Estranged from mitzvah observance, unfamiliar with the dignity accorded to a deceased Jew, they view cremation as the ecologically and economically sound choice.

More Jews than ever are making the painful decision to have their remains cremated, instead of opting for burial in a traditional Jewish fashion.

The following story reads like fiction, but this true tale illustrates an alarming trend in the American Jewish community.

In March of 2011, an 80-year-old nonreligious Jew named Arnold Isaacs passed away in Las Vegas. His wife and children made the decision to cremate his remains despite the pleas of his frum niece, Mrs. Robin Meyerson, to opt for a traditional burial. Due to a delay on the funeral home’s part, the cremation had still not been performed eight days later, and that night, Mr. Isaacs appeared in his daughter Valerie’s dream and requested that the cremation not take place.

Two days later, Valerie found herself at a restaurant with her siblings, where, staring at the establishment’s crackling fireplace, she shuddered at the thought of the fate awaiting her beloved father’s remains. She and her...
the need to debunk the myths surrounding the practice of cremation in the secular Jewish world is easier than combating intermarriage and other spiritually destructive trends. “It is a topic that secular Jews are interested in hearing about,” he says, and on which they are open to changing their minds.

In addition to the need to debunk the myths about the benefits of cremation (see sidebar), personal and religious issues must also often be addressed. Another common reason given for choosing cremation is the fear that no one will visit the grave, particularly when the person leaves no children or doesn’t expect them to visit often. It is this fear that is captured by the phrase “convenient” to have her ashes at home. Rabbi Zohn explains, “but there is a Jewish way of dealing with the dead — the ceremony, hearse, plot, burial, and monument — under $1,000, while it is nearly impossible to keep funeral costs — the ceremony, hearse, plot, burial, and monument — under $8,000. But the expense isn’t the only factor at play. Indeed, Rabbi Zohn estimates that cremations are rising as quickly amongst upper class Americans as among the poor — or perhaps faster. Another major reason given for the trend toward cremation is the sense that it is simpler, more environmentally friendly, and less burdensome than transporting a body, burying it, and letting it remain in the ground to decompose over years — which is, in any event, a troubling thought to many.

Religious faith, though, remains the greatest determinative factor. The more closely one adheres to his religion’s dogmatics, the less likely he is to cremate. One study found that a state’s cremation rates are correlated to the level of religious participation among its citizens. Oregon, for example, with the lowest level of participation in organized religion in America, has a cremation rate of 65%, whereas Bible Belt states like Alabama and Mississippi have rates below 15% for the same practice.

Florida is among the 13 states that already have cremation rates of over 50%, and its sizable population of elderly Jewish residents, many of whom reside far from their children and other relatives, has the highest cremation rate of any Jewish community in America. Beyond the cold statistics lie real stories about real people, and Rabbi Zohn has some rather hair-raising ones to share from personal experience. He came across one couple that insisted on being cremated despite both husband and wife being yeshivah graduates. One frail husband requested that his wife be cremated after her death despite her request to be buried, because he felt that it would be more “convenient” to have her ashes at home.

Close to Home Some among us may be tempted to dismiss this all as a crisis with little bearing on frum Jews, but Rabbi Zohn and Mr. Kornbluth beg to differ. Rabbi Zohn recounted a recent stunning experience in which he was contacted by a rav on the West Coast who encountered a Jew in a hospice center whose mother-in-law wished to be cremated after her passing. The rav recommended that he contact a rabbi before proceeding, whereas the man said, “I have a rabbi in my family named Rabbi Eichelson Zohn.” When the two eventually spoke, it became clear that they were distant cousins.

“Rav Yisrael Kamenezky z’tz” said that ensuring the proper kavod hamelach [honor of the dead] of these Yidden is in the category of a mesivah tzakah, which is the responsibility of everyone in Klal Yisroel,” says Rabbi Zohn. He adds that preventing them from committing a sin as grave as cremation is particularly worthy. “A mesivah [convert to Christianism], someone who intermarried, or was killed by being disallowed to be buried in a Jewish cemetery,” Rabbi Zohn explains, “but there is a genuine halakhic [decree of the scholarly community of generations past] not to bury the ashes of a Jew who was [willingly] cremated in a Jewish cemetery.”

