

Addressing Cremation – What Is Our Responsibility?

queensjewishlink.com/local/community-corner/addressing-cremation-responsibility/

1/11/2017



Rabbi Elchonon Zohn

The phones ring all the time. “Hi, my name is Yitzchok Green. I live in Eretz Yisrael. My wife’s grandfather just passed away in Florida. He left a will to be cremated.” “Hi, my *rosh yeshivah* suggested I call you. I am a *baal t’shuvah* learning in [pick your *yeshivah*] and my father is now in hospice. His second wife is not Jewish and is leaning toward cremation when his time comes. My siblings don’t care much and want to keep the peace.” “Hello, I live in Lakewood. A fellow I have worked with for years, who helped build many *mosdos* in Lakewood, just died. I offered to go to the *levayah* but his wife informed me there will be no *levayah*, only a memorial service; he is being cremated.”

We are, *baruch Hashem*, successful at times in getting things changed to *k’vurah k’Halachah*, but more often we are not. The common denominator of these cases is that they are all very “late in the game.” When we have time to reach out, not in a “crisis” atmosphere, we are frequently successful. When a person is already seriously ill, or has already passed, intervention is seldom effective – and even when it is, the deceased is often buried days or even weeks after the passing.

The response from many in the observant Jewish community is often the same: “This doesn’t apply to me.” “I don’t know these issues well enough to get involved.” Or, “These people have no interest in *Yiddishkeit* or are *anti-frum*, they have made terrible choices; why should I spend any valuable time or resources to get involved?”

The Traditional End-of-life Awareness Movement encourages us to think about our less-observant fellow Jews and how we can alleviate that tzaar

Generally, *frum* people are wholly unaware of the rate of cremation within the broader Jewish community. As

someone who has expended a great deal of time and effort on this subject I'd like to address the many misconceptions one by one.

The rate of cremation within the broader Jewish community is not an easy figure to verify. There are no organizations that collect data specific to those who identify as Jewish. However, CANA (Cremation Association of North America) estimated that 48.6 percent of all deaths in the USA in 2015 resulted in cremation. Recently, newspapers reported that we have passed the 50 percent mark nationally. Think about that for a moment – one out of every two people who died had their bodies burned and their bones ground into fine powder.

My personal estimate, based on my experience and conversations with funeral homes across the country, is a national cremation rate of about 40 percent within the Jewish community. Liberal Jews are far more likely to choose cremation for what they believe to be ecological reasons, and even Jews who identify as “traditional” may choose cremation for monetary reasons.

Above and beyond the mitzvah that requires *k'vurah*, the tragedy of cremation is two-fold – for the living and the deceased. There is little closure in unwrapping an urn compared to attending a *levayah*, lowering an *aron*, and filling the grave. The living have no place to visit, to remember and reflect, or to connect with the *niftar*. Sprinkling ashes is disrespectful and the familiarity of an urn on the mantelpiece gives way to contempt – there is no respect in the presence of ashes, and eventually those urns are thrown out when the family grows old or moves away.

For the *niftar*, however, the pain cannot be described in mortal terms. Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, *zt"l*, in his monumental work *Oznaim L'Torah*, explains the extent and scope of the punishment Lot's wife received. He states that foolish people (*kalei ha'da'as*) ask that Lot's wife seems almost to have received a reward! Her death was quick and painless, no interment, no worms – and what's more, salt helps others! [In fact, she is now a tourist attraction.] It would appear that Lot's wife did well with the death sentence allotted to her. However, those who believe in Hashem recognize the benefit of burial. The discomforts of death and burial are a *kaparah* and cleanse the *neshamah* of its sins. Her punishment wasn't simply death, a loss of this world, but an inability to receive atonement, and thus the loss of the next world as well.

We cannot imagine the pain of the *neshamah* of those being cremated who now understand their infinite loss. The suffering the soul feels when it sees its earthly body going up in smoke is eternal. Eternal. Are we absolved from feeling their everlasting sorrow and inconceivable pain?

As for the canard that the unaffiliated have chosen their fate, and we need not be concerned with their choice – we must only consider the kindness we could generate and the unbelievably meaningful consequence of our intervention against the unending pain and anguish that our less halachically-aware brethren experience – there would be no doubt regarding the course of action demanded of us.

My *rebbe's* father, HaRav Dovid Leibowitz, *zt"l*, pointedly described the scope of our responsibility to others based on a Midrash in *Bereishis* (*Bereishis Rabah* 67:4). The Midrash explains that the Jewish nation had to experience the “great and bitter cry” described in Megillas Esther as reparation for the “great cry” that Yaakov caused Eisav by taking the brachos.

One may wonder, what did Yaakov do wrong? The brachos were his by right – he had bought that right from Eisav years before. However, Reb Dovid pointed out, based on the words of the Midrash, there was a slight criticism of Yaakov for not fully appreciating and empathizing with the *tzaar*, the pain, of his evil brother Eisav.

Even a *rasha* like Eisav deserves our empathy. Do our less-knowledgeable brethren deserve any less? The reality is that every cremation is a tragedy, and many could have been prevented. Even the most Torah-observant among us have friends or relatives considering cremation.

It's not an easy conversation to embark upon, but it can be broached in the broader context of a discussion about

end-of-life preparedness, the afterlife, the Jewish view of heaven, the soul, etc. Commenting on the news of the death of a shared relative or acquaintance or the cremation of a well-known personality, such as Joan Rivers, can open the discussion.

There is much to learn about this issue and how to address it. One of our goals with TEAM Shabbos, this *Parshas Vayechi*, is to “open the discussion.” The **T**raditional **E**nd-of-life **A**wareness **M**ovement encourages us to think about our less-observant fellow Jews and how we can alleviate that *tzaar*. Incidentally, let’s not overlook the *tzaar* of their extended families, the *tzaar* of their ancestral families, and the *tzaar* of their Father in heaven. I firmly believe we are all responsible – it is, after all, the *mes mitzvah* of our time.