

FIFTY METERS BELOW THE SURFACE

*Jerusalem Digs
Deep to Continue
Honoring Its Dead*

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-Adi Alphandary

by Susan Cushing

IT'S SAD BUT TRUE, we live in an age of instantaneous everything. Everyone from your 5-year-old wielding a Wii stick using immersive technology to your elderly grandparents grappling with an iPhone—we are all “connected.” Unfortunately, this has left us overstimulated and underwhelmed. We are a society of stoically jaded, virtual cyborgs who have little or no expectations to be surprised or wowed. We are, it would seem, beyond the time when natural wonders brought forth our adventurous spirit, leading us to seek out the beauty and awesomeness of the world around us. An adventure could be found even in the sleepest of towns if one were so inclined to search.

Yet, every once in a while, something moves into our field of vision that is so magnificent, so breathtaking that even our dot.com brains jump to attention and pause to appreciate.

Such a wonder is nestled in the heart of the Holy City of Jerusalem. Here, a true wonder is opening up, literally, as an underground cemetery is carved among the sacred tunnels. This

incredible project that began in November 2019 was nominated as a finalist in the International Tunneling Association Awards (ITA) in 2017. So impressive, and on such a grand scale, it is hard not to be emotionally affected.

We were fortunate enough to speak to the man leading this huge endeavor, Adi Alphandary, who is in charge of business development for





This revolutionary solution calls for excavating some 24,000 new burial plots at the depth of approximately 160 feet underground (just shy of 50 meters). The first phase of 8,000 graves reached completion in late 2020.

reputation of supporting sustainability while ensuring the protection and preservation of the environment seems to be the perfect guardian to lead this immense undertaking.

According to a company spokesperson, “Our world has limited resources, if we deplete and exploit those – we ruin our world. It is our belief that the subterranean space can serve the surface world in a manner that is much more environmental than most alternatives practices.”

As you can see by the amazing photos included in this article, this is a project shrouded in historical significance and sacred beauty.

“This is an opportunity to revive the old cemeteries that had essentially become ‘lifeless islands’ usually located in the best locations of the big cities of the world,” says Adi. “It meets all the religious criteria and even has received the blessing of the Roman Catholic Church cardinals in Rome.”

Rolzur Underground Solutions, the company spearheading this project.

Adi, who grew up in Jerusalem, has fond recollections of playing among the ancient burial sites and caves with his friends when they were children.

“I feel honored to give back my modest donation by helping to create a solution for an acute burial space problem here in the city of Jerusalem,” he says with obvious devotion. “It is a privilege for me to be able to present such a magnificent solution to a problem that now exists all over the world.”

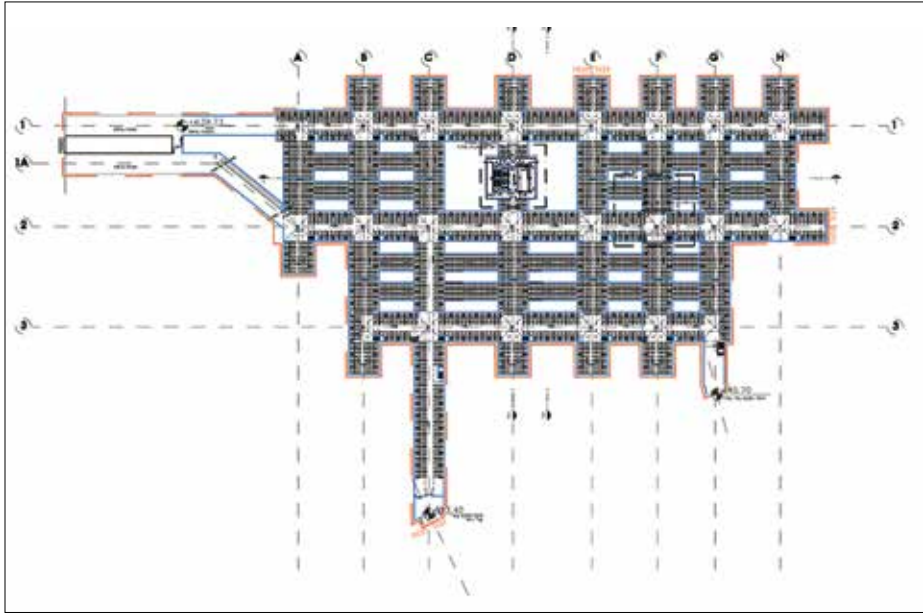
Sacred and Mysterious

As the project progresses, it is with infinite respect that Rolzur carefully, yet powerfully, and quite literally moves mountains to create something so sacred and so special. A company that has built its business on a solid

