name is מלכה לאה (Malka Leah). She is בת ר׳ (daughter of Mr.) דוד (David) הלוי (the Levite) שטולץ (a surname, probably Stoltz). Lastly the abbreviation ע״ה which in this case is probably referencing the father and is short for עליו השלום (May he rest in peace) or it could be referring to her in which case it would be short for עליה השלום (May she rest in peace).

Post-Name Blessings

As shown in some of the names above, names are frequently followed by an acronym which is a kind of blessing that person will rest in peace. Here are some of the acronyms you may find:

Hebrew	Abbr.	Transliteration	Translation
זכרונו/ה לברכה	ז״ל	Zikhrono/a Livrakha	May his/her memory be a blessing
זכר צדיק לברכה	זצ״ל	Zecher Tsadik Livracha	May the memory of the righteous be a blessing
ישמרהו צורה וגואלה	יצ״ו	Yishmerehu Tsuro v'Yicheyehu	May his rock and redeemer protect him
עליו השלום	ע״ה	Olav HaShalom	May he rest in peace
נוחו/ה עדן	נ״ע	Nuḥo/a Eden	May he/she rest in Eden (Paradise)
נשמתו/ה עדן	נ״ע	Nishmato/a Eden	His/her soul is in Eden (Paradise)

Another related group of post-name blessings are for a living parent, usually the father, if listed on the gravestone. If the father of the person is listed on the gravestone, but is still living, you could see one of the following abbreviations after their name:

Hebrew	Abbr.	Transliteration	Translation
נרו יאיר	נ״י	Nero Yair	May his light shine
יאיר נרו	י״נ	Yair Nero	May his light shine
ימים ארוכים	י״א	Yamim Arukhim	(He should live) long days

Death Phrases

Most inscriptions precede the date of death with a form of the word נפטר Niftar (died), basically saying this person died on the specified date. Sometimes a more poetic phrase is used instead. Here are some of the words and phrases that can precede the date of death.

Hebrew	Abbr.	Transliteration	Translation
נפתר	נפ׳, נ׳	Niftar	Died (male)
נפטרה	נפ׳, נ׳	Niftera	Died (female)
נאסף אל עמיו	נא״ע	Neesaf el Amav	Gathered to his people
נקטף בדמי ימיו		Niktaf biDmi Yamav	Harvested in the prime of his life (prematurely) ([Isaiah 38:10](#))
נקטף באביב ימיו		Niktaf b'Aviv Yamav	Harvested in the spring of his life (prematurely)
שנקטף במבחר שנותיו		Sheniktaf b'Mivḥar Shenotav	Harvested in the prime of his years (prematurely)
נאספה אל עמה	נא״ע	Ne'esfa el Ama	Gathered to her people
נאסף אל אבותיו		Ne'esaf el Avotav	Gathered to his ancestors
נאספה אל אבותיה		Ne'esfa el Avoteha	Gathered to her ancestors
נפטר לבית עולמו	נלב״ע	Niftar l'Beit Olamo	Released to his eternal home
שכב עם אבותיו		Shakhav im Avotav	Laying with his ancestors
הלך לעולמו		Halakh liOlamo	Gone to his eternity
הלכה לעולמה		Halkha liOlama	Gone to her eternity
יצאה נשמתו בעמדו בתפלה		Yatsa Nishmato b'Omdo biTefila	His soul departed and rose in prayer
נשמתו עלתה למרום		Nishmato Alta l'Marom	His soul rose to the heights

Sometimes there is a short phrase between the word or phrase above, and the date. This can be a phrase such as בשם טוב (with a good name). This particular phrase is sometimes abbreviated as בש״ט. So you could see something like נפטר בש״ט before the date, or even abbreviated as נבש״ת. Another phrase is בשיבה טובה which means at a ripe old age. You can also find the person's age inserted after this phrase and before the date. In Hebrew you state someone's age by using בן (ben) for a male and בת (baht) for a female, followed by the age (see the [Numbers](#) section below on how numbers are written in Hebrew), so נפטר בת נ״ז (Niftar baht ḥamishim visheva) means 'She died at the age of 57.

Numbers

Now we get to numbers, ever important in reading a gravestone. While in modern Hebrew we mostly use the same numbers we use in English, in the traditional Hebrew used on gravestones, numbers are written using Hebrew letters. It starts out simple where 1 is written as א (Aleph), which is the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet, and 2 is written as ב (Bet), the second letter, etc.

Letter	Number	Letter	Number
א	1	י	10
ב	2	כ	20
ג	3	ל	30
ד	4	מ	40
ה	5	נ	50
ו	6	ס	60
ז	7	ע	70
ח	8	פ	80
ט	9	צ	90
		ק	100
		ר	200
		ש	300
		ת	400

Another way of showing how the numbers work is like this:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
x 1	א	ב	ג	ד	ה	ו	ז	ח	ט
x 10	י	כ	ל	מ	נ	ס	ע	פ	צ
x 100	ק	ר	ש	ת					

The order of the letters is according to the order in the alphabet, so if you know the Hebrew alphabet you can figure out the above chart (first 9 letter x1, next 9 letters x10, last 4 x100).

