

## Caring for the Living and Respecting the Dead

### *Thought for the Day*

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I've always liked the atmosphere in Tiberias and Haifa – they feel so much more relaxed than here in Jerusalem, where everyone seems to be trying to prove something. Perhaps it's because of the different mix of religious history and places of pilgrimage.

Almost 150 years ago, the founders of the Bahai faith fled to Haifa Bay from Persia – today's Iran, where Bahai are still severely persecuted – and their followers have planted magnificent gardens around their graves. Christian pilgrims come to Tiberias to follow the narrative of the New Testament around the Sea of Galilee. Even when the Romans conquered ancient Israel and destroyed Jerusalem and the biblical Temple – events Jews commemorated last week with fasting and lamentation – Tiberias never lost its Jewish community, and pilgrims visit the graves of the authors of the Talmud and revered medieval rabbis, to seek inspiration or solace.

But Tiberias, like Haifa, is also a beach resort for many of Israel's Muslim Arabs who live nearby. On summer evenings the beaches are aflame with makeshift barbecues, as sombrely-dressed orthodox Jews picnic alongside Muslim women in colourful hijab. And Tiberias is also home to a remarkable Scottish institution.

In 1885, David Torrance established a Church of Scotland mission that became the city's first hospital, open to all without regard to race or creed. After Israel built a modern hospital, it became a hostel for pilgrims, and is now the up-market Scots Hotel, a favourite of secular Israelis, where former Glaswegians from a nearby kibbutz organise regular ceilidhs and a Burns supper. David Torrance's grave now lies between St Andrew's Church and the swimming pool.

When the hotel was being built, the project was held up while a way was found to avoid disturbing ancient graves. So perhaps the Scottish Government could learn from this, and reject proposals to allow graves to be opened and reused. After all, perhaps it's true that you can tell a society's attitude to the living from how it respects its dead.

*Ephraim Borowski*

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