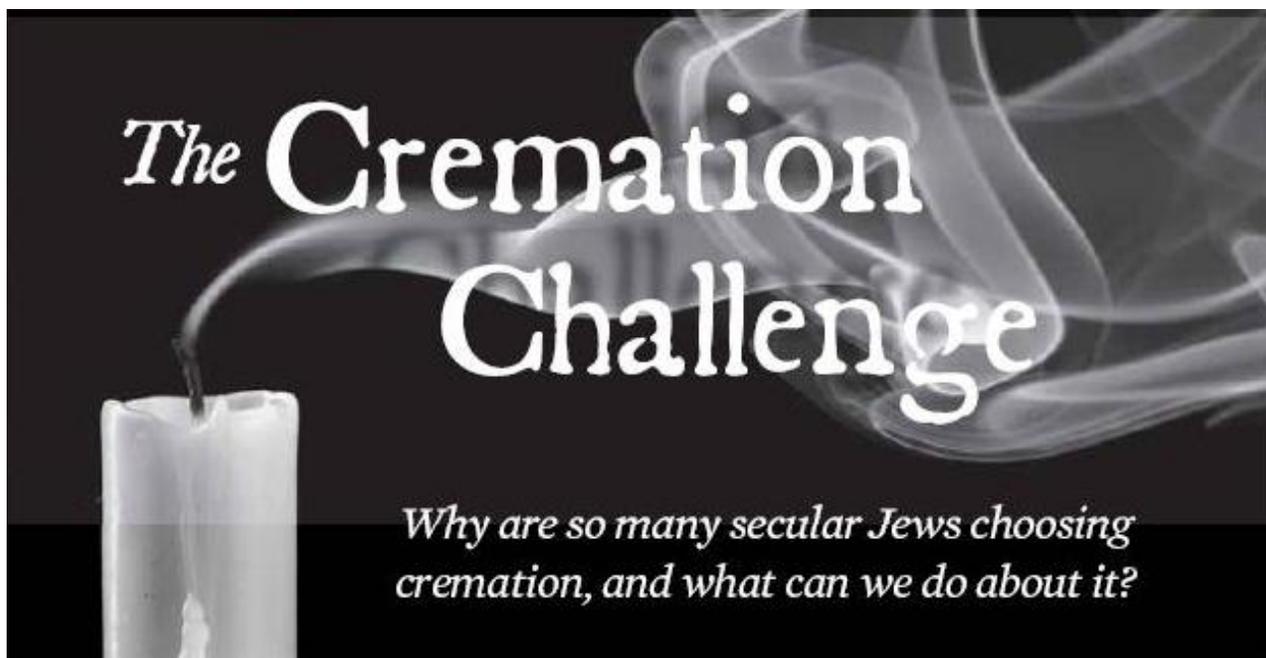


The Cremation Challenge

JA Mag

By Doron
Kornbluth

Everyone I knew growing up fasted on Yom Kippur and had a Pesach Seder. While not everyone kept kosher or celebrated Shabbat, there were certain



customs and lifecycle events that were virtually universal. One of these was a traditional Jewish burial. Cremation was simply unheard of.

Things have changed.

While exact numbers do not exist, Rabbi Elchonon Zohn, of the Chevra Kadisha of the Vaad Harabonim of Queens and founder of the National Association of Chevra Kadisha (NASCK), has calculated that in Jewish funeral homes in the New York area, at least 25 percent of the dead are cremated. Nationally, the rate is much higher.

What can we do? The best way to stem the cremation tide is through education about the sanctity of the human body and the desecration that cremation entails. Unchecked, Jewish burial will soon be restricted to Orthodox Jewry. The more you talk about it and educate others, the better. (Full disclosure: I authored the recently published *Cremation or Burial? A Jewish View* to assist in this effort.) Don't assume that your Jewish coworkers, friends and relatives are committed to burial—fewer and fewer are, even in very “Jewish” families. Also, don't leave the discussion until the last minute. Trying to address the topic while people are grieving, with only a few hours to make a decision, is extremely difficult, and decisions already made are harder to undo.

Fortunately, when the topic is approached with sensitivity, the subject of funeral wishes does not usually offend. Oftentimes, people want to discuss it. In many cases, people can be convinced of the eternal benefits of burial—when the subject is addressed early enough.

The main reasons people usually choose cremation today:

1. Modern Mobility—Kids live far away and won't visit the gravesite, so why have one?
2. Environmentalism—Cremation saves land and avoids polluting the environment.

3. Discomfort with Decomposition—Cremation seems quicker and cleaner.

4. Money—Cremation is usually cheaper than burial, sometimes significantly so.

Let us deal with each of these arguments individually.