So where do these numbers show up on gravestones? They can be used for the day of the week, the date of the month, the year, etc.

Days of the Week

Let's start out with the days of the week, even though they don't show up frequently on gravestones. Days of the week are a good starting point because they illustrate the use of letters as numbers, and the same split between how something is written and how it is pronounced shows up in other contexts.

Day in English	Transliteration	Translation	Full Hebrew	Hebrew
Sunday	Yom Rishon	First Day	יוֹם רִאשׁוֹן	יוֹם א׳
Monday	Yom Sheni	Second Day	יוֹם שֵׁנִי	יוֹם ב׳
Tuesday	Yom Shlishi	Third Day	יוֹם שְׁלִישִׁי	יוֹם ג׳
Wednesday	Yom Revi'i	Fourth Day	יוֹם רְבִיעִי	יוֹם ד׳
Thursday	Yom Ḥamishi	Fifth Day	יוֹם חֲמִישִׁי	יוֹם ה׳
Friday	Yom Shishi	Sixth Day	יוֹם שִׁישִׁי	יוֹם ו׳
Saturday	Shabbat	Sabbath	יוֹם שַׁבָּת	שבת

Days can be a little bit confusing because they are usually written one way and pronounced a different way. They are usually written with the Hebrew letter corresponding to the day (as shown in the number chart above) but they are pronounced as First, Second, etc. In the chart above, the Hebrew column shows how it is usually written, and the Full Hebrew column shows how it is usually pronounced. The Transliteration and Translation columns are of the Full Hebrew, as that is how it is usually said.

The week in the Hebrew calendar begins on Sunday (the final day of the week being the Sabbath). Sunday is written as יוֹם א׳ (Yom A – Day 1) and pronounced יוֹם רִאשׁוֹן (Yom Rishon – First Day). The seventh day is usually simply referred to as שַׁבָּת (Sabbath), sometimes with the יוֹם (Day) prefix but usually not.

In the Jewish calendar, days begin at sundown. So if someone died after sundown but before midnight, the date they died would look like it was a day earlier than what the date would usually correspond to on the Gregorian calendar.

It's unusual to show the day of the week on a gravestone, except if it was Shabbat, and that's more because Shabbat is a holiday. One common reference to a day that isn't Shabbat doesn't follow the above pattern, and is still in reference to Shabbat. You may see an acronym such as עש״ק which stands for ערב שבת קדש (Erev Shabbat Kodesh - the day before the Sabbath) which refers to Friday.

Now let's see how these numbers look practically for the days of a month.

Days of the Month

א	1	ב	2	ג	3	ד	4	ה	5	ו	6	ז	7
ח	8	ט	9	י	10	י"א	11	י"ב	12	י"ג	13	י"ד	14
ט"ו	15	ט"ז	16	י"ז	17	י"ח	18	י"ט	19	כ	20	כ"א	21
כ"ב	22	כ"ג	23	כ"ד	24	כ"ה	25	כ"ו	26	כ"ז	27	כ"ח	28
כ"ט	29	ל	30										

This runs left to right, top to bottom, like a calendar. The numbering starts out with א which is 1, then ב which is 2, etc. Once you get to 11, the numbers are added together, so 11 is י"א which is 10 + 1, and 23 is כ"ג which is 20 + 3. Letters are usually separated with a gershayim (״) like י"א. This is customary, but it may also be a geresh (י'א), or there may be no separation at all (יא).

Note that 15 and 16 are not 10 + 5 and 10 + 6, but rather 9 + 6 (ט"ו) and 9 + 7 (ט"ז). This is because the letters would otherwise form parts of God's name, and therefore are not used.

Now that we have the days of the month, let's look at the names of the months. When we say months here, we are referring to the months of the Jewish/Hebrew calendar. Jewish gravestones will almost always shows dates in Hebrew using the months of the Jewish calendar. If there is a date in the Gregorian calendar (i.e. January 1) it will almost always be written in the local language (i.e. in English in the US, in French in France, etc.).

Months

Hebrew	Transliteration	Holidays	Gregorian
תשרי	Tishrei	Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, Simḥat Torah	September–October
(מר)חשון	(Mar)Ḥeshvan		October–November
כסלו	Kislev	Ḥanukah	November–December
טבת	Tevet	Asara BTevet	December–January
שבט	Shvat	Tu BiShvat	January–February
אדר	Adar	Purim	February–March
אדר ראשון or אדר א׳	Adar Rishon (Adar I)	(During a leap year this month is added before Adar II which contains the dates normally in Adar).	February–March
אדר שני or אדר ב׳	Adar Sheni (Adar II)	Purim	March
ניסן	Nissan	Passover	March–April
אייר	Iyar	Lag B'Omer	April–May
סיון	Sivan	Shavuot	May–June
תמוז	Tammuz	Shva Asar BTammuz	June–July
(מנחם) אב	(Menachem) Av	Tisha B'Av, Tu B'Av	July–August
אלול	Elul		August–September

The month is shown in Hebrew, then transliterated, and then the holidays that fall in that month are shown, and finally the approximate parallel in the Gregorian calendar. Showing the holidays is important because sometimes the dates on a gravestone are not written as a day of a month, but rather a day in relation to a holiday (see Dates Based on Holidays below).

