PHILADELPHIA
Jewish Exponent

Beth David Reform Congregation Revives a Forgotten Cemetery

By Leslie Feldman
March 27, 2024

Grave restoration before and after at Har Hasetim. Courtesy of Beth David Reform Congregation

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In the heart of Gladwyne, nestled amid whispering woods, is Har Hasetim, a cemetery forgotten by time. Tombstones, weathered and worn, bear the names of Jewish generations long past. Nature had claimed its territory, with trees and underbrush stretching their roots among the graves.

And Beth David Reform Congregation, which opened in 1943 as "the fourth Reform temple in the Philadelphia area," according to its website, is working to turn back time.

A History Dating to the 1800s
The story of Har Hasetim is the story of Eastern European Jewish immigration during the late 1800s to avoid religious persecution. Around that time, the Har Hasetim Association bought a nine-acre hillside from Charles Greaves to establish a Jewish cemetery a few hundred yards uphill from the tenement housing that existed along Mill Creek. Deed records show at least 13 different benevolent and burial societies acquired plots in Har Hasetim.

Grave restoration before and after at Har Hasetim. Courtesy of Beth David Reform Congregation

In 1953, the 16 acres surrounding the cemetery were bought by Walter K. Durham, who built a home and developed the rest of the land into a residential subdivision known as Castle Hill. In 1947, the cemetery's last known caretaker, Louis Uranson, died. Har Hasetim began to fall into disrepair.

Saving the Cemetery From Destruction
Due to decades of neglect, Har Hasetim became an unruly, overgrown property almost impossible to navigate. Numerous headstones fell or broke, and iron fences rusted, collapsed or were damaged, along with the headstones, by trees sprouting on the formerly open hillside.

Beth David Reform Congregation, whose membership base is about 300 families, began to lead the effort to restore dignity to those interred at Har Hasetim while recognizing the historic significance was a community-wide task too large for one single institution.

In 2012, the Friends of the Gladwyne Jewish Memorial Cemetery formed as a tax-exempt, nonprofit entity to manage and restore the cemetery. Composed of numerous Jewish and non-Jewish private citizens and local institutions, the Friends set upon a course to create a gem out of this diamond in the rough.

"The Friends' sacred mission is to ensure dignity for those interred at Har Hasetim and their families while honoring the historical, cultural and natural significance of the site," explained Neil Sukonik, president of the board of trustees of the Friends of the Gladwyne Jewish Memorial Cemetery and a member of Beth David. "There are about two dozen congregants that volunteer on a consistent basis, volunteer groups that offer their time and companies that donate their services to help in this endeavor."

Volunteers clear a new trail to a grouping of headstones. Courtesy of Beth David Reform Congregation

Making Headway

A database was established for those whose burial records indicate they are interred at Har Hasetim. The translation of headstones from Hebrew or Yiddish into English has begun, as has the location of historical documentation for those interred at Har Hasetim, when available.

Sukonik said that more than 50 tree markers were placed on more than a dozen species of trees found at the property for visitors to enjoy while walking along the wood-chipped paths carved out of the dense brush and vegetation.

"We have engaged an arborist and a tree company to help manage the forest," Sukonik said. We have established an area that has been used as a genizah by numerous local Jewish institutions for appropriate discarding of their prayer books and other religious materials as required by Jewish law."

To date, more than 125 of the approximately 900 headstones and cradle graves have been reconditioned and conserved by Grave Stone Matters, which travels to the site from Hoosick Falls, New York, for numerous weeks at a time each year.

"It's nice for those working on the project, as well as the families who come to the cemetery to honor their loved ones, to be able to see the fruits of our labor," Sukonik said.

Ernie Dellheim, a longtime cemetery volunteer and Property Stewardship Committee co-chair, added," Over the last several years, we have had many various groups come to the cemetery as volunteers to do restoration work. We have cleared underbrush, cut trails and, most importantly, we have engaged a headstone restoration expert to restore grave sites. The transformation has been remarkable."

Planning for the Future

With additional funding, the Friends hope to address the limited access to the property and continue to work on restoring damaged headstones.

The cemetery is at 1130 Vaughan Lane in Gladwyne. To learn more about the restoration project, visit bdavid.org/make-a-difference/gladwyne-jewish-memorial-cemetery.