

Purpose: To present and seek approval from The Schara Tzedek Cemetery Board for a community wide project involving Mountain View Cemetery.

Background:

Historic Cemeteries as irreplaceable landscapes

It is easy to remove historic cemeteries from our collective memory. Whether it be through abandonment, apathy, pollution or encroachment, we often forget these cemeteries exist. Stones have blackened and /or decayed. With upkeep and maintenance no longer the responsibility of family members, the interest often diminishes to the point of no personal involvement and often no visitation. Ironically, it often takes vandalism or theft to bring these artifacts back into our collective consciousness.

First, however, we need to understand that, years ago, cemeteries were common destinations for family excursions. Traditionally, visitors approached by winding roads, leading to picturesque vistas. Rural cemeteries allowed families to take day trips for outings, picnics, and strolls. Often a great feature was the Entrance Gate, elaborately fashioned, marking the fact that one was leaving the mundane world behind. Markers were about life, hope and a gentle remembrance of the accomplishments of the deceased. Poetry was commonly used, and the causes of death were noted dramatically.

As years passed, changes in ritual or custom added to the general lack of interest in visiting cemeteries. The move forward to equalize or standardize headstones, so that the concept of whether "rich or poor" you "got the same stone", has contributed to the impersonal atmosphere of modern cemeteries. Now, often referred to as Memorial Parks, the focus is on yearly visits to remember the dead, with flat, uninteresting stones, and references to the finality of it all. The emphasis has now become the cemetery as *the final resting place for the deceased*, instead of *providing a context of history*.

Historical cemeteries abound with fascinating headstones with their unique phrases and poetry hand carved by artisans. It is only in these old cemeteries that one can find moving and provocative context with powerful and positive meaning. Historical cemeteries are places where the past and the future connect. Our historical cemetery is at *Mountain View*.

Mountain View

The main site of Mountain View Cemetery has been owned and operated by the City Of Vancouver since 1886. Made up of 106 acres of land and featuring beautiful views of the City and coastal mountains, it has 90,000 gravesites. None had been for sale for years until a major renewal involvement by the City in 2000, revitalized Mountain View. Now ten years later, Mountain View is seen as a model throughout North America for what can be done to make a cemetery relevant. This was a result of many people caring.

The Jewish Cemetery at Mountain View

"In 1888 when the first two Jewish deaths occurred in Vancouver, there was no consecrated Jewish ground in which to bury them. Mayor David Oppenheimer, a member of the Victoria Jewish congregation, arranged to have the bodies sent to Victoria where a Jewish Cemetery had been established on 1860"

Cyril Leonoff, Pioneers, Pedlars & Prayer Shawls

Subsequently at the request of the "Jewish Society" of Vancouver, the City of Vancouver reserved a block of graves at Mountain View for the Jewish community.

"The original documents of this agreement are lost, so the precise date is unknown."

Cyril Leonoff, The Scribe Volume XXVIII 2008

With a decorative gate, railings and a hitching post for horses all made of wrought iron, the grounds were consecrated in 1892.

"The first Jewish Burial took place on 19 Dec 1892 when Otto E. Bond was interred. Apparently leaving no next- of- kin in this part of the world, his grave remains unmarked."

Cyril Leonoff, Pioneers, Pedlars and Prayer Shawls

On Feb 13, 1893, eight year old child Nathan Weinrobe died of diphtheria and was buried at Mountain View. His grave has a white stone marker and is the oldest in this Jewish cemetery. Years later Nathan's sister, Gertrude, a recipient of the 1971 B.C. Pioneer Centennial Medal was buried next to the infant brother she had never known.

Death came early to people in the pioneer days and often in interesting ways: Eddie Lucov's stone says "killed by an electric car"; Lena Letvinkoff's stone states she was the "first B.C. Jewish girl graduate of McGill" and died of "galloping consumption". Many stones reflect the influenza epidemics of 1918-19.

Today, the original ornamental gates have disappeared. The entrance is no longer majestic, but the emotional and historic bond to those who came before us must remain.

We, in the Jewish Community, have not kept pace with our colleagues at Mountain View. We have done very little to make our cemetery relevant. I believe we need to care as much as our founding fathers did.