In this table the months are ordered from Tishrei, which is the month that begins with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year. There are actually different ways of starting the year, and in many cases the months are numbered beginning with Nissan instead (making Tishrei the 7th Month). The order is the same, but the starting point is different. This isn't really relevant to a discussion of gravestones, however, as months are rarely listed by their number, and almost always by their name.

Two months have alternative forms of their names – Ḥeshvan is sometime Marḥeshvan, and Av is sometimes Menachem Av. These additions are shown in parenthesis in the table.

The Hebrew calendar uses aspects of a lunar calendar and a solar calendar. For the most part it follows the lunar cycle, which is approximately 11 days shorter than a solar year. Instead of a leap day every four years like the Gregorian (solar) calendar, in the Hebrew calendar there is a leap month every two or three years. In this case, the month of אֲדָר א׳ (Adar I) is inserted after the month of שְׁבָט (Shvat), and the month of אֲדָר (Adar) becomes אֲדָר ב׳ (Adar II).

In other words there are two months with the name Adar, but the holidays that occur during a normal Adar happen in the second one. If a gravestone lists a date in Adar, it is important to know if it was a leap year or not, although generally if it only says Adar then it would not have been a leap year.

Jewish Holidays

Here's a list of most Jewish holidays, which are frequently referenced on gravestones:

Hebrew	Abbr.	Date	Date in English	Transliteration	English	Gregorian
ראש השנה	ראה״ש, ר״ה, רה״ש	א תשרי	1 Tishrei	Rosh Hashanah	Jewish New Year	Sep-Oct
צום גדליה		ג תשרי	3 Tishrei	Tzom Gedalia	Fast of Gedalia	Sep-Oct
יום כיפור	יוה״כ, יו״כ	י תשרי	10 Tishrei	Yom Kippur	Day of Atonement	Sep-Oct
סוכות	חה״ס	ט״ו תשרי	15 Tishrei	Sukkot	Feast of Tabernacles	Sep-Oct
הושנה רבה	הו״ר	כ״א תשרי	21 Tishrei	Hoshana Raba	Great Hoshana	Sep-Oct
שמיני עצרת	שמ״ע, שמע״צ	כ״ב תשרי	22 Tishrei	Shmini Atzeret	Eight Day of Assembly	Sep-Oct
שמחת תורה	שמח״ת	כ״ג תשרי	23 Tishrei	Simḥat Torah	Celebrating the Torah	Sep-Oct
חנכה		כ״ה כסלו	25 Kislev	Ḥanukah	Festival of Rededication	Nov-Dec
עשרה בטבת		י טבת	10 Tevet	Asara BTevet	10th of Tevet	Dec-Jan
ט״ו בשבט		ט״ו שבט	15 Shvat	Tu BiShvat	New Year for Trees	Jan-Feb
תענית אסתר		י״ג אדר	13 Adar	Taanit Esther	Fast of Esther	Feb-Mar
פורים		י״ד אדר	14 Adar	Purim	Festival of Lots	Feb-Mar
פסח	חה״פ	ט״ו ניסן	15 Nissan	Pesach	Passover	Mar-Apr
ל״ג בעומר	ל״ג	י״ח אייר	18 Iyar	Lag B'Omer	33rd day of the Omer	Apr-May
שבועות	חה״ש	ו סיון	6 Sivan	Shavuot	Festival of Weeks	May-Jun
שבעה עשר בתמוז		י״ז תמוז	17 Tammuz	Shiva Asar BTammuz	Fast of Tammuz	Jun-Jul
תשעה באב	ת״ב	ט אב	9 Av	Tisha B'Av	9th of Av	Jul-Aug
ט״ו באב		ט״ו אב	15 Av	Tu B'Av	15th of Av	Jul-Aug

Above you'll find the name of the holiday in Hebrew, common abbreviation(s) of the name, the date in Hebrew (when a holiday is more than one day this will be the first day only), the date transliterated, the holiday name transliterated, the holiday name roughly translated (sometimes the Hebrew name is much more commonly used), and the approximate time that holiday falls out in the Gregorian calendar.

There are other holiday and time-related terms that show up on gravestones. Here are a few:

