

# DIGGING THE CAVES OF ABRAHAM

## BURIALS: Old quarries transformed in Israel

### Jewish cemetery to revive practice

By Roberta Freeman  
Staff writer

Jewish law affirms that while one's soul is immortal, one's body must return to the earth in keeping with the biblical statement, "you are dust and to dust you shall return."

But in 1997, the state of Israel declared it had run out of open space and the government would no longer permit the construction of new cemeteries using traditional rows of individual graves. The tiny country found a solution by returning to a modern version of the ancient biblical practice of cave burial.

In October, Mount Sinai Memorial Park in Simi Valley will open The Caves of Abraham, the only mausoleum outside of Israel to adapt an ancient burial practice and stringent religious requirements to the 21st century. The cemetery is on Mount Sinai Drive at the north end of Yosemite Drive.

The burial crypts are arranged in a series of airy grottos with skylights carved into the rolling hillside and are entered through wide passageways. Noted cemetery architect Robert Levonian adapted the original crypt designs done by Israeli architects Tuvia Sagiv and Uri Ponger to the Simi Valley site and California building requirements.

"The design follows the natural curve of the hillside and maximizes use, while maintaining the integrity of the cave concept," Levonian

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said during a visit with Ponger to the site Tuesday.

The Caves of Abraham have received approval from the Chief Rabbinate, meeting standards of acceptability within all branches of Judaism. Though there is no law against burial in tiers or the number of tiers, each body must rest in soil and there must be 21 to 22 inches between bodies in every direction, Ponger explained.

Ponger said the cave concept was linked to the niches carved out of hillsides more than 2,000 years ago for the Sanhedrin, a group of distinguished priests, judges and religious officials.

The crypts contain enough space for one or two caskets and are no more than three spaces high.

"It is built on a human scale from the traditional mausoleum," Mount Sinai spokesman Robert Sax explained. "You can touch the uppermost tier of the crypt. Your loved one is never out of reach."

In keeping with the Jewish law, each crypt is surrounded with earth. Handfuls of

earth from Jewish cemeteries around the world, as well as from Holocaust concentration camps, rest in the bottom of each crypt and are channeled within the concrete walls surrounding each space.

Levonian noted the initial difficulty in finding a contractor capable of devising a method of building the hollow walls to be filled with the earth.

"It is a very highly complicated process," said Chris Inman, construction manager with Hayhoe Construction Corp.

Ponger, a native Israeli, said he and his partner Sagiv have recently won contracts to develop the cave concept for cemeteries in the major urban and metropolitan areas throughout his homeland.

"We built our first site in Jerusalem 12 years ago," Ponger said, noting his own mother was buried in a small site he designed in the hillside of an abandoned quarry.

Ponger said the Israeli government is actively working to reclaim the many abandoned quarries throughout the country. His most ambitious project is about to commence east of Tel Aviv. Ponger will trans-



Staff photo by Ed Compean

**DUST TO DUST:** Roberto Madlegrol spreads dirt in one of the first 550 tombs under construction at the Mount Sinai Memorial Park in Simi Valley.

form 45 acres from an eyesore into terraced hillsides of lush greenery, providing 270,000 burial sites. The number is expected to provide for the surrounding area's burial needs for the next 30 years.

Mount Sinai General Manager Arnold Salzman said the park is interested in providing a variety of choices for families faced

with burying their loved ones.

The first phase, scheduled to be completed in October, will contain 550 crypts. A second phase of 550 crypts will commence upon completion of the first.

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