

## How do we Know Maimonides is Actually Buried in Tiberias?

By Yamin Levy

The sages commented: He who dwells in the land of Israel all his sins are forgiven as the verse (Isaiah 33:34) states: “The inhabitants will not say ‘I am sick’. The people who dwell there shall have their sins forgiven.”

Even one who walks four cubits there will merit the World-to-Come. Similarly *one who is buried there receives atonement as though the place in which he is buried were an altar of atonement* as the verse (Deuteronomy 32:43) states: “His land will atone for His people.”

*Maimonides Mishneh Torah Melachim 5:11*

We all know the story of the tour guide who takes a group of tourists to the north of Israel and points out the burial place of Samuel the prophet. The next day while traveling through the south of Israel he again points out the burial place of Samuel the prophet. A curious tourist asks: “but yesterday you told us Samuel the prophet was buried in the north?” “Of course” responds the guide “That was Samuel “I” and this is the burial place of Samuel “II”. It is because of tour guides like these that we are weary and suspect when asked to trust that a certain place is the actual burial site of an ancient sage.



Yet when it comes to the burial site of Maimonides the tradition is almost as ancient as his death. The earliest source that identifies Maimonides' burial site in Tiberias dates back to 1258 some 54 years after Maimonides died.

The thirteenth century, Rabbi Ya'acov of Paris kept a record of his travels through Israel and its neighboring countries and published it under the name *Eleh Masa'ot* (these are the travels). Rabbi Ya'acov was a fund raiser for the famous Rabbi Yechiel of Paris<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It has been suggested that Rabbi Ya'acov was actually raising money for the Yeshiva in Acco see R.CH Kook Mimizrach U'MiMa'arav 3 page 143. The alternative is that he was raising money in Israel

and he kept a precise record of cities he traveled and the holy places he visited. At the time there was no comprehensive guide or catalogue of cemeteries and burial places of the great sages.

This work was important for two reasons. First and foremost the Jewish people have always been meticulous in marking their graves and preserving clear demarcations between cemetery grounds and residential areas. Cemeteries were traditionally located far from a town (no less than 80 feet) and were generally fenced off. This tradition arose out of practical considerations among which were the traditional purity laws which forbade the Kohanim to touch a corpse or come within 6 feet of a grave. By placing clear signs a Kohen, a member of the priestly tribe, could avoid such contact.

In addition to the above reason, Rabbi Ya'acov's guide of burial sites, especially of great and saintly rabbis (as was Rabbi Ya'acov's) was important because it was believed, that visiting the burial site of great sages to offer prayers would bring good luck.

Below is the page from a book published in 1904 by Professor Greenhut who reprinted Rabbi Ya'acov's travels<sup>2</sup>. Rabbi Ya'acov makes a clear reference to Maimonides' burial place. He writes as follows:

In Tiberias are buried: Rabbi Akiva and his students; [and] Rabbi Chiya and his two sons; [and] Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakay and his students; [and] Rabbi Kahane and Rabbi Meir Kazin  
**[and] the Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon**  
their memory should be a blessing.

It is no surprise that the fourteenth century Rabbi Eshtori Farhi of Provence who also accumulated a great deal of topographical material on Medieval Eretz Israel makes the same observation as Rabbi Ya'acov of Paris. Rabbi Eshtori authored a book called *Kaphtor VaFerah* where he states at the beginning of chapter 16 that Rabbi Kehane and Rabbi Yochanan are buried in Tiberias **“and among them is HaRambam”**.

No less significant is the fact that when Rabbi Eshtori spent time in Egypt prior to traveling to Israel he met the descendents of Maimonides and he says nothing about Rambam being buried in Egypt. If we had no other evidence this in itself would suggest with certainty that Maimonides was not buried in Egypt.

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for the Yeshiva in Paris. There were numerous wealthy Jews living in Acco at this time. Acco was a port city that enjoyed a great deal of commerce and there is ample evidence that the Jews were at the forefront of the economy.

<sup>2</sup> Published by Carmeli; Dr. Greenhut in MaSa'ot Rabbi Binyamin (1894 page 140-144); Lantz HaMa'amar Vol. 3; Y. Ben Tzvi Mimizrach U'Mima'arav year 3.