Hebrew	Abbr.	Transliteration	Translation
ערב		Erev	Day before (literally evening)
ליל		Leil	Day before (literally night)
ערב שבת	ע״ש	Erev Shabbat	Day before Sabbath (Friday)
ערב שבת קדש	עש״ק	Erev Shabbat Kodesh	Day before Holy Sabbath (Friday)
מוצאי		Motza'ei	Night after
מוצאי שבת	מוצ״ש	Motza'ei Shabbat	Night after Sabbath (Saturday night)
מוצאי שבת קודש	מש״ק, מוצש״ק	Motza'ei Shabbat Kodesh	Night after the Holy Sabbath (Saturday night)
ראש חודש	ר״ח	Rosh Ḥodesh	Beginning of the Month
ערב ראש חודש	ער״ח	Erev Rosh Ḥodesh	Day before the first day of the month
חול המועד	חוה״מ	Ḥol HaMoed	Intermediary days (of Pesach or Sukkot)
חול המועד סוכות	חהמו״ס	Ḥol HaMoed Sukkot	Intermediary days of Sukkot
חול המועד פסח	חהמו״פ	Ḥol HaMoed Pesaḥ	Intermediary days of Pesach
ערב סוכות	ע״ס	Erev Sukkot	The day before Sukkot (14 Tishrei)
ערב פסח	ע״פ	Erev Pesaḥ	The day before Pesach (14 Nissan)
ערב שבועות	ע״ש	Erev Shavuot	The day before Shavuot (5 Sivan)
אסרו חג	א״ח, אח׳	Isru Ḥag	The day after a holiday
אסרו חג יום כיפור	אח״יכ	Isru Ḥag Yom Kippur	The day after Yom Kippur (11 Tishrei)
אסרו חג פסח	אח״פ	Isru Ḥag Pesach	The day after Pesach (23 Nissan outside Israel)
אסרו חג של פסח	אחש״פ, אחשל״פ	Isru Ḥag Shel Pesaḥ	The day after Pesach (23 Nissan outside Israel)
פסח שני		Pesaḥ Sheni	Lit. Second Pesach, this occurs on 14 Iyar
פורים קטן		Purim Katan	Lit. Small Purim, this occurs on 14 Adar I during leap years
שושן פורים		Shushan Purim	The day Purim is celebrated in Jerusalem, on 15 Adar
עומר		Omer	The 49 days between Pesach and Shavuot

Hebrew	Abbr.	Transliteration	Translation
יום/ימים		Yom/Yamim	Day/Days
חודש	ח׳	Ḥodesh	Month
שנה	ש׳, שנ׳	Shana	Year
חג		Ḥag	Festival
יום טוב	יו״ט, י״ט	Yom Tov	Festival (lit. Good Day)
לפרט קטן	לפ״ק	Lifrat Katan	Short Count (see section below for details)

Dates based on holidays

Sometimes the date of death will be listed in reference to a holiday instead of using the day or the Hebrew month. If someone dies on a specific holiday an inscription might list the holiday name, or an abbreviation for it, or might reference it by saying it was the day before a holiday, the night after, a specific day of the holiday, or if it is during Pesach or Sukkot, it could give the number of the intermediary day.

If someone died on a multi-day holiday the inscription could have the day of the holiday, such as ב׳ חנכה which would be the 2nd day of Ḥanukah. As mentioned in the section on prepositions, this is frequently actually written as ב׳ דחנכה using the Aramaic preposition ד. See examples in the section below.

Pesach and Sukkot both have religiously observed holidays roughly a week apart, and the days in between are called Ḥol HaMoed, or intermediary days. These days are numbered differently in Israel and outside Israel, because in Israel only one day of each holiday is celebrated, whereas outside Israel each holiday is celebrated for two days. For example, the first day of Pesach is the 15th of Nissan, but outside Israel the holiday is celebrated both on the 15th and the 16th. So a reference to the 1st day of Ḥol HaMoed Pesach in Israel would be the 16th of Nissan, while a reference to the 1st day of Ḥol HaMoed Pesach outside of Israel would be the 17th of Nissan.

Similarly if you look at the use of א״ח (Isru Ḥag) in the table above to indicate the day after a holiday, אח״פ (Isru Ḥag Pesach) would be on the 23 Nissan outside of Israel, but 22 Nissan in Israel. Other related acronyms to look at are אח״יכ which is an example of acronym where the gershayim (״) is not before the last letter (here it separates two phrases), and the three acronyms that all mean the day after Pesach (אחשל״פ, אח״פ, and אחש״פ). Similar acronyms exist for Sukkot and Shavuot, but repeating everything isn't necessary. Substitute ס for Sukkot and ש for Shavuot instead of the פ for Pesach.

Some acronyms expand to more than one phrase. For example, ע״ש could mean ערב שבת (Erev Shabbat) or ערב שבועות (Erev Shavuot) from the above table, or עליה שלום or any one of a dozen other acronyms.

Years

Years in the Jewish calendar are shown as an acronym of the letters that add up to the year, but usually without the first digit of the year. It's a bit confusing, but not too hard once you get the hang of it. The letter-number equivalents are already show above, and we're going to use those to calculate a few year. As I'm writing this the current year in the Jewish calendar is 5780, which is written in Hebrew as תש"פ. That means we need to add up the value of three numbers ת Taf (400) + ש Shin (300) + פ Peh (80) which equals 780. To get the year in the Jewish calendar simply add 5000 to get 5780.

The first digit is left off because when dealing with gravestones, we can be pretty sure the dates are in the last 780 years, so the first digit isn't necessary. Sometimes this digit is shown, using the letter ה to indicate 5000.

You might notice that there are only 3 letters that represent 5780, and that's because this year ends in a zero. Next year we would be back to 4 letters – תשפ"א with the א simply adding 1 to the number. In Hebrew abbreviations the gershayim (") is always placed before the last letter, and it has no real significance other than to indicate that it is an abbreviation.

