

Common Hebrew Abbreviations on Tombstones

by Rabbi Shalom Bronstein

In the "From Our Mailbox" column in the Fall 1999 issue of AVOTAYNU is a very helpful item from Beth Dwoskin on converting Hebrew dates on tombstones. Sometimes, the Hebrew inscriptions also include abbreviations that may confuse or baffle the researcher. Following are a few that I have spelled out and translated. The word before the slash is the masculine form; the word after the slash is the feminine form.

At the top of the stone, above the name:

[כ"פ] Poh Nitman/Nitmanah or Poh Nikbar/Nikbarah; "here is interred," or "here is buried."

Before name of person:

[ר"י] Moreinu Harav; Our teacher and rabbi

[ר"י] also Moreinu Harav; Our teacher and rabbi

[ר"י] Our teacher and our rabbi

Before the first name of a male:

[ר] Reb; In this context it means "mister." The word has no connection to the word rabbi.

Before the first name of a female:

[מ'] marat, meaning "Mrs."

Between the name:

[כ"ר] Ben/Bat Reb; son/daughter of Reb (again meaning "mister," not rabbi)

After the person's name:

[ז"ל] Zikhrono/Zikhronah Livraha; may his/her memory be for a blessing

[ז"ל] Zecher Tzadik Livraha; may the memory of the righteous be for a blessing

[ז"ל] Alav/Aleha Hashalom; may he/she rest in peace

Before the date:

[נ"ב] or [נ"ה] Niftar/Niftarah; died on [date]

Abbreviations of months:

[א"ב] Menahem Av; the month of Av

The month [חשוון] Heshvan, may also be inscribed as [חשוון] Marheshvan.

At the very beginning of the date line:

[א'ר"י] Alef d'rosh Hashanah; the first day of Rosh Hashanah. Not to be confused with ה'א, the fifth day of the month of Adar.

[א'ר"י] Alef d'rosh Hodesh; first day of the new moon

[ב'ר"י] Bet d'rosh Hashanah; second day of Rosh Hashanah

[ח'ר"י] Hol Hamoed Sukkot; the intermediate days of the holiday of Sukkot

[ח'ר"י] Hol Hamoed Pesah; the intermediate days of the holiday of Pesah

[ח'ר"י] Hol Hamoed Shet; the intermediate days of the holiday of [name of the holiday]

[י"ז] Yom Hakipurim; Yom Kippur

[י"ז] Yom Hashabbat; the sabbath, Saturday

[ע"פ] Erev Pesah, the eve of Pesah

[ע"ש] Erev Shabbat; the eve of the sabbath; Friday

[ע"ש] Erev Shabbat Kodesh; the eve of the holy sabbath; Friday

[ר"י] Rosh Hashanah

[ר"י] Rosh Hodesh; the beginning of the month

Bottom line of monument:

[ז"ל] is the abbreviation for T'hi Nafsho/Nafshah Tzurarah Bitzror Hahayim; may his/her soul be bound in the bonds of life

Special Indication of Martyrdom

If a person died as a martyr for the sanctification of God's name, three letters follow the person's name. Although not usually seen in the United States or Canada, these letters are often found next to individual names engraved in monuments erected in memory of destroyed communities found in many cemeteries. They may also follow the name of the community itself: [ד"ר] Hashem Yinkom Damo/Dama; may God avenge his/her blood

Tribal Affiliations

- Appearing only on tombstones of males: Two outstretched hands inclined toward each other indicates that the individual was a Kohen, a member of the priestly caste

- Pitcher engraved above name indicates that the person was a Levite.

Special Considerations for the United States

Hebrew inscriptions in the United States are done by using a system of numbers. The rabbi or other person knowledgeable in Hebrew writes the Hebrew and then transcribes it; each Hebrew letter is assigned a number. The numbering system may vary between different monument companies and is not consistent. Before the stone is engraved, the inscription is checked to make sure that the numbers do, in fact, correspond to the correct Hebrew letters. The vast majority of those doing the engraving do not know Hebrew. Unfortunately, those who engrave the stones are not always faithful in carrying out the approved and signed blueprint provided by the rabbi. Mistakes do occur, with increasing frequency. Common examples are final letters used in the middle of words and some letters, similar in appearance to other letters, are interchanged. It is advisable to photograph the tombstone or to take a rubbing. Do not be surprised if a mistake shows up in the spelling, even though someone who knew Hebrew carefully checked the blueprint before it was sent to be engraved.

Rabbi Shalom Bronstein, a resident of Jerusalem, is a professional genealogist and member of the Israel Genealogical Society and Association of Professional Genealogists. His e-mail address is <sygaa@netvision.net.il>.