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## My Work at the Cemetery

How a day at the cemetery changed the way I think about the Jewish community

**By Benjamin Sales**



I recently participated in a volunteer project to restore the cemetery of the abandoned Kehilath Jacob Anshe Drohiczen synagogue. At first, my only reason for volunteering was to acquire two community service hours for my school requirement. But I left the cemetery with a greater appreciation of the roots of the Chicago Jewish Community.

I first learned about the cemetery restoration project from the Tikkun Olam Volunteers Network (TOV), which is the community service and social action branch of the Jewish United Fund. TOV provides a variety of community service volunteering options throughout metropolitan Chicago throughout the year. One of those projects is the cemetery restoration, which began in mid-July and continues until the end of October.

I called the TOV Network in mid-August in order to sign up for community service events before school started. I was hoping to add on to the community service hours that I had accumulated towards my school's requirement of 80 "chesed" (Hebrew for community service) hours. TOV informed me that the only event for which I could sign up was the cemetery restoration. I was disappointed. I enjoy volunteering, but I was hoping to volunteer in a way that would help the needy. I didn't know much about the cemetery or its synagogue, and I wasn't quite sure what I'd be doing.

When I arrived at the cemetery, most of the volunteers were already cleaning what seemed to me to be an open field. I soon learned, however, that I was standing on an actual cemetery, and that the gravestones themselves had been moved for practical purposes. I soon noticed a fenced-in corner of the field; it was filled with gravestones that seemed too close to each other to accommodate graves.

Some of the volunteers were picking up litter throughout the cemetery, while others pruned branches off trees surrounding the site. I was given brief instructions and sent to help with the trees. For the next couple of hours, I pruned off dead branches and picked up branches on the ground. I worked hard, but didn't really see the significance of what I was doing.

After two hours, the supervisors called us into the fenced-in area containing the gravestones. Immediately people started noticing the names on the gravestones and connecting the names with those of family and friends. The supervisors then told us the point of the project: Many cemeteries are connected with congregations, and once those congregations disband, the cemeteries are often neglected and fall into disrepair. Such was the case with Kehilath Jacob Anshe Drohiczen, a congregation that originally stood outside of Chicago. The congregation was founded, as many were, by immigrants from a town in Eastern Europe. The synagogue thrived for many years, but in the mid-20th century, the congregation became defunct and burials in the cemetery ceased.

Once neglected, the cemetery encountered numerous problems. A former member of Anshe Drohiczen, for example, explained the ongoing legal battle for the cemetery regarding taxes. He told us of the importance of keeping the cemetery out of respect for those buried there and



in memory of the congregation. Volunteers who lived nearby said that because of the absence of the actual gravestones, unknowing people treated the cemetery like a park, frequently playing ball there. After a few closing remarks, the supervisors thanked all of us, and we left the site.

After learning about the cemetery and its history, I became aware of the significance of my effort and time. The restoration gave me a greater understanding of the history of the community in which I live, and taught me the importance of keeping the memory of the past community alive—no matter what the cost. The past makes us what we are, and knowledge of that past gives us a greater understanding of where we are today.

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Ben S., 17, is a Senior at Ida Crown Jewish Academy in Chicago, whose hobbies include wrestling, newspaper, USY, and baseball.