Another trick to these years is that you can add 1240 to the number, so 1240 + 780, and get the year in the Gregorian calendar (2020). There is a caveat here, which is that since the years don't start at the same time, it could be off by one year. Since the Jewish year usually starts in September or October in the Gregorian calendar, if the date occurred in the first few months of the Jewish year, it would actually be in the previous Gregorian year. Thus if the date you are looking at is ט"ו שבט תש"פ (15 Shevat 5780) which was the first day of this past Chanukah, the Gregorian year was 2019.

If you want an easy way to convert dates, I recommend you use a date conversion tool such as Steve Morse's Deciphering Hebrew Tombstone Dates in One Step. As a general rule of thumb, all dates since roughly 1939 start with תש, all dates from about 1839-1939 start with תר, and you won't find a date that starts with anything other than a ת before 1639. So if you can't read the first letter of a year on a gravestone, chances are it's ת.

Here's my visual chart on how decipher Jewish years:

Choose one letter from each column, working your way from right to left, add up the numbers to get the year.

א	י
1 +	10 +
ב	כ
2 +	20 +
ג	ל
3 +	30 +
ד	מ
4 +	40 +
ה	נ
5 +	50 +
ו	ס
6 +	60 +
ז	ע
7 +	70 +
ח	פ
8 +	80 +
ט	צ
9 +	90 +

ה ת
5400 = 400 + 5000
(1639/1640 CE)

ק
5500 = 100 +
(1739/1740 CE)

ר
5600 = 200 +
(1839/1840 CE)

ש
5700 = 300 +
(1939/1940 CE)

This chart covers the Jewish years 5400-5799, corresponding roughly to the civil years 1639-2039, which should cover most matzevot that someone would be trying to read.

The ה at the beginning (on the right side) is greyed out because usually it will not be shown on a gravestone (although sometimes it is). Even if it's not there, you still need to add 5000 for the current millennium. Working your way to the left, add 400 for the ת, which means this chart only applies to years starting with a ת, which covers a range of 400 years from 1639 to 2039. This should cover most gravestones. Moving to the next column, you can add either 100, 200, or 300 depending if there is a ק or a ר or a ש. If none of them are present after the ת, then the year is in the 55th century in the Jewish calendar (i.e. the year starts with 54…) and is between 1639 and 1740 in the Gregorian calendar. Move left again to the next column and if one of those letters is present, add the number corresponding to the decade. Lastly, if there is another letter, it should be one of the letters in the last column on the left indicating a specific year within a decade. Add up everything to get the Jewish year.

One more note about the missing letter representing the millennium. It's not left off in an attempt to save space. The letter ה which is used to represent 5000 in the year, usually left off, also represents God (as an abbr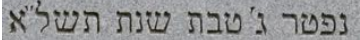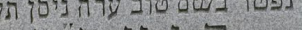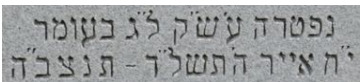eviation of השם HaShem, "the name"), and is therefore left off to show respect to God. This is the same reason some names with the letter ה are sometimes abbreviated on gravestones (see the name אריה abbreviated to ארי׳ in number 4 from the [Name Examples](#) above). When the letter is left off, the year is sometimes followed by the acronym לפ״ק which stands for לפרט קטן, roughly translated as Short Count, meaning it's the short version of the year (without the millennium letter). This abbreviation is also sometimes shown as a ligature of the three letters that looks like the image on the right.

As shown above a year need not have all of the letters. While most years will have 4 letters, like תשע״ט for 5779 (last year), this year is תש״פ for 5780. Since it's a new decade, there's no 4th letter. You'll notice the gershayim (״) moves so it is always between the last two letters of the year. For the year 5700, the year was simply תש״ and for the year 5400 the year was simply ת.

Date Examples

Now that we've looked at letters, numbers, months, holidays and years, let's see a few examples of how these are written on gravestones:

	#	Inscription	Translation
	1	נפ׳ ו׳ אלול תש״י	Died 6 Elul 5710
	2	נפטרה ביום י״ד אייר פסח שני תשנ״ב	Died on day 14 Iyar, Pesach Sheni 5752
	3	נפטר ג׳ טבת שנת תשל״א	Died 3 Tevet in the year 5731
	4	נפ׳ א׳ דחנוכה תשל״ד	Died 1st day of Ḥanukah 5734
	5	נפ׳ ז׳ דפסח תשד״מ	Died 7th day of Pesach 5744
	6	נפטרה י״ב לחודש אדר שנת תש״ד	Died 12 of the month of Adar in the year 5704
	7	נפטר בשם טוב ער״ח ניסן תש״מ	Died with a good name Erev Rosh Ḥodesh Nissan 5740
	8	נפ׳ ט״ו לחודש אייר שנת ה׳תש״ח	Died 15 of the month of Iyar in the year 5708
	9	נפ׳ ערב שבועות התשד	Died Erev Shavuot 5704
	10	נולדה י״ד תשרי תשי״ב ונפ׳ ט״ו תמוז תשס״ו	Born 14 Tishrei 5712 and died 15 Tamuz 5766
	11	נפטרה ע׳ש״ק ל״ג בעומר י״ח אייר ה׳תשל״ד – תנצב״ה	She died Erev Shabbat Kodesh Lag B'Omer 18 Iyar 5734 – May her soul be bound up in the…
	12	נאספה אל עמה ד׳ לחודש כסלו תש״ה	She was gathered to her people the 4th of the month of Kislev 5705

Let's review these one by one.

