

Death rites are widely observed in any religion, as people look to tradition for guidance in that confusing time following a loss. Judaism demands a simple burial in the ground. However, often out of ignorance, many Jews opt for cremation. This is certainly contrary to Jewish practice. The *Tur* ([Yoreh De'ah 362](#)) and *Shulchan Arukh* ([ad loc., par. 1](#)) explicitly require burial in the ground, as opposed to placement in a coffin or container above ground, based on a Biblical verse.

For many, Jewish law is sufficient. For others, Rav Doron Kornbluth wrote a convincing book titled [Cremation or Burial? A Jewish View](#) (Mosaica, 2012). Many choose cremation because it is cheaper and more environmentally friendly. Rav Kornbluth points out that the most expensive cremation is on par with the most expensive burial while the least expensive cremation is only slightly cheaper than the least expensive burial. The key to managing the cost is embracing Jewish burial tradition.

An ancient custom demands that Jews use burial shrouds that are simple white robes and that any casket used is a plain pine box with no metal at all. Deceased bodies are not embalmed, covered with cosmetics or otherwise tampered with beyond the (free) purification performed by the burial society (Chevra Kadisha). While many choose to hold funeral services at a chapel prior to burial, a graveside service is certainly acceptable and even common. All this saves significant money and also makes for a more environmentally friendly burial. This becomes even more cost-effective when done through a bulk program like [OU's Levaya Program](#), which works with Parkside Memorial Chapels.

People often mistakenly think that cremation is the natural way to dispose of a body. It is actually more damaging to the environment than a traditional Jewish burial. Statistics comparing the environmental impact of burial and cremation fail to consider that much of burial's impact is avoided by Jewish tradition. The coffins, formaldehyde and cosmetics that pollute the earth are contrary to Jewish law. A Jewish body decomposes along with its wooden coffin, completing the cycle of life by returning to the dust from which we came (Gen. 3:19). While decomposed dust brings life to the ground and allows for plant life to flourish, ashes destroy the ground and prevent anything from growing. The energy required to cremate a body — maintaining approximately 2,000 degrees for about 2 hours — is a significant use of fossil fuel. Additionally, every cremated body emits toxins. Those with fillings, medical insertions or other unnatural parts will emit even more. The environmental impact is significantly diminished in a simple burial.

Rav Kornbluth sensitively points out that graves are for the living. Children, grandchildren, even distant relatives may someday want a place where they can connect to their lost loved one. Even when people live far away, a single location designated for a deceased relative is a very meaningful connection to the past, a way to return to your roots.

Jewish law requires burial in the ground. Rav Kornbluth goes beyond the law, using language and ideas accessible to all readers to show why burial is the most sensitive and appropriate way to conclude a life and continue the chain of existence. Rav Kornbluth's excellent book received input from many, including Rav Elchonon Zohn of the [National Association of Chevra Kadisha](#). Shabbos Vayechi is designated as [TEAM Shabbos](#), a time for increasing awareness of traditional end-of-life issues, including proper burial. I pray that this contribution will help to console the bereaved and guide them toward tradition during their difficult time.