

Jewish congregations consider coordinating management of cemeteries

By Danae King

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Though practical for obvious reasons, cemeteries often aren't profitable. That's one reason several local synagogues are considering centralizing the management of the cemeteries that they own.

"It makes the most sense because cemeteries aren't typically financially viable entities," said Miranda Weisbuch, executive director at Beth Jacob Modern Orthodox Congregation in Berwick. "They operate at a loss and it drains the resources of synagogues who have limited resources to start with."

First discussed a few weeks ago at a meeting hosted by the Columbus Jewish Foundation, creating a central Ohio Jewish cemetery association would allow for better organization, efficiency and maintenance of Jewish cemeteries and Jewish areas of larger cemeteries, said Mark Levy, a member of the committee looking into the idea.

"I'm not sure why this discussion didn't happen sooner and I wish it had happened sooner," Weisbuch said.

In total, there are seven areas in Columbus where Jews are buried, and coordination of them "sometimes works, sometimes doesn't," Levy said.

"I just started noticing different conditions of different cemeteries in Columbus and felt it was time to raise the bar for ourselves," Levy said. "Jewish tradition has always had a strong reverence for maintaining and honoring ancestors and the deceased. ... It's pretty important to the community."

Levy also has plans to get the headstones photographed and the plots mapped online so visitors can find them, he said.

"We're very in favor of that," Ari Goldberg, executive director at Congregation Agudas Achim, a synagogue in Bexley, said of the idea. "There are a lot of families that have, unfortunately, moved out of the Columbus area and aren't able to come back. (Seeing the grave) means so much."

At a June 8 meeting, representatives of the Jewish Cemeteries of Greater Cincinnati spoke with foundation members. The group is a nonprofit corporation that operates 24 Jewish cemeteries in the Cincinnati area. A local association could use it as a model, Levy said.

The Jewish Cemeteries of Greater Cincinnati organization was founded about eight years ago, after several years of getting organized and pulling people together to make it happen, said David Harris, its executive director. Harris often gets calls from other cities asking how they can do the same thing. He recommends that they do.

"It's phenomenal," Harris said. "It's a treasure for the community. Cincinnati has cemeteries dating back to the 1820s. We want to make sure they're well-maintained and preserved. It's a huge, wonderful thing to have in the community, and the burden we lifted from the congregation is amazing."

Though some Christian churches have sold off their cemeteries, Harris assumes that many Jewish congregations haven't because of the importance of caring for the dead in the Jewish tradition.

"The first thing you're supposed to do when you establish a new community, before you build a synagogue, you dedicate a cemetery," Harris said.

The Cincinnati organization has full-time staff members and maintains and improves cemetery grounds, according to its website.

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Right now, each Columbus-area synagogue sells plots in its section or part of the cemeteries, Levy said.

“Each synagogue has their own way of doing things,” said Levy. “I thought it was time to get it a little more organized, official and efficient.”

Each kind of Judaism has different burial requirements, so the goal with a new association would be to maintain the identity of each, Levy said.

“It has a lot of merits, there are a lot of logistics to be worked through,” Goldberg said. “The primary drawback, I think, is the synagogue would be giving up autonomy in terms of the day-to-day running of the cemetery, as well as the monies that are involved.”

“It would systematize it across the community,” he said. “There would be one central address.”

Though the association is still in its early phases, Levy said he’s confident the association will be established once funding is figured out.

For more information, contact the Columbus Jewish Foundation at 614-338-2365.