

We know from the Talmud in Baba Metziah that it is our obligation to return a lost object to its owner. There are very specific laws about how to do this. The basic law is that when something has an identifying mark on it, it goes back to the owner. But if the item is too generic to know whom it belongs to, we get to keep it. But we can be sure that neither the Torah nor the rabbis who gave us these more specific laws ever thought somebody would have to figure out what to do with a grave stone.

While New York City resident, John Lankenau was out walking his dog one evening a few years ago, he found a two-and-a-half-foot-high granite grave marker on the sidewalk. Knowing that it would be vandalized if he left it there, he carried it home. He said he just couldn't imagine leaving someone's life sitting on the street like that.

He kept it in his apartment, not knowing quite what to do with it. And continued his life of making art and working as a part time cook. He would often wonder why this grave marker was on the street and who Hinda Amshantzky was. She, of course, was the woman whose name was on the gravestone.

He knew she was 87 when she died on May 15, 1910. And he knew she was Jewish because there was Hebrew on the stone. Lankenau, a Lutheran, went to local synagogues and called the Jewish genealogical societies but could find no trace of Hinda.

After a several false starts, he got some help. A New York Times reporter who was also a customer of Lankenau's catering business recruited the city's commissioner on records. The commissioner found a death certificate for Amachantzky but even though it was close to Hinda's name, it wasn't her.

Lankenau finally contacted a genealogist who found Hinda's great-great-granddaughter in California. It turned out that Hinda was a great cook who wrote a wonderful cookbook, in fact in 1901 it was the first Yiddish cookbook published in the US. Even when it was translated into English, its recipes had the Yiddish flavor, one of them was called, chicken zup mit macaroni. In the book, Hinda wrote that she had 45 years experience in the kitchen and that her recipes were economical and healthy, protecting children from the diseases of the day.

In a time when women, especially immigrant women, rarely made a name for themselves, here was a very ordinary woman who did the extraordinary thing of publishing her own recipes. Amazing.

But now Lankenau wanted to know where Hinda was buried. Once the United Hebrew cemetery society checked it's records looking for the date of Hinda's death, her name was found but it had been misspelled. Her gravesite was not marked, nor was there any evidence that it was ever marked.

To understand the next piece of the puzzle, we have to see where the gravestone was found. It was in front of an gallery and gathering space for artists. The stone had been purposely left there as a gift for the woman who ran the gallery. It was found outside an old monument maker's shop that was being refurbished. The man who found it knew at one time there had been a

synagogue in the basement of this art gallery, so he knew the owner would love to have it. When it was missing the next day, they both assumed it had been stolen.

So that's the end of that story except that the Center for Jewish History, which is putting out a digital copy of Hinda's cookbook, is paying to have Hinda's stone installed on her grave. The cemetery has agreed to do it for cost.

This little peek into Jewish history and the inclination to do the right thing is just fascinating. Lankenau couldn't leave the stone on the street. He couldn't stop looking for Hinda until he found her and her family. And as a caterer he was thrilled to learn that she was a master cook.

Even though Lankenau wasn't Jewish, he was able to do one of the highest mitzvot. When we say Kaddish for the dead, be sure that they get a proper burial, put up a grave stone for them, we are acting with the highest reverence for our Jewish tradition. None of these mitzvot are repaid by the person whom we are remembering. But we are repaid just by knowing we are doing the right thing.

Shabbat Shalom.