1 The first date is the simplest and most common form. It starts with the abbreviation נפ׳ which is short for נפטר for a man, or נפטרה for a woman, and just means 'died'. All of these examples except the last one start with some form of this word or its abbreviation. Next is ו׳ which is the number 6, followed by אלול which is the month of Elul. Lastly, we have תש״י which is the year 5710. So we know this person died on 6 Elul 5710 (which is either the night of August 18, or the day of August 19, 1950).

2 Here we have a few additional words. It starts out with the word נפטרה, which again is died, in the feminine form. Then we have the additional word ביום which means 'on the day'. The preposition ב (in) and יום the word for day. Next is י״ד which is the number 14. Looking at the ד it actually looks like a ר, but here we use the simple logic that there is no number ר״י. If the gravestone shows the secular date, you can also compare to verify the number if it's otherwise confusing. Next we have אייר, the month of Iyar. Next is something interesting, it says פסח שני, or Pesach Sheni. This is a holiday, and always falls out on 14 Iyar, so in theory they could have just said one or the other. Lastly, the year is shown, תשנ״ב which is 5752.

3 For the remainder I'm just going to point out the interesting parts of the dates. There's no need to repeat the common elements. Number 3 uses the word שנת meaning year, before the year. Like using ביום in number 2 this isn't necessary, but perhaps used as more flowery language.

4 Starts with ד׳ which is the number 4, but it's not the day of a month, but the day of the holiday Ḥanukah as it it followed by דחנוכה. The ד here is a preposition, and the spelling with the ו an alternate (and more phonetic) spelling of Ḥanukah. To figure out the actual date, you would see that the first day of Ḥanukah is always 25 Kislev, so the date this person died would be 28 Kislev, 5734.

5 Similarly expresses the date in reference to the day of a holiday, this time Pesach. So ז׳ דפסח is the 7th day of Pesach. As the first day of Pesach is always 15 Nissan, this person died on 21 Nissan.

6 Uses לחודש before the month name, ל being the preposition and חודש meaning month. Like number 3 this example also uses שנת before the year.

7 Adds an honorific בשם טוב which means 'with a good name'. It also uses a referential date, using the acronym ער"ח which stands for ערב ראש חודש or the day before the beginning of the month, that month being ניסן Nissan. That means this person died on the last day of the previous month, which would be כ"ט אדר (29 Adar).

8 Notice the use of ט"ו to represent 15. Also, note that the year is prefixed ה" which is the usually left off millennium (5000) part of the year. While normally we calculate the year and add 5000 to get the actual year, in this date the 5000 is shown.

9 Again shows a date in reference to a holiday, this one being ערב Erev (the day before) שבועית Shavuot. As Shavuot falls on 6 Sivan, this person died on 5 Sivan. The year, like in 8, has the ה indicating the millennium, but there are no markers to set it apart, so this might be more confusing at first glance.

10 Includes the date the person was born, and the date she died. She was נלדה (born) on י"ד תשרי תשי"ב (14 Tishrei 5712), ונפ׳ which is the prefix ו (and) and the abbreviation נפ׳ for נפטרה (died) ט"ו תמוז תשס"ו (15 Tamuz 5766).

11 Includes the acronym ע׳ש"ק which sands for ערב שבת קדש (Erev Shabbat Kodesh – the day before the Sabbath) meaning it was a Friday, and then added ל"ג בעומר which is the literally the 33rd day of the Omer (the 49 days between Pesach and Shavuot) but is also a holiday. It then adds the date י"ח אייר ה׳תשל"ד (18 Iyar 5734) and the end phrase תנצב"ה (see [At the end](#) below).

12 Interesting in that is doesn't use the term נפ׳ and instead uses the phrase נאספה אל עמה, which means 'She was gathered to her people', certainly a more poetic way to express that someone has died. See the section above on [Death Phrases](#) for more on possible phrases instead of נפטר/נפטרה.

At the end

Many gravestones end with the acronym תנצב״ה which means 'May his/her soul be bound up in the bond of life'. People new to reading gravestone inscriptions frequently confuse this acronym with a year since it also starts with a ת and looks like a Jewish year.

Hebrew	Abbr.	Transliteration	Translation
תהי נשמתו צרורה בצרור החיים	תנצב״ה	Tehi Nishmato Tsrurah biTsror haḤayim	May his/her soul be bound up in the bond of life ([I Samuel 25:29](#))

A final example

Now that we've reviewed many of the possible phrases and abbreviations that can show up on gravestones, let's jump back in a take a look at a final example, and break it down. The following is a photo of my grandparent's double matseva. My grandfather (who I've written about on my site, see: [Friends from Antwerp – and is that a famous Yiddish poet?,](#) [Don't get stuck inside the box,](#) and [When my grandfather traveled to Nazi Germany to save his family](#)) died 34 years after my grandmother, although they are buried together in the Beth Israel Memorial Park in Woodbridge, NJ. Their inscriptions are typical, although there are some differences between them that are interesting.

