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# Protesting Lithuania's Plans to Build a Convention Center Over a Jewish Cemetery



by Pini Dunner

OPINION



Headstones at a Jewish cemetery. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

One of the contemporary Jewish world's most impressive yet unsung scholars is the unassuming Professor Shnayer Leiman of New York. Aside from being an ordained Orthodox rabbi and an accomplished historian with expertise on the most obscure areas of modern Jewish history, he is also a brilliant teacher and a cherished mentor for numerous aspiring students and aficionados of Jewish history seeking to advance their expertise and share it with others. Above all, he is a true gentleman, soft-spoken and unassertive, even — as I have personally witnessed — in the face of gross imbecility.

Which makes his very public intervention into the disgraceful situation over the ancient Jewish cemetery in Vilna all the more surprising and arresting. His call to

Jews the world over to protest the Lithuanian government's decision to build a convention center on the site of this cemetery demands our attention, and our vigorous response.

In a letter issued last week, Professor Leiman laid it out powerfully, but without hyperbole:

The remains of hundreds, perhaps thousands of Jews are still buried in the Old Jewish Cemetery of Vilna. These include the remains of some of Vilna's greatest rabbis, Jewish martyrs, and pious women through the centuries, including R. Moshe Rivkes, author of the Be'er Ha-Golah on the Shulhan Arukh; R. Shlomo Zalman, brother of R. Hayyim of Volozhin, and favorite disciple of the Vilna Gaon; R. Shmuel b. R. Avigdor, last Chief Rabbi of Vilna; R. Avraham, son of the Vilna Gaon; the Ger Zedek of Vilna, whose remains were never removed from the Old Jewish cemetery, despite claims otherwise; Traina, mother of the Vilna Gaon; Chana, first wife of the Vilna Gaon; and Gitel, second wife of the Vilna Gaon. Virtually every Jew who died in Vilna before the year 1831 is, in fact, buried in the Old Jewish Cemetery.

It is above these people's remains that the convention center will be built, with much of the funds coming from the European Union. What a disgraceful desecration of a sacred site. Is it not enough that the Lithuanian Jewish community was obliterated by the Holocaust, and that this destruction was then compounded by postwar Soviet Union antisemitism? It seems even dead Jews are not safe in Lithuania.

This is a cemetery that has already been mercilessly desecrated. Between 1948 and 1955, when Lithuania was under Soviet control, the gravestones were stolen for use in local buildings, and then a sports arena was built on the site.

Over recent years, Lithuanian leaders have claimed that all of their country's antisemitism last century was a foreign import of Nazis and Russians, and proudly assert that Lithuania has now reverted to its default philosemitism, embraced its Jewish heritage and welcomed Jewish visitors and residents with open arms. This ludicrous assertion, undoubtedly motivated principally by a desire for Jewish tourism and investment, has now been exposed for the sham that it is.

Sadly, there are Jewish individuals — including, sickeningly, Faina Kukliansky, chair of the Lithuanian Jewish Community organization — who support the construction of the new National Convention Center on the cemetery. The disgraceful Kukliansky — whose support for the convention project tells you everything you need to know

about her qualifications for Jewish leadership — has even defended the continued existence of the abandoned Soviet-era sports arena on the site, which she said has been designated as an architectural heritage site and therefore cannot be demolished. Apparently, she believes that the same Soviets who removed all the Jews' tombstones in order to build their sports monstrosity deserve to have their repulsive architectural heritage respected.

How is the current political leadership of Lithuania, or the EU for that matter, any better than the contemptible Soviet authorities who began this process of desecration in the first place? Answer: They are not — unless this outrage is halted immediately, and the Old Jewish Cemetery is recognized as an internationally protected heritage site of the Jewish community of Europe, and indeed the world.

In this week's Torah portion, Vayechi, after making a powerful promise to Jacob, we see the great pains Joseph took to bury his late father's remains in Canaan, even risking Pharaoh's ire to do so. Similarly, Joseph requested on his own deathbed that his remains be removed from Egypt, whenever the Jews would eventually depart and return to their ancestral homeland, and be buried there. The commentaries offer a variety of explanations as to why both Jacob and Joseph were so insistent. Interestingly, Jacob makes two requests with regard to his burial. The first and most adamant was that he not be buried in Egypt. Only then did he affirm that he specifically wanted to be buried together with his forefathers.

Although none of the commentaries suggest this, is it possible that Jacob's seemingly redundant first request resulted from his prescient knowledge of the frequent grave desecration that occurred throughout Egypt? No grave of any eminent ancient Egyptian was safe from robbers looking for precious gravesite adornments, notwithstanding the great reverence which the country may have initially showered on a last resting place. Jacob's burial site in Hebron may not be quite as extravagant or fêted as his Egyptian one might have been in Biblical times, but there Jacob was always and remains peaceful and undisturbed, 3,500 years later.

Jacob's resolve to be removed from Egypt was a message to his descendants that interference with mortal remains represents the worst kind of disrespect to God, who gave us flesh and bones as the vehicle by which we serve Him in life. I therefore urge you to [sign this online petition](#) requesting that the Vilnius Convention Center project be immediately halted and for the Old Jewish Cemetery, once and for all, to be put on an international heritage protection list.

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