Hebrew Tombstones

[A] Recording

*The Index*, published by The Centre for Jewish Art, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, suggests that the Hebrew inscription is written first, followed by the English translation in quotation marks after the Hebrew text.

Order of Lines

The inscription is copied with a description of its location on the object, direction of reading and number of lines. The end of every line should be marked by a vertical line (|) or a slash (/). A break in the continuity of the text, caused by the object’s structure or decoration should be marked by a vertical line flanked by two dots (.) or a slash flanked by two dots (/). Where the inscription is written in non-continuous lines, it should be copied in its sequence, mentioning the location of the sections. The translation of the inscription is written in one continuous sequence without the division of lines.

Example:

In the centre of a Star of David is a circle which is inscribed:

מֹסֵס צֶּרֶם לִנְפָּה מִרְשָׁה קַהֵּרָה יְאָהִיר

“Moses commanded us a Torah, even the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob” (Deut. 33:4). A dedicatory inscription appears within the circle and ends in the bottom triangle of the Star:

בִּשָּׁמָּה / נֶשֶׁת / רָבָּה / בַּת / אָהִיר

“in the name of the soul of Deborah daughter of (in the bottom triangle) Aaron”.

Where letters or words are unclear, a question mark is placed instead of every
unclear letter. Interpretation of unclear or missing letters should be placed in brackets, followed by a question mark: eg.

and the inscription will be translated: “…the (gracious/importan?) woman, Mrs”.

Abbreviations
Common abbreviation letters, like R. for Rabbi may be left. Less well known abbreviations should be completed, with the omitted letters in brackets:

and translated in full: “Mrs Rachel”.

Acronyms
These should be recorded as they appear in the original Hebrew text followed by the complete words in brackets starting with an equals sign (=). The English translation should quote only the deciphered words, stating that the text appears as initial letters. 

Examples

In translation the whole words should appear: “The holy society of Sabbath observers”. “My help cometh from the Lord, Maker of heaven and earth (Psalm 121:2 in initials)”.

Literary references
Standard abbreviations of Jewish books appear in the Encyclopedia Judaica and are indicated in brackets at the end of the quotation. Eg 

Bible: The abbreviation of the book, chapter number followed by a colon and then the verse number: (Gen. 12:4).

Mishnah: (Mishnah, Avot 4:13).

Babylonian Talmud: (B.T. Ber. 16a).

Transliteration
It is best to try to follow the rules, where they apply, as they appear in the Encyclopedia Judaica.

Months

Nisan ..............................................................March–April
Iyar ..............................................................April–May
Sivan .............................................................May–June
Tamuz ............................................................June–July

Av (also known as Menahem Av — Av (the comforter) July–August
Elul ...........................................................August–September
Tishri ..........................................................September–October
Heshvan (also known as MarHeshvan)..................October–November
Kislev ................................................................. November–December
Tevet ................................................................. December–January
Shevat ............................................................... January–February
Adar (Adar Rishon, Adar Sheni, often rendered Adar I and Adar I) ............................................. February–March

Special days
Shabbat Shuvah — The Sabbath between Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur;
The Great Shabbat — before Passover;
Shabbat Nahamu — the Shabbat of Comfort, after the Fast of the 9th of Av.

Transcription of the tomb of former Chief Rabbi David Tevele Schiff
[B] Abbreviations

These are indicated by dots, scrolls or other ornamental signs above the letters (א or ע) or by two dashes before the last letter in a sequence (”), or by one dash after a single letter (“’). These are the most common abbreviations found on Jewish tombstones.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>א’א</td>
<td>one, first; man; Sunday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>א”א = אבר = אבריג</td>
<td>my grandfather/mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>א”א = אבריג</td>
<td>our father Abraham, a patronymic used for righteous proselytes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>א’בי</td>
<td>Head of the Beth Din</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>א”ת = אשת</td>
<td>a woman of worth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>א”א = אבריג</td>
<td>first day New Moon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>א”א = אבריג</td>
<td>Godfearing man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>א”א = אבריג</td>
<td>a composite letter — aleph lamed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ב’</td>
<td>two, second; Monday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ב”</td>
<td>householder, Vestry Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ב” = בראש</td>
<td>second day New Moon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ב” = בראש</td>
<td>son of the rabbi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ב”</td>
<td>the bachelor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ב” = בראש</td>
<td>House of Study, college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ב” = בראש</td>
<td>the son of Rabbi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ב” = בראש</td>
<td>author of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ב” = בראש</td>
<td>the son of Mr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ב” = בראש</td>
<td>three, third; Tuesday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ב” = בראש</td>
<td>the practice of charity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ב” = בראש</td>
<td>Treasurer (of Charity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ד’</td>
<td>four, fourth; Wednesday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ד’ = ד”</td>
<td>of, belonging to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ד” = ד”</td>
<td>legal suit at Beth Din</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ד” = ד”</td>
<td>the words of Torah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ד” = ד”</td>
<td>five, fifth. Thursday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ד” = ד”</td>
<td>Hashem, ie God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ד” = ד”</td>
<td>the great Rabbi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Messrs Hoshana Rabba the (learned) associate the worthy the bridegroom known as the praiseworthy and important the learned and wise Rabbi (or just plain Mr) the Rabbi, the Gaon six, sixth, Friday six, sixth, Friday May his/her memory be for a blessing May the memory of the righteous be for a blessing May the… for the life of the World to Come The holy society This abbreviation appears on a stone in the Alderney Road Cemetery, London. It is not known what it stands for.

