

In death as in life, the earth is G-d's gift to mankind

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/ Rabbi Israel Becker, Congregation Chofetz Chayim

At the recent annual dinner of my alma mater, the Rabbinical Seminary of America, I saw my lifelong friend, Rabbi Elchonon Zohn. He is a world renowned expert on Jewish end of life issues and burial who has been instrumental in guiding communities all over the United States.

He asked me to join with rabbis across North America who had agreed to dedicate the Shabbos of Vayechi, which deals with the death and burial of our patriarch Jacob, as a special Shabbos creating an awareness of the importance of following Jewish burial traditions. (We read the Torah portion Vayechi on Jan. 14 this year.) When I assured Rabbi Zohn that I would be honored to participate, I did not imagine the discoveries I would soon make.

Many a lesson is taught to us through story and parable. The Talmud records a fascinating conversation between the great sage Rabbi Meir and an Egyptian queen, Cleopatra. To describe the power of the earth, the rabbi presented an analogy to the queen using a seed to demonstrate the power of the earth. When breaking down matter, the earth enhances and beautifies. A bare seed is placed into the ground. It decomposes, and germinates. From that seed, a beautiful plant emerges. So, too, explained Rabbi Meir, when a human body is placed in the earth, a spiritual beautification process takes place, and the soul emerges more magnificent than ever. A famous Torah story further elaborates on this concept.

Lot, the nephew of Abraham, lived with his family in the biblical city of Sodom (Bereishis/Genesis 19). When G-d decreed that Sodom was to be destroyed, He sent two angels to carry out the deed and save Lot and his family. As they were leaving, they were forbidden to look back on the destruction taking place. Lot's wife violated the command, turned around, and was instantly transformed into a pillar of salt as punishment. Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, in his commentary on the Torah, questions whether her transformation into a pillar of salt, being quick and painless, was indeed a bad way to go. She avoided being placed in the ground, and her body did not deteriorate in the earth. Why, then, was this considered a punishment? He explains that the Torah is teaching us the importance of the burial process. In order for the soul to be cleansed of blemishes acquired during one's lifetime as a result of human flaws, return to the earth is necessary. This is a benefit that Lot's wife was denied.

During one's life, the body and soul are merged as one. After life, the soul is lovingly shed from the body through the earth's processing, which allows the soul to emerge in its purest state. Often, the word "expire" is used as a friendlier way to refer to death. However, in a sense, the comparison is inaccurate because after life the journey continues. Everything in G-d's creation has a purpose. The good earth is a magnificent gift from G-d to mankind. In life, it produces our food to sustain us. After life, it prepares us for the blessing of eternity. Only through burial in the earth can this gift from G-d be received.