Note that there are almost double the number of elements of my grandmother's inscription. Her name is prefixed with מרת, and has a blessing ע"ה that shows up after her name, as well as her father's name. My grandfather has no title, and there is only a blessing after his father's name. This is probably correct since one's Hebrew name consists of both your name and your father's name (or mother's name in certain situations). In this case, there isn't a need to add the ע"ה twice (although it is perhaps trying to say that they should both rest in peace). The inscription shows both her father's name and her father's surname (her maiden name).

In my grandmother's inscription the date is preceded by ther full word נפתרה (died) while my grandfather has the very common abbreviation נפ׳. Most interestingly the date given for my grandmother's death is the 3rd day of Ḥol HaMoed Sukkot (ג׳ דחוה״מ סוכות), without giving the actual date, which was י״ט תשרי (although that was written in English at the bottom). My grandfather, who also died on a holiday, Shmini Atzeret, could have had the date written simply as שמ״ע instead of the full date that was written כ״ב תשרי.

Only my grandmother's inscription ends with תנצב״ה. It almost looks like the engraver ran out of space on my grandfather's stone, as he started the inscription at the same level, but ended a line lower and maybe couldn't add it in without it looking crowded.

The following is the full breakdown of the inscription elements:

	Element	Hebrew (Lily)	English (Lily)	Hebrew (Jack)	English (Jack)
1	Intro	פ״נ	Here is buried	פ״נ	Here is buried
2	Title	מרת	Mrs.		
3	Given Name(s)	ליבקה	Livka	יעקב	Yaakov Mordechai
4	Blessing	ע״ה	Rest in Peace		
5	Relationship	בת ר׳	Daughter of Mr.	ב״ר	Son of Mr.
6	Father's Given Name(s)	חיים	Chaim	משה צבי	Moshe Zvi
7	Father's Surname	קלײנהױז	Kleinhaus		
8	Blessing	ע״ה	Rest in Peace	ע״ה	Rest in Peace
9	Death phrase	נפטרה	died	נפ׳	died
10	Day number	ג׳	3rd day	כ״ב	22nd day
11	Preposition	ד	of		
12	Time period day applies to/month	חוה״מ	intermediary days	תשרי	Tishrei
13	Holiday	סוכות	Sukkot		
14	Year	תש״מ		תשע״ד	
15	Extra statement	והיא רק בת חמשים ושבע	and she was only 57 years old		
16	Conclusion	תנצב״ה	May her soul be bound up in the bond of life		

It's sad that after the date is given for my grandmother's death, is adds the line 'והיא רק בת חמשים ושבע' (and she was only 57 years old). Note that in Hebrew when writing someone's age, it is preceded by the word בת for a woman and בן for a man. Literally בת means daughter and בן means son, but that how ages are written (i.e. She was the daughter of 57 years). May both of my grandparents' souls be bound up in the bond of life.

Bibliography

There are many sources for information on Jewish gravestones, but here are the most easily accessible in English.

Some of the books mentioned below

Online

Blatt, Warren. Reading Hebrew Tombstones. New York, NY: JewishGen, 2013. A good introduction to Jewish tombstone inscriptions.

Doctor, Dr. Ronald D. Reading Hebrew Matzevot: Key Words, Abbreviations, & Acronyms. Portland, OR: 2008. I found this when I was looking up another source putting together this bibliography, and while I didn't have it when I wrote most of the article, it would have been very useful. An excellent compilation.

Holzman, Ada. Abbreviations and Terms Found on Tombstones in Poland. Kibbutz Evron, Israel: Zchor.org, 2016.

Isenberg, Madeleine. Matzeva (Tombstone) Deciphering Guidance. Beverly Hills, CA: 2018. An excellent source sheet that is used during her lectures, it includes lots of interesting information and sources.

Katz, Dovid. The Language of Litvak Gravestones: A Cultural Dictionary. Vilnius, Lithuania: DefendingHistory.com, 2005.

Rechtschafner, Esther. [From Rachel's Tomb to Billion Graves: The Inscriptions on Jewish Tombstones](). Kibbutz Ein-Zurim, Israel: Israel Genealogy Research Association, 2016. A good look at the history of Jewish tombstones, including Ashkenazi and Sephardi variations.

Reiss, Johannes. [Help! I Do Not Speak Hebrew, Yet I Need Hebrew Sources for My Genealogical Research](). Eisenstadt, Austria: Koschere Melange, 2019. From the blog of the Austrian Jewish Museum in Eisenstadt. Includes downloadable pages with Hebrew letters, numbers, calendar, and common phrases from gravestones.

Susser, Rabbi Dr. Bernard. [Hebrew Tombstones](). London, England: JCR-UK Susser Archive. This seems to be a guide for transcribing tombstones, written by Rabbi Dr. Bernard Susser, who transcribed many tombstones in England. I believe this was published after he passed away. Contains a good list of abbreviations.