Modern Mobility. Cremation is quite common in Florida, as many older couples retire there. Their kids are usually spread all over the country. Many of these retirees believe that since there is no one to visit their graves, why bother having one? Yet the Torah did not mandate burial so that family members will have a place to visit the deceased. Think of God's burial of Moses. Even though he would have no visitors (the location was hidden to prevent idol worship), God chose burial over other options. Bodies deserve proper burial—with or without visitors.

Environmentalism. True, the environmental movement is very critical of American burials, but that is primarily because of the massive amount of metal sunk into the ground each year (due to metal caskets) and the chemicals used in embalming, both of which are prohibited by Jewish law. Cremation itself has even graver environmental problems, including using tremendous quantities of fossil fuels—between 1.5 and 2 million BTU's (British Thermal Units) per cremation and releasing many toxins into the air. One study found that 32 percent of the mercury released in Sweden was due to cremations,¹ and a recent Canadian study on cremation's environmental impact concluded simply that crematories were very possibly hazardous and should not be located near residential areas.²

Also, while it is true that “land is for the living,” when you crunch the numbers, it would take over 10,000 years to use up only 1 percent of America's land mass. Furthermore, Jews constitute only 1.5 percent of the population. In short, there is plenty of land available for cemeteries, usually within a one- or two-hour drive of urban centers, and environmentalists are not in favor of cremation. What do they suggest? “Green Burial”—with no embalming and no metal caskets. Sound familiar? Traditional Jewish burials are actually a model for the eco-conscious!

Discomfort with Decomposition. It isn't pleasant to contemplate being eaten by worms, and cremation seems to be a quick and clean alternative. But it isn't. A typical cremation involves being in an oven in extreme temperatures for an hour and a half to two hours. And, as Professor Stephen Prothero, a professor of religion at Boston University and the author of *Purified by Fire*, puts it, “. . . crisping, crackling, roasting, steaming, shriveling . . . Think of the stench of burning flesh and hair . . .”³ All this is not to suggest that burial is more appealing, only that people have serious misconceptions about the subject. Cremation is long, loud, violent, artificial and repulsive. Burial isn't pleasant, but it is the way nature intended for every living being to end life.

Money. When you factor in all the side costs, many cremations are almost as expensive as burials, except for “direct cremations” where a company will pick up the body from the hospital or hospice and ship the ashes within a couple of weeks. All they need is a credit card, and everything will be taken care of for between \$1,000 and \$2,000, far less than any burial services.

Although the other rationalizations people offer for cremation don't stand up to scrutiny, the cost issue does. Considering the fact that cremations are usually cheaper—sometimes significantly so—how do we convince our Jewish friends, coworkers and relatives to spend the extra money for burial? Here are a few ideas to get a discussion started:

OU Levaya Program: Making Traditional Jewish Funerals More Affordable

The OU Levaya Program, servicing the Greater New York area, substantially lowers the cost of a traditional Jewish funeral while maintaining strict adherence to halachah.

“A traditional Jewish funeral is the greatest tribute that one can make to the departed,” says Rabbi Moshe D. Krupka, former national executive director of the OU and currently an OU national vice president, who launched the program in 2000.

The OU Levaya Program, operated in conjunction with Parkside Memorial Chapels, ensures *kevod hamet*, that the deceased is cared for in accordance with all halachic requirements.

“Many times family members of the deceased are pressured into purchasing costly services that are unnecessary, or worse, incongruous with traditional Jewish burial,” Rabbi Krupka says. “We started the program so that families would not have to choose from a menu of services that are unnecessary and oftentimes inappropriate at a time when they are most vulnerable.”

When purchasing a chapel or graveside funeral service, additional items that would normally cost extra, such as a simple pine coffin, hand-sewn linen shrouds, and the *taharah*—ritual cleansing of the deceased—are included at no extra charge. The package deal can save OU members up to \$1,000 on the cost of a funeral.

Parkside Memorial Chapels is one of the most reputable, independent Jewish funeral homes. Still family owned and operated, it is committed to upholding Jewish tradition and to treating the deceased with dignity and respect. All halachic aspects are provided by the Chevra Kadisha of the Vaad Harabonim of Queens (in Brooklyn, taharah is performed by the Chevra Kadisha of the Vaad Harabonim of Flatbush). When necessary, arrangements can be made at additional cost for shemirah, the use of other chapels, or for transfer to a cemetery in Israel.

To take advantage of this program, one must be a member of the OU prior to the time of his passing. Please contact the OU at 212.613.8137 or 212.613.8198.