The honourable (Mr) Righteous Priest, ie a Cohen According to the way Jews count ie the number of the day during the counting of the Omer According to the major order of counting, ie including the thousands According to the minor order of counting.
ie excluding the thousands

our Teacher, Rabbi

our Teacher, the Rabbi, Rabbi

Rabbi (of a Community)

Saturday night after Sabbath

died and buried

Levitical excellence, ie a Levi

by the hand/agency of

eve of New Moon

the ten Days of Penitence

eve of the holy Sabbath ie Friday

President

Here lies [a female]

Here lies [a male]

here, the holy congregation of

the holy congregation of

New Moon

the holy Sabbath

may his/her soul

be bound up in the bond of life (eternal)

This abbreviation appears on a stone in the Alderney Road, London, Cemetery. It is not known what it stands for.
Numbers

Individual

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>א</th>
<th>ב</th>
<th>ג</th>
<th>ד</th>
<th>ה</th>
<th>י</th>
<th>ז</th>
<th>ח</th>
<th>ט</th>
<th>י</th>
<th>ז</th>
<th>ח</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>י</th>
<th>כ</th>
<th>ל</th>
<th>מ</th>
<th>נ</th>
<th>ס</th>
<th>ע</th>
<th>פ</th>
<th>צ</th>
<th>ע</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ק</th>
<th>ר</th>
<th>ש</th>
<th>ת</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>400</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

etc...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>א</th>
<th>ב</th>
<th>ג</th>
<th>ד</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

or sometimes the letter is written larger than the others to indicate that it is being used for thousands.

In combination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>י</th>
<th>ק</th>
<th>ל</th>
<th>מ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

or | י | ק | ל | מ |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>544</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

etc

As a chronogram

1853 AD = 613 = 3+200+400+10 = בשנה עץ ליבר גרהו ליום ק

Gregorian & Jewish equivalents

1740 AD = 500 AM; 1840 AD = 600 AM; 1940 AD = 700 AM

AD = Anno Domini; AM = Anno Mundi (The year of the World, ie counting backwards from now (2002) until biblical times, and then backwards through the Bible until the beginning of the life of Adam you come to the current Jewish year of 5762.

The thousands [we are now in 5,000] are generally omitted when writing Hebrew dates. When they are omitted, the three Hebrew letters , or a composite letter incorporating all three letters, is generally placed after the date.

Verses used as chronograms are sometimes an indication of the activities of the deceased.

**Geological Identification of the Tomb**

Note whether the stone is Granite, York, Limestone, Slate, Marble or a combination, or made of another material.

**Types of Monument**

Note whether it is: Headstone, Coped stone, Coffin or body stone, Chest tomb (with panelled sides), Altar tomb (with brick sides), Pedestal tomb (square in section), Kerbstones, Open book, broken column, Artificial mound, Obelisk. Is it enclosed with railings? Is it a family plot?

Note any symbolic features: skull and crossbones, hearts, hourglasses, arrows or darts, lamps, scythes, spades, pick axes, snakes (often with tails in mouth), trees (‘?mutilated), trumpets, books, pens. Particularly Jewish features include: Star of David palms of hands with thumbs touching (a Kohen); a ewer pouring out water, sometimes on to the hands of a Kohen (a Levi); two candlesticks for a pious woman, a broken candlestick for a pious woman who died young; twin pillars of Jachin and Boaz; a scroll of the Torah or five Books of Moses; a crown (representing the crown of Torah or a good name); a menorah; lions guarding the Torah.

On Rumanian Jewish stones the pelican (which according to ancient belief fed its young with the blood of its breast — see the pelicans in the room in Jerusalem where the Last Supper is said to have occurred) is used as a symbol for women.

In central Europe surnames are sometimes reflected in artistic decoration: In Speyer (Rhine Valley) a 1365 stone for a woman Bluene bat Jacob has a flower. David Gans (d. 1613) has a goose on his stone in the Prague cemetery, there is a mouse for a Maisel family, a lion for a Judah Lob (= Lowe = a lion), a fish for the Karpeis family, Issacher Teller (d. 1697) in Prague has a bear (cf Gen. 49:14 where Issacher is compared to an ass which ‘bears’ a burden), as well as a medical instrument reflecting his profession as a doctor. In Mikulov, Czech Republic, is a stone with a hand holding a collecting box — the deceased was a Charity Treasurer.

