

# King David's Tomb

Category: Holidays, Shavuos

*The most ancient form of virtual visitation.*

## The Fight Over King David's Tomb

In Jerusalem, there is a place that is considered the tomb of King David. It's a building on Mt. Zion and there, on the first floor, there is a synagogue. It's an accepted and established tradition that this building stands over the tomb of King David, and Jews have always been coming there to pray.

But the building itself has a tradition of its own.

Christians have a tradition that the second floor of the building is the location of the so-called "last supper." And so, for hundreds of years, this site has been a point of friction and dispute between Jews, Christians and Muslims, with the Jews claiming that it belongs to them and the Christians claiming that it belongs to them.

Over the last 500 years, up to the 1948 War of Independence, the site was under Muslim control and entry was limited to Muslims only. Jews and Christians were not permitted to enter.

As is known, the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe established a "Perpetual Tehilim Society at the Tomb Adjacent to King David's Grave" (Igros Kodesh Vol. VI, pg. 312), and the Rebbe renewed it the eve of Shavuos 5750.

Christians, on the other hand, use the second floor once or twice a year. Several years ago, the Israeli government, in a goodwill gesture, wanted to transfer authority over the second floor to the Vatican. When that hit the news, there was a firestorm in Israel. The entire media was aflame, with government ministers and Knesset members being asked if were true and denying the fact, claiming that there was no such planned move.

However, the Vatican released a statement saying that they were not seeking authority or ownership over the site—rather, they "just" wanted to organize a

prayer service there every day. Besides the practical problem created by a site that would create daily friction between Jews and non-Jews, it was an idea doomed to fail because there would be demonstrations and fights every day, with the police having to get involved to break up the crowds. That certainly wouldn't contribute to peace in the Old City.

There would also be halachic problems, but in the end, as you can imagine, the plans fell through.

## **The First Prayer of a Tzaddik**

People often ask why Jews go to pray at the graves of tzadikim, righteous people. Jews throughout all the generations have even gone to living tzadikim to ask them to pray for them. Seemingly, everyone can pray to G-d directly! Why do you need a tzadik to pray to G-d for you?

This custom of going to the tzadik to pray for you is a Jewish tradition of 3,000 years, and perhaps even older.

In Parshas Vayeira, we're told that Avraham came to live in a place called Garar (which today is located in the Negev Desert between Israel and Egypt). The story is told that when Avraham and his party came to Garar, Avraham said that his wife Sarah was "my sister"—but then, as was the custom in those ancient days, because she was a beautiful woman, she was taken to the palace of King Avimelech, the King of Garar.

Then the Torah tells us: "And G-d came to Avimelech in a night dream and said to him, 'Behold, you will die over the woman you took, for it is consorting with a married woman!' " Not only did G-d warn him that he was going to die, but He also smote him and his household with a plague of "stoppage of all reproductive orifices" (Rashi, Bereishis 20:9). And then G-d told him, "Return the man's wife for he is a prophet, and he will pray for your and you shall live." There, G-d Himself tells Avimelech that Avraham, the prophet and tzadik, will pray for him, and in the merit of Avraham's prayers, Avimelech will live. And indeed, "and Avraham prayed to G-d, and G-d healed Avimelech, and... they gave birth."

From there we learn that G-d Himself instructs people to go ask tzadikim to pray for them. (See My Rebbe, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, pg. 186.)

# The Tomb's Spirit

The reason we turn to tzadikim for their prayers is because tzadikim have better connections to G-d; their prayers are heard. Asking tzadikim to pray for us is kind of like asking the bank president, or the bank's most important customer, to approve that bank loan for us. For the same reason, we also visit the graves of tzadikim, asking the souls of the tzadikim buried there to pray for us and advocate for us before G-d.

When the Previous Rebbe visited the Holy Land in 1929, he visited Meron, the grave of Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai. Afterwards, he related that in Meron, they would say that Rabbi Shimon's tomb was a "happy tomb" and that Rabbi Shimon was a "happy rebbe" (Likutei Diburim Vol. III. Pg. 517b)—meaning that people who came to pray at the tomb left the place in high spirits. Later, the Previous Rebbe visited a different tomb and upon leaving, he said, "That's a kalemutter tomb!" That's Yiddish for "melancholy."

The Rebbe described the Previous Rebbe's tomb as a positive place—that when one visits there, it causes a "lifting of the spirits." The Rebbe explained that there are tombs that trigger somberness and introspection, while others trigger happiness and elation. The Previous Rebbe's life's work was one of drawing close and lifting up every Jew in a pleasant manner, so when you visit his grave, it brings happiness (Yud Shevat 5716, *Toras Menachem* vol. 16 pg. 42).

## Let It Rub Off On You

Perhaps this is why so many people are drawn to the grave of King David.

King David endured many tough chapters in his life. As a child, his brothers distanced him, as he writes in Psalms (69:9), "I was strange to my brothers and a heathen to the sons of my mother."

Later, when he had already become King Saul's son-in-law, not only had his situation not improved but King Saul himself pursued him and tried to kill him for a long time.

Then, after he had already become king, he suffered greatly from a lot of people; as he writes in the same chapter, "More than the hairs of my head are those who

hate me freely.” After that, one of his own sons rebelled against him, and on and on.

But despite all that, King David remained an optimistic person. He never lost his faith in G-d. As the Book of Shmuel says, every time King Saul was in a gloomy mood, David would be summoned to come forth and play the harp for him.

The Talmud (Tractate Brachos 3b) tells us, “A harp was suspended over the bed of David,” and “he would get up at midnight and play it” (Pesikta). To this very day, all the pictures and paintings of King David depict him with a musical instrument in his hand. It’s also said that when he brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, “David was hopping and dancing before G-d.”

What’s more, David was the one who compiled the Book of Psalms, which are all songs and praises to G-d. Many of them start with the words, “Mizmor L’David”—a Song by David. We see from here that King David was a happy man who always saw the positive side in everything and constantly sang out his thanks and gratitude to G-d. He is called the “N’im Zemiros Yisrael”—the Sweet Singer of Israel.

It’s no wonder that people come to pray at his grave — it gives them a shot of happiness and lifted spirits.

We who don’t live in the Holy Land can’t go to Mt. Zion whenever we want. But we, too, can connect with King David and draw a bit of his optimism; when we read chapters from his Book of Tehilim, that’s our way of visiting his grave.

The holiday of Shavuos is both the birthday and the yahrzeit anniversary of King David. It’s the best time, therefore, to get your hands on a Tehilim and say a few chapters every day. I’m sure that after saying Tehilim every day, each one of us will be a little “possessed” by the optimism of King David. (Shavuos 5717, *Toras Menachem* vol. 20 pg. 66.)