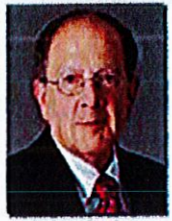
Garden of Remembrance (Gan Zikaron) Memorial Park Celebrates 20th Year

CLARKSBURG,MD— Twenty years ago, the Greater Washington Jewish community was experiencing a shortage of burial options for its nearly 300,000 Jewish residents. The historic synagogue and community Jewish cemeteries, some of which date back to the mid 1800's, were nearly full. Several were in disrepair, not fully funded, and in neighborhoods that were inconvenient for loved ones to visit.

Jewish history and tradition demonstrate the need, importance, and priority of establishing a Jewish cemetery by the community in every town that Jews have settled throughout the world. In the United States, local Jewish cemeteries date back to the mid-1650's when permission for the first synagogue owned cemetery was granted in New Amsterdam, NY. In this community, Washington Hebrew Congregation established its first cemetery in the 1850's, a pattern soon followed by other synagogues and fraternal organizations. Later, a few commercial, for-profit Jewish cemeteries were established.

By the late 1990's, it became clear that the Washington Jewish community needed a new cemetery to serve the community for the next 100 years. After studying the successful Jewish cemeteries in other American cities and exploring the availability of appropriate land in the Greater Washington area, the leadership of Washington Hebrew Congregation took it upon themselves to spearhead (and underwrite) the creation of a Jewish, nonprofit, community cemetery – the **Garden of Remembrance (Gan Zikaron) Memorial Park.** Their philosophy was to establish a memorial park that would address the religious needs and practices of the entire Jewish community – Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal, and unaffiliated Jews. Twenty-seven Partner Congregations representing the full spectrum of religious observance and affiliation each have sections for their members, and more than half of the 152-acre memorial park is available for the unaffiliated in Community Gardens.



Sheldon Grosberg

As Gan Zikaron marks its twentieth anniversary, is has achieved its goal of providing a sacred burial ground for the entire Jewish community for generations to come. With nearly 2,500 burials to date and over 10,000 reserved burial spaces, the Garden of Remembrance in Northern Montgomery County, Maryland, with its volunteer Board of Di-

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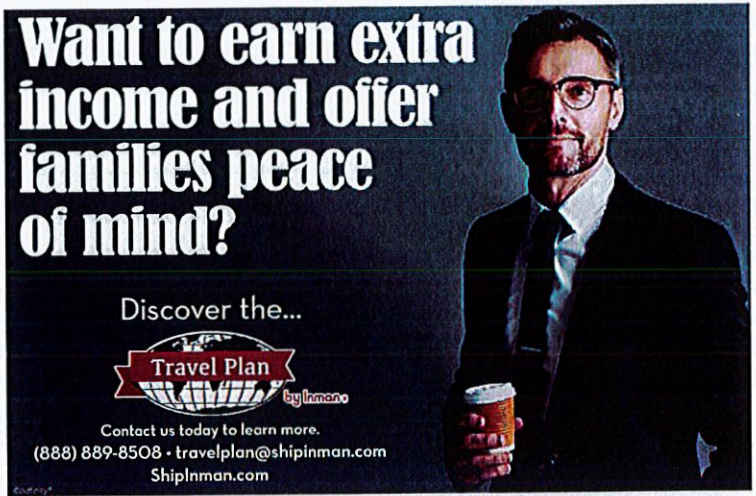

Garden of Remembrance Memorial Park

Continued from Page A18

rectors and small, dedicated staff, is fulfilling its mission of "Kavod Hamet," honoring the deceased, a most important and valued "mitzvah" (commandment) in Jewish law enabling and requiring one to perform an obligation for which they cannot be thanked or repaid.

"The Garden of Remembrance (Gan Zikaron) Memorial Park enables the Jewish community to honor loved ones, respect the bereaved, and preserve the legacy of generations of Jewish life," explains **Hank Levine,** president of the nonprofit cemetery. "We serve the Greater Washington Jewish community and its Congregations one family at a time," concludes Levine.

For nearly twenty years, **Sheldon Grosberg** served as the founding Executive Director of the Garden of Remembrance until his passing in late 2019. He was a guiding hand and influence on the cemetery's design, development, and operation. In January 2020, **Glenn Easton,** a 35 year Jewish communal professional and synagogue administrator with extensive cemetery and bereavement experience was hired as new executive director to manage, expand, and sustain the memorial park.

"I feel blessed to have been given the opportunity to build upon the strong foundation and most meaningful mission of Gan Zikaron," shares Easton who previously served as executive director of both B'nai Israel and Adas Israel congregations. "It is inspiring to work with a board of directors and a 27-congregation advisory committee that are always looking for ways to expand our service to the community and sustain that service for generations to come," he concludes.

One way that the Garden of Remembrance plans on expanding its service to the community is by building a memorial chapel on the premises. In the planning and fundraising stages for nearly twenty years, the memorial park has plans to break ground on the 150-seat chapel and memorial center in the spring. The new memorial chapel will be located across from the beautiful gazebo that has hosted memorial services, musical programs, and family gatherings for over a decade at the memorial park.

Another service to the Jewish community, in accordance with Jewish tradition, the Garden of Remembrance accepts and buries worn prayerbooks, Torah scrolls, and other sacred texts containing the Hebrew name for God in its "genizah" of six burial sites.

As a nonprofit, Jewish organization, the Garden of Remembrance is committed to supporting the larger Jewish community and has awarded small grants and contributed thousands of dollars to many Jewish educational, religious, and social service organizations throughout the community. It is an Agency of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington and invests part of its Endowed Care Trust in the federation's United Jewish Endowment Fund.

The Board and Partner Congregations of Gan Zikaron highly value the "mitzvah" (commandment) of "bal tashchit," the commandment to preserve the environment. As the first cemetery in Maryland to be certified as a hybrid Green Burial Cemetery by the *Green Burial Council of North America*, the Garden of Remembrance recently opened a Green Burial Gardens section of the cemetery which prohibits the use of concrete liners and limits memorial markers. In addition, the memorial park is working with Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection and the Chesapeake Bay Trust on creating Rain Gardens throughout the property to support county watershed restoration, sustain native plantings, and serve as an educational center for the preservation of the local environment.

Like most organizations and family activities, the Garden of Remembrance has been deeply affected by the onset of the coronavirus. Funeral services have been limited in size, require masks and social distancing, and have been held graveside rather than at synagogues or funeral home chapels. Through the use of staff assisted live video streaming, small funeral attendance has been magnified to include a large number of family and friends from throughout the world. A recent "Zoom" funeral service included family from Australia, England, Israel, and Southern California – an opportunity to electronically participate and embrace the bereaved previously unused prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The cemetery has also had to request families to bring their own shovels and suspended its practice of distributing umbrellas in the rain and blankets in cold weather to avoid spreading the virus.

The Garden of Remembrance (Gan Zikaron) Memorial Park begins its third decade of service to the Greater Washington Jewish community, honoring the deceased and caring for the living with devotion, passion, dignity, and respect as tradition wishes, "for 120 years" other synagogues and fraternal organizations. Later, a few commercial, for-profit Jewish cemeteries were established.

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