

William F. Cohen



Dear Editor:

I am writing in reaction to your article in the August 17th NYT piece entitled “Weeds Among the Graves, and Dismay Among the Survivors.”

By way of full disclosure, I am a friend of the plaintiff, Mr. John Lucker, and have visited Bayside Cemetery myself to get a sense of its condition. It is hard to say what has created a greater sense of outrage for me—the condition of the cemetery, the indifference and lack of respect for the dead and their families displayed by Congregation Shaare Zedek, or the seeming shrug of the shoulders with which your article treats this situation.

It should be noted that Mr. Lucker has not filed this lawsuit for monetary gain, but simply to return the cemetery to an appropriate and reasonable condition. A condition that displays respect for the dead and one that provides some reasonable semblance to the care and condition the cemetery’s departed ‘residents’ and their families contracted for. Instead, Shaare Zedek has delayed, obfuscated and threatened, all while continuing to contract for such services, and claiming, alternatively --no responsibility... the impossibility of the task...but great progress.

If Shaare Zedek took the steps necessary for an appropriate cleanup, the entire matter would disappear tomorrow. The whole issue is even more absurd given the recent statement in the August 28, 2008, edition of the Queens Chronicle by Shaare Zedek’s lawyer Mr. Stephen Axinn, who “doesn’t deny that most of the property is neglected and disrespected”. If that is the case, the only question remaining is “where did the money go?”

I was particularly outraged by the comment and quote which closed the NYT article: “Bob Martorano, the cemetery’s groundskeeper, said that the cemetery had no equipment, not even a lawnmower, to clean up the property.” How is this possible? How could Shaare Zedek even hope to provide care for the cemetery with no equipment? What does a “groundskeeper” with no equipment actually do? How does one even have a serious conversation with people who think that paying a groundskeeper who doesn’t have the tools he needs to do his job is an appropriate use of cemetery funds?

It is also equally outrageous for Mr. Matorano to say that “Most people want it cleaned up, but some people *love it here and want to leave it just the way it is*” (emphasis added). Who are these people? The groundskeeper? The cemetery? The deceased? The congregation? I cannot imagine that anyone who has seen the condition of the cemetery would consider it to be an acceptable resting place for a friend or family member. Shame on the New York Times for even printing the quote as a reasonable possibility.

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