Another early proof that indeed Maimonides is buried in Tiberias dates back to 1288. This is the year that the head of the Jewish community in Damascus declared a ban against all the anti-Maimonideans of his time.

As his father before him, Rabbi David Hanagid, Maimonides' grandson had taken the mantle of leadership and responded to those who opposed his Grand-father's teachings. Rabbi Shelomo Petit a Kabbalist from Acco sought support from the rabbis of France, Germany, and Italy for his anti-Maimonidean crusade. Rabbi David was a powerful and respected leader and upon hearing the efforts of Rabbi Shelomo he enlisted the support of the Rabbis from Damascus, Baghdad and Sefat. The rabbis responding decisively and in unison declared a ban not only on Rabbi Shelomo but on all the anti-Maimonideans:

“We stood at the grave of the Gaon z”l with a few leaders from Acco and we read the declaration... Next to the Nagid Rabbeinu David the grandson of Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon”

While Tiberias is not stated clearly we know the rabbis gathered at Maimonides' grave and the burial place was in Israel somewhere near Sefat and Acco. Based on the preceding references we can safely assume that the burial place is Tiberias.

About 100 years ago the gravestone of Rabbi David the grandson of Rambam whom we just mentioned was found next to Maimonides' Grave (on the grounds of the Maimonides Heritage Center). The stone was taken to Egypt and displayed there until a professor of Yeshiva University who asked to remain anonymous was able to secure the gravestone's return back to Tiberias where it is displayed at the Kever of Rambam (in the blue bird cage like display).

Rabbi David the Grandson of Maimonides lived a number of years in Israel then moved back to Egypt where he died. His remains were brought back to Israel and he was buried in Tiberias in order to be next to the grave of his Grandfather.

There are at least two other important references that clearly suggest early evidence that Maimonides was buried in Tiberias. A late medieval poem called “*Eretz Asher Lo Bemiskenut Yivul Nitna*” published in the Hebrew journal *Zion* volume 1 pages 31-38 has one line in it that is important to us. It states clearly:

**“Moshe son of Maimon is buried in Tiberias**

The last yet equally significant late medieval reference that Maimonides is buried in Tiberias is found in a work written by a student of Nachmanides (Rabbi Moses ben Nachman) called “*Totza'ot Eretz Israel*”<sup>3</sup> (the Product of the Land of Israel). In the describing the burial sites of the righteous in Tiberias he writes:

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<sup>3</sup> Published by Simcha Assaf in *Zichron Shel Luntz*

## **In the cemetery is buried Rabbenu Moshe ben HaDayan Rabbi Maimon**

The practice of transporting the remains of the deceased to Israel was commonly observed by all members of the Jewish communities of medieval Egypt and other places. Indeed Maimonides was sent a question (Teshubot 372) by one of his students called Sa'adya regarding a very poor man who was planning a trip to Israel and disinterred his parents who were buried in the outskirts of Egypt in order to bury their bones in Jerusalem. The student inquired about the permissibility of such a practice. Maimonides responded in the affirmative and added: "this man acted very well and this was the practice of the great sages of Israel".

We have similar responsa from Egypt written into the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Radbaz) suggesting the common nature of this practice.

What do we make of the tent alongside the Rambam Synagogue in Egypt that some suggest is the actual burial site of Maimonides? The answer is simple. Maimonides was first buried in Egypt immediately after he died until arrangements were made to transport his remains to Israel. That temporary burial site might, indeed, have been next to his synagogue. Rabbi Yoseph Sambori a 17<sup>th</sup> century Egyptian scholar actually records the tradition that **"Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon was first buried along his Bet Midrash until his remains were transported to Tiberias."** This tradition has been well preserved and there is no evidence to suggest differently.

In fact we have absolutely no record that Rambam was buried in Egypt. Jews have continuously lived in Egypt since the death of Maimonides and it would be highly unusual that this community would not have kept a record of the burial of such a great man. The Jewish community of Egypt has preserved the burial site of many other lesser personalities. The fact is that the accepted tradition in Egypt has always been that Rambam was buried in Eretz Israel.

