

Old Jewish Cemetery of Vilna to Be Turned into New Convention Center

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Dear Friend,

I don't ordinarily get involved in signing petitions, but this is a matter that cries out for protest against the massive desecration that is about to take place. I'm sure you know that the Lithuanian government has announced plans to build a new convention center over the Old Jewish Cemetery of Vilna. Although the Vilna Gaon's remains were removed from the Old Jewish Cemetery, the remains of hundreds, perhaps thousands of Jews are still buried in the Old Jewish cemetery. These include the remains of some of the greatest rabbis, Jewish martyrs, and pious women through the centuries, including R. Moshe Rivkes (d. 1671-2), author of the *Be'er Ha-Golah* on the Shulhan Arukh; R. Zelmele (i.e., R. Shlomo Zalman, d. 1788), brother of R. Hayyim of Volozhin and favorite disciple of the Vilna Gaon; R. Shmuel b. R. Avigdor (d. 1793), last Chief Rabbi of Vilna; R. Avraham b. Ha-Gra (d. 1809) ; the Ger Zedek of Vilna (d. 1749), whose remains were not removed from the Old Jewish cemetery (despite claims otherwise); and Traina (date of death unknown), mother of the Vilna Gaon; Chanah, first wife of the Vilna Gaon (d. 1782); and Gitel, second wife of the Vilna Gaon, who apparently outlived the Gaon (precise date of death unknown). Virtually every Jew who died in Vilna before the year 1831 was, in fact, buried in the Old Jewish Cemetery.

The petition does not call for the Lithuanian government to cancel plans for building a new convention center (funded largely by the EU). It simply asks that it be built at a different location in Vilnius – which can easily be done.

A wonderful Vilna resident, Ruta Bloshtein, a shomer shabbos woman who bakes challah for members of the Vilna kehillah every erev Shabbos, has taken upon herself the responsibility of spearheading this write-in campaign. She started some three weeks ago and has about 250 signatories so far. She needs at least 1000 signatures; if she doesn't get them it will be a Chillul Ha-Shem even beyond the destruction of the Jewish cemetery itself. It will be a signal to the Lithuanian government that Jews neither care nor count. If she gets

3000 signatures, the political authorities will have little choice but to take the petition into account before making any hasty decision. She needs, and deserves, our help.

The two key Rabbonim in Lithuania today, Rabbi Krelin (Chief Rabbi of Lithuania) and Rabbi Krinsky (head of Chabad) are among the first 250 signatories. It seems to me this is a case of *מת מצוה* in more ways than one. Sefer Chasidim, §261 (ed. Margulies, p. 225) reads:

אהוב לך את המצוה הדומה למת מצוה שאין לה עוסקים, כגון שתראה מצוה בזויה או תורה שאין לה עוסקים, כגון שתראה שבני עירך לומדים מועד וסדר נשים, תלמוד סדר קדשים. ואם תראה שאין חוששים ללמוד מועד קטן, ופרק מי שמתו, אתה תלמדם, ותקבל שכר גדול כנגד כולם, כי הם דוגמת מת מצוה.

You should love mitzvos that have similar status to that of an abandoned corpse that no one attends to (and

whose burial is obligatory on whoever finds it). Should you see a mitzvah that is denigrated, or a portion of

Torah that is neglected, make a point of [doing the mitzvah and] studying the Torah that is neglected.

Should you see the members of your community studying the Order of Mo'ed [the laws of the Festivals] and

the order of Nashim [the laws pertaining to women], to the neglect of the other Orders, make sure that you

study the Order of Kodoshim [the laws pertaining to sacred matters relating to the Temple sacrifices and

service]. Should you see that no one concerns himself with the study of the talmudic tractate *Mo'ed Katan*,

or the talmudic chapter *Mi Shemeso* [the third chapter of tractate Berakhos], make sure that you study them.

Your reward will be great, equal to that of all the others, for all these are samples of an abandoned corpse

whose burial is obligatory on the one who finds it.

All one needs to do is to click on the link below, fill out the electronic form, and electronically sign their name. Please forward to others, so that they too can participate in this mitzvah. It is not a time to stand idly by.

With prayers for the success of our cause,

Shnayer Leiman

[CLICK HERE TO FILL OUT THE FORM.](#)