

The Tombstone of the Reverend Moses Cohen

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The tombstone of the Reverend Moses Cohen, who died in Charleston, South Carolina, on April 19, 1762, offers an early example of the use of Hebrew verse for religious purposes in America.

We have but scant information about the life of the Reverend Mr. Cohen, who officiated as "rabbi" of Beth Elohim Unveh Shallom, Charleston's first Jewish congregation, founded in 1749. Cohen, who had come from London and made his living in Charleston as a shopkeeper, served the congregation as its first "rabbi" on a volunteer basis.

The laudatory verses inscribed on the tombstone in both Hebrew and English indicate the high regard in which Cohen was held. That he was esteemed for his pioneering contribution to Jewish religious life in Charleston is also evidenced by the provision in Congregation Beth Elohim's 1820 constitution that "on every Kippur night perpetually, the first *escaba* (prayer for the dead) shall be made for the Reverend Moses Cohen because he was appointed and confirmed the Reverend Doctor of this Congregation from its establishment."¹

At the top of the tombstone appears an elaborate carving of two hands outstretched in priestly benediction, indicating that the deceased was of priestly descent. Above the two hands are the Hebrew words *keter kehunah*, or priestly crown.

The Hebrew inscription below the carving characterizes Moses Cohen as an "accomplished scholar" and "an eminent man of riches." Since this inscription varies from the English version on the tombstone, and since it contains also the Hebrew date of Cohen's passing, we present it in translation: "Here lies the accomplished scholar, the eminent man of riches, the honorable Mosheh Ha-Kohen, who

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¹ Quoted in Charles Reznikoff and Uriah Z. Engleman, *The Jews of Charleston* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1950), p. 18.

died and departed this life on the second day [of the week, i. e., Monday], 27 Nissan, 522, according to the abbreviated reckoning. May his soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life.”

The Hebrew verses following the inscription correspond to the English ones, but with some slight variations. The last line of the Hebrew, for which no English equivalent is given on the tombstone, reads: “Before God by Michael on the altar” — a reference to the Angel Michael who proverbially receives the souls of the righteous at the gates of Heaven.²

The first line of the verses begins with the Hebrew name *Mosheh*, and the initials of *Ha-Kohen* (הכהן) appear as an acrostic in lines two to five, thus giving us the full name of Mosheh Ha-Kohen. The style of the Hebrew verses, which are rhymed throughout, is pedestrian.

The stonecutter was obviously not well versed in Hebrew. In one word he substituted a *kaf* for a *beth*; in another he used a *resh* in place of a *daleth*. In two cases, he completely omitted letters from words. Missing letters have been added in brackets in the transcribed text.

In the Hebrew date, the order of the two letters *zayin* and *kaf*, whose numerical equivalent is twenty-seven, is reversed to make up the word ז'ך (*zak*), meaning “pure.” The Hebrew year 522 is rendered as בכש"ר (*b'kasher*), the numerical equivalent of the more usual form תקכ"ב, because בכש"ר, unlike תקכ"ב, makes up a Hebrew word, meaning “clean” or “pure.” This was often the practice in rabbinic usage, especially when indicating the year of publication on the frontispiece of rabbinic works.

Below is the transcription of the text as it appears on the tombstone:³

² See Hagigah 12b; on Michael as the Guide of Souls, see *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1901-1916), VIII, 537.

³ The following are the abbreviations used in the inscription: פ"נ = פה נטמן — “here lies”; כבוד הרב רבי = כה"ר — a courtesy rabbinical title; לפ"ק = לפ"קטן — “according to the abbreviated reckoning,” that is, without thousands (the year is given as 522, instead of 5522 [1762]); ת"צ'ב"ה = ת"צ'ב"ה' — “may his soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life.”

כתר כהונה

פ"ג

החכם המושלם הגביר הנעלה כה"ר
 משה הכהן שנפטר והלך לעולמו ושב[ק]
 לן חיים ביום ב' ז"ך ניסן בכש"ר לפ"ק

ת' נ' צ' ב' ה'

לאור ולזרחה להשמים	משה אשר אל אל כתום עלית
הודך ואורך נהדר כפלים	הן על פני תבל לעניים היית
תוך אבני שיש אין שם מים	כי בין שרפים שמה דיר[ת]ך
דמעות גוזלים מלאו עינים	הה כל יודעיך על פרידתך
נפשך תהיה עולה לאשה ריח	ברך אחר אשר האיר בעוז זורח
לפני אדני על ידי מי[כ]אל במזבח	

Here

Lieth Interred the R[ight]. R[everend]. MOSES COHEN, D.D.

Died, the 19th Day of April, 1762

Aged 53 Years

Moses, thou wentest up to God with Righteousness
 To Shine and Glorify in Heaven.
 Whilst upon Earth, thou wast a guide to thy People.
 Therefore thy Glory is now doubly Beautified
 Behold, among the Seraphims; thou fixedst thy Dwelling
 Amidst the Glorious Transparent Pavements.
 Alas! all that knew thee at thy departure,
 Flowing Tears have fill'd their Eyes.
 May thy Light Shine with Force and Glory,
 And thy Soul be accepted an agreeable offering.