

THE CONVERSATION NOBODY WANTS TO HAVE (AND WHY YOU NEED TO HAVE IT)

In a staff meeting at *Ohr Sameach*, Rav Mendel Weinbach zt"l once reportedly said: "We may call certain classes in the Yeshiva by certain names for the sake of packaging, but the bottom line is they are all Torah." "Packaging," the way we present Torah concepts to the broader Jewish public, has always been one of the most fundamental and difficult challenges of the *kiruv* world. A major part of every *kiruv* professional's job is to take complicated Torah subjects and, without cheapening their meaning, make them understandable. Similarly, every *kiruv* professional also strives to "package" Torah concepts in a way that will cause fellow Jews to feel motivated, positive, and inspired about their growth. After all, *t'shuva me'ahava* (repentance from love) is a much more appealing process than *t'shuva me'yira* (repentance from fear). It is therefore unsurprising that death, cremation and burial frequently fail to make the menu at *kiruv* events. It is, if you will, the conversation nobody wants to have.

Here's why you need to have it.

According to the National Funeral Directors Association, the rate of Americans choosing cremation over burial is rapidly approaching 50%. Jews are not far behind, with a cremation rate of over 30%. Remove observant Jews from the picture and the rate is even higher. Organizations like the National Cremation Society run advertisements and publicity campaigns to convince grieving families to cremate their loved ones. In some instances, non-Orthodox Rabbis may even join the list of people recommending that Jews either have themselves or a family member cremated. The consequences of failing to stop a Jew from cremation are dire. According to leading Rabbinic authorities, the act of cremation is a direct rejection of belief in G-d and the afterlife, as well as a forfeiture of that person's right to experience the resurrection of the dead (in Hebrew: "t'chiyas hamesim") during the End of Days.

In the case of unobservant Jews, *kiruv* professionals must understand that their target audience is at risk not only while living, but also after death. Many of the people appearing at *kiruv* events have already recorded a directive ordering cremation in their will; some have not thought about the subject, but have family members who will make the decision to cremate for them in post-mortem planning; others might even lean towards burial, but without enough information in their pocket, could fall prey to the secular culture and tactics of pro-cremation campaigns. Since not every Jew exposed to *kiruv* ends up becoming fully observant, it is essential that *kiruv* professionals attack this

difficult subject directly and sensitively in order to increase awareness of the risks at stake.

So how, at the end of the day, does one talk about this topic? A nice bowl of cholent and a discussion about death? Maybe not. But as Pirkei Avos states, “There is no man who does not have [his] hour, and no thing that does not have its place.” When bringing your fellow Jews closer to Judaism, consider the follow three situations that are ripe for a conversation about the body’s final journey:

1. A funeral

In the words of Rabbi Akiva, “If not now, when?” A funeral is the most natural place to talk about the sanctity and importance of traditional burial. For Rabbis officiating at funerals, finding the right words to extol the virtues of a deceased Jew is a daunting and even frightening task. Take note, however, that a Jew deciding to avoid cremation is itself a virtue. Rabbis should talk openly at funerals about how fortunate the deceased is for having received a traditional Jewish burial, and how much praise should be accorded the deceased’s family for having made that choice. They should explain that by respecting the vessel that accompanied them through life, and disposing of it in a dignified way, they have not only honored their memory but also their Creator. Lastly, they can also devote a small amount of time to urging others to learn from the deceased’s example. The exact content of any discussion of this nature will of course vary depending on the venue, the audience, and the story of the deceased.

Nonetheless, the opportunity to teach and the reasons available to encourage burial (there are many more) are vast.

2. A conversation about the cycle of life

In the words of Rabbi Elchonon Zohn, director of the National Association of Chevra Kadisha, “I think we live in a society - if we had to describe western culture - that I would call ‘death denying.’” People in western societies tend to avoid conversations about death unless it is absolutely necessary. So any conversation about cremation and burial outside of the context of a funeral is best couched in a broader discussion about life. The cycle of life - birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, aging, and death - is an excellent starting point to talk about these issues. Whether through a lecture series or a more general discussion with an individual, *kiruv* professionals have the opportunity through discussing the cycle of life to emphasize that Jewish thought views every step with a focus

on the dignity of human existence. At birth, we usher a baby into the world with celebratory meals and ceremonies; at bar and bat mitzvah, we inaugurate our young men and women into responsibility and contribution to society; at adulthood, we emphasize building families and teaching the next generation; and finally at death, we honor the memory and meaning of that person's life by burying the body in the ground in a dignified way. By embedding the discussion of cremation and burial into this context, *kiruv* professionals can limit the natural aversion we have to talking about death, in addition to emphasizing the Jewish perspective on the value of life.

3. A conversation about the Holocaust

Yom HaShoah and other Holocaust-related events are often a missed opportunity to educate the public about the Jewish view on death. In addition to talking about the memory of the six million murdered during the Holocaust, *kiruv* professionals should note the manner in which these Jews were killed, and what the Jewish perspective has to say about it. The Jews who died in the Holocaust were not killed, immersed in a mikvah, gently dressed in a *kittel*, placed in a casket and buried. Most of the time, they were left in open pits with piles of bodies, thrown into undignified shallow graves, or cremated in concentration camp crematoriums. *Kiruv* professionals should emphasize that disposing of a body through cremation represents a disgraceful, barbaric act practiced throughout history by our enemies. They should frame the ability of our generation to receive a proper traditional burial as a gift our ancestors did not enjoy.

Discussing death and the afterlife is certainly challenging, and may be awkward. As Rabbi Zohn explains, "Death and the afterlife is not an easy subject to tackle. It's not something we're comfortable with as a general rule." Nonetheless, the discomfort the listener may feel at first should not stop *kiruv* professionals from approaching a subject that could yield incredible gains in understanding and interest.

Ironically, the depressing subject of death is an area of discussion where Jewish thought has an unequivocal marketing edge over the cacophonous noise of secular society. The secular world can only market death as a dark, bleak, and undignified experience where the body ceases functioning and falls apart. By contrast, the Jewish world views death as a dignified, solemn and important journey that returns our souls to our Creator, and represents a hopeful and meaningful embrace of the future. Such a perspective is not only more appealing than the secular view, but also helps explain the

fundamentals of Jewish thought for the listener. We, the Jewish people, are a culture of life, of meaning, and of purpose, and even in the darkest moments, we still seek out the light of spiritual elevation.

The Talmud (*Avoda Zara* 17a) recounts the story of Elazar ben Durdaya, a continuous sinner who decides that he must change his ways. After weeping and fully repenting for his sins, Elazar's soul departs and a voice emanates from Heaven declaring, "Elazar ben Durdaya has reached the [everlasting] life of the World to Come." Upon hearing this, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi (author of the Mishna) weeps and reflects, "There are those who acquire the World to Come in many years, and there are those who acquire the World to Come in a single moment." While not everyone who comes in contact with the *kiruv* movement reaches full observance, every Jew still has the opportunity to make a momentary decision that could change the entire scope of their lives. It could be as simple as a discussion about burial with a Rabbi, a decision to sign a health care directive, or a quick conversation encouraging a relative not to be cremated. The possibilities for spiritual growth and gain are endless. In the words of Rabbi Zohn: "Life, even a moment of life, is valuable. It transcends everything."