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And Nothing Remains

For many years, recalling the millions of Jews who were R7 incinerated in the Holocaust was a potent argument for dissuading Jews from volunteering for a similar end, but, Rabbi Zohn warns, as time passes, the effectiveness of that tack has diminished. There are even some Holocaust survivors who claim to desire cremation as a show of “solidarity” with their martyred relatives. If Dr. Rabbi Zohn tells of how he managed to convince one Holocaust survivor who had made that very argument. “I asked her,” he says, “ ‘Don’t you think that part of the pain that your mother and sister felt while being led to the crematorium was that their family will have nowhere to go to?’

If there are financial concerns about footing the bill for a funeral, family assistance and pre-need funeral payment plans are good options, and there are several chevra kadisha-related organizations that subsidize burials in such cases. In some cases, assuming one has lots of patience and sensitivity, speaking even to nonreligious Jews about burial plans to cremate. Instead, they approach is to be avoided in seeking to convince nonreligious Jews to abandon their religious “Jews never do that” approach. That is even more the case with a friend or relative. (More information can be found at peacefullurn.com) He is also working on launching a website specifically focused on this topic.

One woman who had a change of heart regarding cremation was Rachelle Lifpitz, author of Kornbluth’s book and in similar situations. In 2001, the Swedish Environment Protection Agency estimated that cremation caused approximately one-third of the country’s mercury emissions. More broadly, Kornbluth says, “I read the book with a magnifier,” Mrs. Sommer tells Mishpacha, “and realized that I hadn’t put all of the facts together. I thought that it would be easier than burial, but it really isn’t.” Ultimately, she instructed the executor of her will to change her wish to that of burial.

Mrs. Lifpitz similarly relates that her mother changed her mind about cremation after reading Kornbluth’s book as well as one authored by Rebbetzin Lori Palatnik, a well-known shomer HaBa VaDaAt mishpacha and the only site run by Chabad.org and JewishDeathAndMourning.org. Rabbi Zohn has also traveled to Israel where she felt her “father’s soul guiding me through the cremation nightmare behind them, Mrs. Lifpitz says that she and her siblings have seen improvements in various aspects of life. She recalls a vivid dream she had several weeks after her father was buried, in which he came to her, lovingly held her hand, and told her, “Thank you so much for burying me as a Jew. I feel at home and at peace.” “The dream was so real, I kept on trying to open my eyes,” she remembers tearfully.

Her sister Valerie volunteered to become a shomer at a Jewish funeral home and made other advances in life. Rachelle traveled to Israel where she felt her “father’s soul guiding me the entire time.” She has developed a greater interest in Yidishkayt, and has once again begun lighting Shabbos candles with a brachah each week. “I realize that the things I do here on earth make my father go higher in Heaven,” she explains.

Another common claim is that in-ground burial is a waste of precious earth space. Kornbluth cites statistics showing that if, for the next 10,000 years, every deceased American were to be buried, their plots would not take up even 1% of the country’s land mass. More broadly, Kornbluth sees it as imperative to counteract the notion that cremation is “natural.” He points out that all living creations, from flowers to animals, return to the earth upon their demise and gradually decompose. In a section of his book that is decidedly not for the squeamish amongst us, he details just how degrading and gruesome the multi-hour cremation process is, with every bone and limb in the body turned into ash in an 1800 degree oven.

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FACTS VS. POPULAR FICTION

Mr. Kornbluth and Rabbi Zohn concur that, generally speaking, an explicitly religious “Jews never do that” approach is to be avoided in seeking to convince nonreligious Jews to abandon their religious “Jews never do that” approach. That is even more the case with a friend or relative. (More information can be found at peacefullurn.com) He is also working on launching a website specifically focused on this topic.

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