

The Jewish Cemetery of Montjuïc in Barcelona: opportunity and challenge to dignify a common past

In speaking about Jewish cemeteries throughout the Diaspora of our people, we must understand that one of the community leaders' priorities, as they were deciding to establish themselves in or be accepted by a city, was the guarantee of the right to own a plot to bury according to the precepts of a tradition going back to the time of Abraham. Other basic guarantees and needs negotiated with the local powers were the right to practice their rites and rituals, to circumcise the male children and to conduct internal affairs of the community independently and in accordance with their own laws and customs.

The oldest written document which mentions the Jewish cemetery in Barcelona dates from the eleventh century (1091) referring to some vineyards that Ramon II, Count of Berenguer, owed as restitution to the Canonry of the Holy Cross and Saint Eulalia, in which some old Jewish graves are mentioned (*veteres judeorum sepultura*, in Latin).

Another reference, indirectly and at a later date (1368), seems to confirm the antiquity of the cemetery to the 9th century. It deals with the Jewish community of Tortosa who, upon seeing their cemetery in danger, points out that there are some notable tombs within it, unlike any other place in the kingdom, with the exception of Barcelona “*where some have been there for over 500 years.*”



Detail, NW wall of Lieutenant's Palace

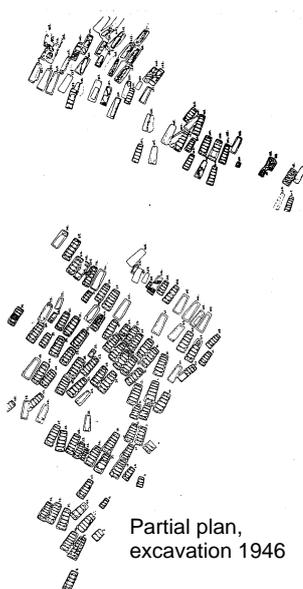
After the attack on the Call (the Jewish quarter) in 1391, the Montjuïc necropolis' gravestones were reutilized as building materials. One example where we can see in plain sight a large amount of re-used stone is the 16th century Lieutenant's Palace, which housed until recently the Archives of the Crown of Aragon.

In the early 15th Century, King Martin the Humane granted the Celestine community – which was under the auspices of the Royal Chapel – a plot of land which had been the Jewish cemetery. In later references from the 17th to the 19th Century, we see in ownership titles as well as in military cartography, the place-names “Plain of the Jews” or “fort of the Jews”, “the Jewish road”, as well as “the fountain of the Jews”, all of which very probably referred to the location of the old cemetery.

Over the course of centuries, the area around the cemetery was exploited as a quarry, and under military jurisdiction was practically maintained as one in spite of a few partial incursions such as those instigated by the construction of the General Alvarez de Castro batteries (1898). This resulted in the necropolis ending up on both sides of the present-day road which leads up to the castle.

In the early decades of the 20th Century a few headstones and graves cropped up here and there during the installation of the field of the National Marksmanship Society. Afterwards, during the construction of skeet shooting pavilions, the remains of the cemetery were found. In light of this discovery, technicians from the Municipal History Institute undertook emergency explorations between 1945 and 1946, in which they demarcated, studied and analyzed the morphology and the human remains of 171 graves.

Jordi Casanovas i Miro recovered the 74 headstone pieces (which had been found in different buildings as re-used materials or in museum back rooms) in the “Hebrew Series of the Paleographic Monuments of the Middle Ages”.



Partial plan,
excavation 1946



Fragment of matsevah in a museum

In 2001, looking ahead to some work slated for that area of the mount, the City Council of Barcelona undertook a campaign of excavations in a burial plot adjoining the one dug up in 1945. During the work, five hundred and fifty-seven graves and a single “matsevah” (headstone) were found. The complete report of this activity has not yet been completed, but an article with the study’s results was published detailing the morphology of the graves and the analysis of human remains.

This is the first time in Catalonia that a “matsevah” is found in its original location thus allowing to identify the complete information about the person buried there. This case refers to “*the wife of Rabbi Isaac ben Rabbi Levi, who passed away in the month of Kislev in the year 990 of the Hebrew calendar (November – December, 1229 AD).*”

In the Jewish tradition, respect for the dead includes an absolute prohibition against exhumation, even centuries after burial. This explains the concern that arose in the local and international Jewish world when opening up of graves in the cemetery at Montjuïc was known. As a result of initiation of the proceedings of the BCIN declaration (Cultural Site of National Interest), information was also requested about the fate of the excavated remains in order to re-inter them.



View towards Jerusalem

When in 2006 the local press informed of the plan for some work which the City of Barcelona intended to carry out on Montjuïc, as a matter of course we were interested in those aspects of the project which might affect the old cemetery area. Specifically, in what is today a very special terrace, with views of the Mediterranean, which is to say facing toward Eretz Israel, they propose making a garden on one side, and a building on the other to provide restrooms and refreshments for the area.



Location of 'historic place'

As we have explained, with such singular characteristics, and considering that this piece of history represents the presence and remembrance of the Jewish community of Barcelona over five or six centuries, it seemed to us that this site would merit special treatment, which might convey the fullest depth of its significance. And so we conveyed to the Jewish communities in Barcelona, to whom we suggested that in order to grant permanent protection, it is necessary to request that the regional government of Catalonia declare it a ‘*Cultural Asset of National Interest – Historic Place*’ as defined by the Catalan Landmarks Law. (Law 9/1993. DOGC n. 1807, 10/11/93) With the invaluable collaboration of the Center of Studies of Montjuïc, we prepared the document for the aforementioned application and succeeded in getting the process initiated in March, 2007.

With the urban growth of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, the Jewish cemeteries, which were located far from cities, are now totally unprotected and in danger of becoming completely destroyed by residential and sports complexes, transportation infrastructure, commercial centers, etc.

The historical sites hold great value for a better understanding of the complex makeup of the society in which we live, especially if a determined collective identifies itself in a more intimate way with them, bringing to light their character and identity.

It is for this reason that through the Center of Studies ZAKHOR we have identified, as one of the over-arching objectives, the study and the protection of old cemeteries as sacred places with the capacity to transmit cultural values.

In this vein, we have three projects in progress.

On behalf of Barcelona's Jewish cemetery on Montjuïc, we have presented to City Hall a conceptual proposal, asking them to consider a project to be evocative of a historical memory of Barcelona and of Judaism, understanding that this is a thousand year-old culture, alive and with its own criteria for funeral ritual and cemeteries, and which transcends the scope of our city.

In order to provide data for the Declaration of Cultural Asset, we are researching in the archives, which up till now have not been sufficiently explored, with the clear objective of defining the limits of the necropolis with the greatest possible accuracy. This work is about use of a non-invasive and excavation-free methodology, since doing otherwise would be against our tradition. This project has been selected by The Rothschild Foundation Europe to receive funds from its Jewish Heritage program, which facilitates research projects, cooperation and good practice between the different entities involved in this field.

And to convey the values which are reflected by funerary ritual, we are working on the publication of a book (with a grant from the Direction of Religious Affairs of the Catalan government) which we hope will help people understand the origin, the reasons and the evolution of the practice of this aspect of our culture.

We trust that the contribution by ZAKHOR, including a Jewish point of view toward projects related to our culture as well as closely collaborating with local governments and institutions, will convey a special message, a different dimension and the richness necessary to understand and convey the meaning of each element of our heritage. This collaborative work will help towards better understanding of a valuable legacy, leading to a knowledge of the Jewish presence in Barcelona, Catalonia and Spain. It is one more way to contribute to cultural diversity, respect and coexistence within Europe.

Center of Studies ZAKHOR

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