Symbols for the house in which the deceased lived appear on stones in Hanau. Zum Schwaben, at the Swabian Building, is indicated with a man and a German inscription in Hebrew characters, another has a Palm Tree, another has a horse, with the inscriptions Zum Palmenboim and Zum goldenem Ross. Coats of arms, where the owner was entitled to them, or at least thought he was, also appear.

[For the information in the three preceding paragraphs I am indebted to Hannalore Kunzl, ‘Symbolism in the Art of Jewish Gravestones in Europe’, *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1985), Divi-]
sion D, vol II, Art, Folklore, Theatre, Music; and to Dr Sharman Kadish, Jerusalem, who brought it to my attention.]  
On Isaac Gompertz’s (d. 1836) stone in Exeter was incised a passage from his poetic work, Devon. Watch out for acrostics on the deceased’s name in inscriptions.

Photographs
Any good camera suffices. Relatively slow film is best, and a small stop, often necessitating a tripod.  
Best results will often (but not always) be obtained with a directional light source, such as direct or diffused sunlight, or a source of artificial light. Where possible the light should come from top left. In the case of a very worn inscription there may only be fifteen minutes when the sun strikes at an optimum angle.  
Skillful use of flash, not frontally but obliquely, may give good results. It may then be best to wait for darkness, but be sure to let everyone around know that you are there with the best of intentions, or you may arouse sinister suspicions! Monochrome film is best, but if it is a multicoloured stone then you will want colour film.

Cleaning
Do not use metal objects for cleaning away earth which has banked up at the foot of the stone. If necessary, clean the stone with a dry brush.
Errors

The opportunities for errors are legion. To begin with, the mason was possibly a gentile who knew neither the Hebrew alphabet not the meaning of the words he was incising. Even if the inscription was correctly written it may not have been cut deeply and consequently weathered poorly after many decades. Acid rain and atmospheric pollution, even in non-industrial areas, has worked havoc on many stones.

The letters which are most likely to be mired are:

א for י when the bottom right hand shank of the י is worn away.

ב and כ at any time

ג and ד are easily confused

ה may be misread as a י or י if its left foot is eroded, or as a י if the foot is extended

יק may be taken for י if its foot is extended upwards, and vice versa

ל and נ are easily confused

ך can be read as נ or as נ

ץ can be read as an abbreviation mark, or lost altogether

ן can be mistaken for י or י

ל can be read as ל or ל or ל or ל or ל when the top of the ל is worn away

ם and כ are easily confused at the end of a word

ך can be taken for י or י

ץ can be taken for י or י

ץ sometimes looks like a י

ך if it loses its leg can look like a י or י or י or י

ץ is easily confused with י, or if the head of a י reaches up into an upper line, then י and י can be misread as a י or י

ץ when eroded can look like an י, or double י

ץ can easily be taken for י or י

Of the ninety-five inscriptions which the Rev. Dr M. Berlin noted in the Plymouth Hoe Jewish Cemetery forty five had totally disappeared within seventy years.
Bibliography


In addition, Mr Charles Tucker, Archivist at the Chief Rabbi’s Office, has produced a two-page Bibliography on Jewish Cemeteries, from which the following are extracted.

Legal History


Gazetteers


Histories of Particular Cemeteries

Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society:

vol 2 (1894), Jews’ Burial Ground at Ipswich

vol 10 (1924), Old Sephardi Cemetery, rear 243 Mile End Road, E1.

vol 11 (1928), The Jewish Cemetery at Ballybough in Dublin.


vol 20 (1964), Pre-Expulsion Jewish Cemetery of London.


Bernard Susser is also publishing during 1995 the tombstone inscriptions in the Jewish cemeteries of Exeter, Falmouth, Penzance and Plymouth (Gifford Place) as one volume in the six volume series of Anglo-Jewish Studies in the South-West of England.
The hand drawn illustrations are of tombstones and inscriptions in the Alderney Road Cemetery, Mile End, London. They were done in 1993 by Paula Palombo and Yael Turner, who were on a student exchange scheme organised by ICOMOS UK/Israel and the Working Party on Jewish Monuments UK and Ireland. They were supervised by Dr Sharman Kadish and Mr Charles Tucker. The reference numbers to the illustrations are the numbers in their transcriptions. The photographs are of tombstones in the Alderney Road cemetery.

Record and transcription of the tomb of Jacob Aaron, 1793, with a facsimile of the entry from the record book of the Great Synagogue.
Record of the tomb of Benjamin Wolf, son of Michael Fürth, 1792.
Record of the tomb of Pearl Simon, 1788

Tomb of Alexander Alexander, Exeter

Tomb of XX, Plymouth

Tomb of XX, Plymouth