

Parshat Hayei Sarah

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New cemetery reflects changing Jewish community

Two-thirds of plots open to interfaith families

By Elise Kigner
Advocate Staff

The state's newest Jewish cemetery, Beit Olam East, reflects two trends: the growing number of interfaith families and the mushrooming Jewish community in the suburbs west of Route 128.

Two-thirds of the plots at the 10-acre Wayland cemetery will be open to interfaith families.

The \$7 million cemetery will

be dedicated Nov. 7. It was built as an extension to the adjacent Beit Olam Cemetery, which opened in 1999.

Stan Kaplan, executive director of Jewish Cemetery Association of Massachusetts (JCAM), said the idea for the original cemetery was suggested by Rabbi Herman Blumberg, who was then the rabbi at Temple Shir Tikva in Wayland. Blumberg



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A prayer garden at Beit Olam East in Wayland.

Beit Olam East to be dedicated in Wayland

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told Kaplan that he had heard from many interfaith families that it was hard to find appropriate plots, as they had to choose between a secular cemetery and a Jewish cemetery with a small interfaith section.

"It became more and more apparent to the rabbis that we had a problem," Kaplan said. "There was nothing more alienating for Jewish families than not being able to be buried in a Jewish cemetery, when they were bringing up their children Jewish and living a Jewish life."

Sitting on three acres, Beit Olam had a capacity of 2,000. Cemetery officials expected plots would be available for at least 30 years. However, with people buying plots earlier in life, the cemetery sold out in seven years. Most customers were in their 40s, 50s and 60s, and included a number of professors from Cambridge. Blumberg, his wife and children all have plots there.

To accommodate the huge demand, the Sudbury Design Group last fall embarked on construction of Beit Olam East. Situated on what had been farmland, the new cemetery can accommodate 7,000. Already, 1,500 sites have been sold.

Kaplan said he arrived at the

number of new plots by using a formula that incorporated the state's death rate and the total number of congregants at 26 synagogues in Metrowest. He doubled the resulting figure to take into account unaffiliated Jews.

Two-thirds of the plots are labeled as Reform and are open to interfaith families, and a third are marked as Conservative – the same ratio as in Beit Olam. In keeping with a recent ruling by the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly and the wishes of local rabbis, the Conservative and Reform sections are at least six feet apart and separated by pathways and roadways. Temple Emunah in Lexington, Temple Beth Am in Framingham and Temple Beth Elohim in Wellesley each has its own section.

As with Beit Olam, Kaplan doesn't plan to do much marketing for the extension. "I think when people see it they will talk about it a lot," he said, adding that the beauty of the grounds would be advertisement enough.

Kaplan estimated that the plots at Beit Olam East would sell out in 50 years.

The new cemetery is surrounded by trees and features



Reform and Conservative sections are separated in the 10-acre cemetery.

pathways in the shapes of three Stars of David. It has three designated prayer gardens and 50 granite benches scattered throughout. Urns in the cemetery are filled with stones from cemeteries in Israel.

Plots cost \$3,850, including perpetual care of the grounds and the monument (but not the cost of the monument itself). Kaplan said the price reflects land and development costs as well as anticipated maintenance. The land at Beit Olam East cost \$3.5 million and construction another \$3.5 million.

Before the original Beit

Olam, the last Jewish cemetery opened in the state was Sharon Memorial Park in 1948. Beit Olam and East Beit Olam are the only two cemeteries that have been built by JCAM. The nonprofit took over many of the state's Jewish cemeteries when it was founded 26 years ago. It now owns and operates 106 cemeteries, about half the Jewish burial grounds in the state.

The contrast between JCAM's oldest and newest cemeteries reflects changes in the Jewish community over the past 150 years. Ohabei Shalom, which opened in East Boston in

1844, is the resting place of immigrants who settled in the Mystic River Jewish communities. As funeral homes were uncommon back then, the cemetery was built with a chapel. Often, a husband and wife would be buried on opposite sides of the cemetery, as it was not until after World War II that family plots became nearly universal. Monuments tended to be large, unlike the more modest monuments at Beit Olam.

State treasurer candidate Steve Grossman, who is co-chairing the campaign to restore the chapel at Ohabei Shalom Cemetery, will give the keynote address at the dedication of Beit Olam East. A half dozen rabbis and cantors will conduct the service. They will then lead a walk around the perimeter of the cemetery, stopping seven times along the way to read blessings as a way to mark the land as holy.

Kaplan predicted that up to 1,000 people would attend the dedication. After the ceremony, plot owners will be able to explore the cemetery and pick their burial spots.

The Beit Olam East dedication service will be held Nov. 7 at noon. For more information, call 617-244-6509 or visit jcam.org