



*Il Rabbino Capo*

## THE CEMETERY IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

The word we use for cemetery is "Bet ha Chajjm", which means "house of life", or, as it's written in particular at the new entrance of the Jewish section within the Cemetery of Bologna, "Bet mo'ed lekhoh chai", that is "house of reunion for all the living people".

As we can notice, but even more so as the Masters of the Jewish tradition teach us that, the word DEATH is mostly omitted, even to indicate that condition.

Always according to the Jewish tradition, death is part of the life passage, and the cemetery is the absolute proof of it.

The Cemetery is one of the most valid testimonies of the Jewish Community's existence: even where the Jews have long gone from a town, it represents the undeniable and lasting proof of their ancient presence.

Ever since antiquity, Jews have always struggled to gain a land where they could bury their loved ones. The clearest example is to be found in the Book of Genesis, chapter 23, narrating that Abraham, at his wife's death, strived to purchase a land where to bury her.

The primary feature of such a land is to be located far from where bodies of people belonging to other religions are buried; therefore, to be separate and self-standing. In the Bible episode, it's interesting to read the part where Abraham negotiates with Ephron - king of the Hittites - (probably Amurabi) to purchase the land. With great elegance and nobleness, Abraham says he is ready to pay even a large amount of money for the land, provided that it's far from the place where other bodies are buried.

He pays indeed a very high amount - "400 shekels of silver", as this was "current money among the merchants"<sup>1</sup>. Such a detailed description indicates that, according to the exegetical interpretation of the text, the money paid by Abraham for the land is considered as re-appraisable in time.

Also in later centuries has the cemetery played a relevant role in the Jewish tradition, and it's plain to see how important the cemetery has always been, in every historical period, for the Jews.

All the regulations concerning the establishment of a cemetery are considered to be very strict, but are followed by all the Jews.

Some of the rules mentioned below are showing a strong consistency with our specific subject:

- The cemetery must be established outside the city walls, or at least at a

distance of 25 meters from the inhabited area.

- The dead must be buried in rows, and they should all have their feet in the direction of Jerusalem.
- Masters and Rabbis, as well as babies and little children, are recommended to be buried separate from other bodies.
- Inside a Cemetery, one should not behave "lightly", nor put sheep or other animals to pasture.
- Due to impurity of the corpses, a Kohen (whose family name comes from the priestly service in the ancient Temple of Jerusalem) is forbidden to enter the cemetery, except for his closest relatives.
- Torah study is prohibited in a cemetery, and so is to enter with liturgical clothes (i.e. tefillin - the phylacteries, worn by male observant Jews during weekday morning prayers).
- It is forbidden to enter a Cemetery on Saturdays and on the holidays as to the Jewish calendar.

The cemetery, also thanks to all this set of rules, has therefore gained an almost sacred, refined, aspect.

The Roman Jews call it Holy Ground, due to the importance of the place: an expression that has been long taken in the common speak of other religions as well.

On the contrary, those who decided to desecrate such a sacredness named it "The awful Jewish garden" (*"l'ortaccio delli hebrei"*), as it was in Rome in the centuries of the Jewish ghetto, when the cemetery was offended in a most shameful way.

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*(English courtesy translation by Micaela Merli - Comune di Bologna)*

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<sup>1</sup> See Gen. Chapt. 23 -