



JCLP The Legacy Late Spring 2019

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A Laudable Mitzvah

The first mention of burial in Jewish tradition is in Vayera when Abraham buries Sarah. Through the Commission on Cemetery Preservation (COCP), a supporting foundation of the Jewish Federation of Cleveland, Jewish Cleveland continues to recognize that honoring those who came before by caring for their final resting places is one of the highest mitzvot we can achieve.

A community-wide effort was undertaken to look after older cemeteries in the Cleveland area that have fallen into disrepair because the congregations that owned them are no longer in existence or were unable to maintain them. There are 16 Jewish cemeteries in the Cleveland vicinity and another three general cemeteries with Jewish sections. Seven of the Jewish cemeteries are now under the jurisdiction of the Commission on Cemetery Preservation and the Commission has accumulated a wealth of knowledge in the best practices to ensure the long-term ability of these historic and sacred, but regrettably overlooked, places to endure. With an appreciation of the Commission's expertise, JCLP consultant Steve Edelstein approached colleagues within the Federation to explore if and how the foundation might help three small communities beyond Cleveland in Northeast and North Central Ohio. Cemetery maintenance is frequently the first issue faced by contracting Jewish communities and was an important part of the Legacy Plan that each of these congregations was in the midst of drafting. Emanuel Jacob Congregation of Mansfield, Congregation Oheb Shalom of Sandusky, and Temple Tifereth Israel of Ashtabula are typical of the small Jewish congregations that characterize JCLP Legacy communities: diminished in size but fierce in devotion and a recognition that they must plan for the future.

"We were so impressed by the forward thinking of these small communities in outlying areas and how much they want to maintain a Jewish presence," said Barry Reis, chief financial officer of the Jewish Federation of Cleveland. "We in Cleveland were happy to help out."

The Sandusky and Mansfield communities own their historic cemeteries, with some graves dating to the 19th century. Dedicated volunteers currently handle care and maintenance of the properties. There is a Jewish section of the Ashtabula Township cemetery.

As of late May, the Commission on Cemetery Preservation of the Jewish Federation of Cleveland has come to an agreement with all three communities to ensure the future of their cemeteries by providing them with an infrastructure of guidance and expertise. The Commission has agreed to be a resource to ensure the continued care and maintenance when local volunteers in Sandusky and Mansfield can no longer perform those tasks. In the case of Ashtabula, the Commission will be a periodic monitor of Jewish graves in the township cemetery and act as a reference on Jewish ritual for local providers.

The sensitive and responsive manner in which the Jewish Federation of Cleveland is working to preserve the cemeteries of smaller, distant communities that might look at Cleveland as the big and impersonal city is a model of exemplary kindness. We strengthen our present and future when we so honor the past.

“Cemetery preservation, everywhere our people live, is an issue Federations will have to grapple with nationwide,” said Reis.

Please reach out to JCLP if your small-town or rural Jewish community has concerns about perpetual care for a cemetery.