The Problem and Solution

Approximately 3,500 burials are performed every year in Jerusalem; with limited land, the problem of where to lay these bodies to rest becomes an ever-growing and more urgent problem. Due to the lack of available space, many families have opted to bury their deceased in above-ground, multi-story buildings. Others are forced to pay astronomical sums of money for the privilege of being laid to rest in more traditional, pastoral settings. But even these options are becoming scarce.

About five years ago, the *Kehilat Yerushalayim* Burial Society of Jerusalem began consulting and collaborating with Rolzur to find a viable and respectful solution to this problem. The solution became this innovative, first-of-its-kind cemetery experience that is being carved out of these ancient tunnels. Not only will this address the need for additional burial space in



which is responsible for more than 50 percent of the burials in the Holy City,” says Adi. “This is in order to find the most suitable religious approaches to enable a respectful burial practice.”

Rolzur sought the help and agreement of local authorities, contractors, and other professionals from different fields dedicated to the success of such a unique project.

Although neither Adi nor Arik is an orthodox Jew, each man has strived to become knowledgeable about the intricacies of the religion in order to proceed with respect and not inadvertently make any move that might appear otherwise.

“The Jewish religion does not condone nor believe in cremation,” notes Adi, “so that possible solution was dismissed long ago. We have learned during our work here that citizens of Jerusalem can be buried free of charge but those from Tel Aviv or the United States for instance, must pay.”

Adi adds that a project of such magnitude would not have been possible without the Burial Society of Jerusalem’s involvement. “Because the Burial Society of Jerusalem is responsible for more than 50 percent of all burials here, we have worked very closely with them appreciating their invaluable input and advice.”

The very layout of the underground cemetery is magnificent. “So far, we have opened the first third (A, B & C streets)—about 8,200 burial places,” says Adi.

This incredible endeavor continues to unfold. ■

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the Holy capital, but it serves as a memorial honoring this sacred space.

This extensive, \$50 million endeavor is the brainchild of Arik Glazer, chief executive of Rolzur, whose comprehension of the existing situation led to the concept that this ever-expanding *Har HaMenuchot* cemetery could expand underground just as those that are created in the traditional way on the earth’s surface.

This revolutionary solution calls for excavating some 24,000 new burial plots at the depth of approximately 160 feet underground (just shy of 50 meters). The first phase of 8,000 graves reached completion in late 2020. The remaining burial spots will be made available over the next two years.

It has become a source of tremendous pride for this ancient community. In fact, Jerusalem Mayor Moshe Leon noted, “Out of Zion shall come forth the Torah. The *Minharot Olam* project is unique and is an innovation in burial in Israel and around the world. The project was done with the utmost in preserving the environment and the green areas and maximizing the use of the resource of land. I am proud to be the mayor of a city that cares for its loved ones for a respectable and honorable burial.”

And, Hananya Shachor, manager of *Kehilat Yerushalayim* called the *Minharot Olam* project, “something completely new in the Jewish world, I think in the whole world. There was never such a thing as building such beautiful underground tunnels for burying.”

This project continues to move forward, paving the way for more and more citizens to respectfully and reverently bury their loved ones. It is the Rolzur company’s hope that this idea will be embraced by other countries and communities around the world as a beautiful and environmentally friendly solution to a growing problem in our world.

Working Together

Perhaps the real success story in all of this is the unflinching camaraderie and cooperation that have been at the heart of the project from the very beginning. Rolzur has worked meticulously and respectfully with all local entities to ensure a mutually agreeable end result.

“We have operated in full cooperation with the largest Burial Society of Jerusalem,

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