Tagger, Mathilde A. [Hebrew Acronyms on Tombstones and Death Registers](). Jerusalem, Israel: Israel Genealogical Society, 2004. This was distributed on CD-ROM at the first genealogy conference I attended, in Jerusalem in 2004.

Tagger, Mathilde A. [Jewish Cemeteries: An Annotated Bibliography](). Jerusalem, Israel Genealogy Research Association, 2014. An incredible bibliography done by Mathilde Tagger, and updated multiple times, covering publications on Jewish cemeteries worldwide that are in the collections of the National Library in Israel and the Ben Zvi Institute. This version was done for IGRA in 2014, shortly before she passed, in preparation for the 2015 IAJGS conference in Jerusalem.

Books

Goldin, Hyman. [Hamadrikh: The Rabbi's Guide, Revised Edition](). New York, NY: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1956. Contains templates for gravestone inscriptions (translated in Segal's book) and lists of names (Hebrew and Yiddish) and their halachic equivalents (which I've transcribed – see [male]() and [female]() lists). Originally published in 1939 (and revised in 1956) this is especially useful as a look at the names in use by Jews pre-WWII, and the gravestone templates were used by generations of Rabbis so many inscriptions after 1939 will use those templates in some form. Out of print, but the link goes to a scanned copy on the Internet Archive.

Segal, Joshua L. A Field Guide to Visiting a Jewish Cemetery: a Spiritual Journey to the Past, Present and Future. Bennington, NH: [Jewish Cemetery Publishing](), 2010. A good book on the subject, available to order from the author's web site. In an appendix he translates and transliterates the gravestone inscription templates from Hamadrikh (although there are a few differences in his text).

Menachemson, Nolan. A Practical Guide to Jewish Cemeteries. Bergenfield, NJ: Avotaynu, 2007. Unfortunately, it appears to be out of print and hard to get. A good book on this subject, however, it covers more than just reading inscriptions, including how to clean and maintain gravestones. Bill Gladstone [reviewed]() the book in Avotaynu.

Hüttenmeister, Frowald Gil. [Abkürzungsverzeichnis hebräischer Grabinschriften (AHebG)](). Tuebingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2010. The 2nd edition of the most comprehensive index

of Hebrew gravestone acronyms/abbreviations, with over 8,500 acronyms and abbreviations listed, expanded into over 10,000 full phrases in Hebrew, with translation into German. While it would be nice to have an English translation, just having the expansions of 8500 acronyms is very useful.

Other Sources

The Dutch genealogy society Amoetat Akevoth, which unfortunately is in the process of shutting down, has a [section](#) ([archived](#)) on gravestone inscriptions that includes many acronyms and abbreviations, including the full phrases in Hebrew, and translations into Dutch. This includes over 50 phrases that expand from the acronym ה״ה.

Aaron Palmon has an [article](#) in Hebrew on the acronyms used specifically for rabbis. He has a whole book on the language of tombstones in Israel (טקסטים על מצבות עבריות : לשון המצבות בארץ ישראל מ- 1900 עד ימינו) although it's not organized in such as way to help someone trying to decipher inscriptions.

Other resources that are useful are general lists of Hebrew acronyms and abbreviations, although these require more knowledge of Hebrew. I have a book I use called קובץ ראשי תיבות וקיצורים which is useful, although there are now online sites and apps you can use that are very helpful. One useful web site is called [Kizur](#), whose whole purpose is to expand Hebrew acronyms and abbreviations (and separates them into categories including Jewish (religious) acronyms and those used in the army, etc. Other sites that have many Hebrew acronyms include the Hebrew version of Wiktionary (called [Wikimilon](#)), and [Milog](#), a good online Hebrew dictionary. There are also phone apps, just search in your phone's app store for 'Roshei Tevot'.

As an aside, to understand how prevalent acronyms are in Hebrew, and how complicated figuring them out are, there is an interesting paper on this subject ([Hebrew Acronyms: Identification, Expansion, and Disambiguation](#)).

Understanding names is clearly useful when deciphering gravestones. I have written about Jewish names (see my [Names](#) page), but these only scratch the surface. I transcribed the Hamadrikh lists, but there are many other lists of names that could be consulted that are not as accessible. Some Hebrew religious books contain lists of names, particularly when dealing with issues of marriage and divorce, including links between shem kodesh (Hebrew name) and kinnui (secular name) or between Hebrew and Yiddish. Some examples include [מאיר עינים](#) (starting page 64) and [קונטרס השמות](#) (starting page 1069).

There are a number of books on Jewish given names. Alexander Beider's [A Dictionary of Ashkenazic Given Names](#) is an important work. Rella Isrally Cohn's [Yiddish Given Names: A Lexicon](#), Boris Feldblyum's [Russian-Jewish Given Names](#), and Mathilde Tagger's [Dictionary of Sephardic Given Names](#) are all useful, but none of them include the names in Hebrew, limiting their usefulness in figuring out names from Hebrew inscriptions. One surprisingly useful book considering its small size is Rabbi Shmuel Gorr's [Jewish Personal Names: Their Origin, Derivation and Diminutive Forms](#). Rabbi Gorr also authored articles on popular Jewish given names for [boys](#) and [girls](#) on the Chabad web site (which draw from his book).