The Map

Wherever you find belief in one God, you find much higher rates of burial. And wherever you find belief in many gods, or weakening of belief in a god, you'll find higher rates of cremation (think of Asia and post-Christian Europe vs. the Middle East and the Bible Belt). There are many reasons for this, beginning with the Torah's insistence on burial, which was later adopted by Christians. Another explanation for the monotheism-burial link is the intrinsic and perhaps subconscious understanding that it is wrong to willfully destroy the *tzelem Elokim*. Put simply, throughout history monotheists have buried the dead, and with good reason.

The Body: Enemy or Partner?

It is not surprising that Eastern religions practice cremation: they view the body as the enemy. Spirituality exists in separation from the physical. Note that their leaders are celibate and ascetic (think of the guru on the mountaintop, completely detached from worldly life). Judaism, on the other hand, believes in elevating the physical. While the soul needs to control bodily desires, the body is not the enemy. I couldn't give tzedakah without my hands, speak words of Torah without my mouth, or help an elderly woman cross the street without my legs. The body is a partner with the soul and deserves to be lovingly placed in the ground, not burnt like garbage.

A Tear in the Earth

The modern world worships youth. Wrinkles are surgically removed. People avoid cemeteries, and speaking of death is considered taboo. Cremation is often the result of a subconscious desire to deal with the loss quickly—press a button and move on. Contemporary funeral services are shortened or turned into inspirational nature walks. In many Jewish circles, “*shivah*” (the traditional seven days of mourning) has, at best, become “*sheloshah*” (reduced to three days). People want to get on with their lives. But certain human experiences should not be quick and efficient. What if the dead are our parents and grandparents? These are the same bodies that gave birth to us, held us, cried for us and worked hard to provide for us. They are not meant to be processed away as quickly as possible. We need, at times, to stop and take note. When a body is buried, the ground is opened up; a tear in the earth appears. The gaping hole declares “Something is not right here; there is a tear in the human fabric of life. Take note, world; don't rush through this moment. Recognize the loss. Remember the life.”

Neighbors Forever

When the younger residents of Milford, Michigan were reluctant to pay for repairs to a washed-out bridge leading to the old cemetery, poet-undertaker Thomas Lynch expressed the importance of cemeteries in the following way:

A graveyard is an old agreement made

Between the living and the living who have died

That says we keep their names and dates alive.

This bridge connects our daily lives to them

And makes them, once our neighbors, neighbors once again.

Life is not a snapshot, but rather a video—we are the products of the efforts of generations past, and our contributions will benefit the present as well as future generations. By downplaying the role of the cemetery (most ashes are scattered today, not buried), the modern world is minimizing the link to generations past. The bonds of historic mutual responsibility are thus weakened, to the detriment of all.

The Soul

A loving wife could not separate quickly from her recently departed, beloved husband. Similarly, the soul cannot leave its partner—its body—immediately after death; it stays close. During this time, the soul is fully aware of what is happening to its body.⁴ The soul is greatly comforted when its body is handled correctly, and it goes through unimaginable pain if the body is cremated.

Closure

Few people regret providing their relatives with proper burial. It is respectful, peaceful and comforting. In my research, I have consulted with many Jewish funeral directors around the country who have told me that many families come to regret their decision to cremate. They may have had little information or time to think and got caught up in the modern cremation fad. With no time to mourn and no proper place to visit, cremation often leaves a lack of closure. Sadly, there is no second chance to fix the mistake—cremation cannot be undone.

These are only a few of the approaches to be explored in a discussion of cremation and burial. Note that I didn't mention the most famous argument against cremation: Resurrection of the Dead (this can and should be discussed, but it requires a much longer article). In my experience, a variety of approaches should be used, as one never knows which words and ideas will affect someone. The key is to get people thinking and reading about it now—before it's too late.

Notes

1. John Reindl, "Mercury Emissions from Crematoria," ejnet.org, accessed June 7, 2012, <http://www.ejnet.org/crematoria/reindl.pdf>.

2. Veerle Willaeyts, "Public Health Impact of Crematoria," Memorial Society of British Columbia, <http://www.memorialsocietybc.org/c/g/cremation-report.html>.

3. Stephen Prothero, *Purified by Fire* (Berkeley, 2002), 67.

4. Talmud, Berachot 18b; Tosafot, Shabbat 153a, s.v. "venishmato"; Talmud, Sotah 34b; Rabbi Aaron Berachyah, Ma'avar Yabok 2:25; and Menashe ben Yisrael, Nishmat Chaim 2:22.

To hear an interview with Rabbi Elchonon Zohn, visit <http://bit.ly/P7lec5>.

To hear an interview with Doron Kornbluth, visit <http://bit.ly/RCHuHI>.

Doron Kornbluth is a speaker, bestselling author of Why Marry Jewish?, Why Be Jewish? and Raising Kids to Love Being Jewish, and licensed tour guide in Israel. His latest work is Cremation or Burial? A Jewish View (Ramat Beit Shemesh, 2012).

