

# A BURNING ISSUE

Rabbi Avi Shafran

Sybil Sage, a Jewish writer and artist living in New York, asked her son if he minded her plans to have her and his father cremated.

“How about I make urns for Dad and me?” she asked. “I can cover them with fun photos—family vacations, birthday parties, graduations.”

When her son eventually acquiesced, Ms. Sage designed an urn to hold her and her husband’s ashes and, she wrote recently in the *Forward*, friends subsequently commissioned her “to create personalized urns for family members or for pets.”

A decade ago, just over 20% of Americans who died were cremated. In 2005, the rate had risen to 32%. The Cremation Association of North America forecasts that by 2025 more than half of Americans will choose to have their remains burned rather than interred. While no one knows what percentage of American cremation-choosers are Jews, there is little doubt that, at least among Jews with limited or no Jewish education, cremation has become acceptable, even chic. Several years ago, a crematorium even opened in Israel.

Jews bereft of Jewish knowledge can hardly be faulted for not appreciating the concept of “*kovod hameis*,” the mandate to show “honor for the deceased,” a concept that underlies the Torah’s opposition to cremation, the very opposite of honor. They do not understand that the fact that human beings are created “in the image of G-d” entails, among much else, that human bodies whose souls have departed be consigned to the earth in as undisturbed a state as possible.

Many contemporary Jews, sadly, cannot even be expected to be familiar with the Jewish belief in the resurrection of the dead—even though it is one of Judaism’s most basic teachings, subtly evident in the Written Torah’s text and prominent in its Oral Tradition. The Mishna assigns so much gravity to the concept that it places its deniers first among those who “forfeit their share in the world to come” (Sanhedrin, 11:1).

What shouldn’t be surprising, though, to any Jew—or non-Jew, for that matter—is that our bodies are invaluable. After all, they are the means by which we accomplish what we do on earth; if our lives are meaningful, then the flesh-and-blood vehicles that harbor our souls and wills in this life are the indispensable means of creating that meaning—most importantly, by performing G-d’s will. It is through employing our bodies to do good deeds and opposing their gravitations to sin that we achieve our very purposes.

And so, Jewish tradition teaches, even though we are to consign our bodies to the earth after death, there is a small “bone” (Hebrew: “*etzem*”) that is not destroyed when a body decays and from which a person, if he or she so merits, will be rejuvenated at some point in the future.

The idea that a person might be recreated from something tiny—something, even, that can survive for millennia—should not shock anyone familiar with contemporary science. Each of our cells contains a large and complex molecule, DNA, that is essentially a blueprint of our bodies; theoretically, one of those molecules from even our long-buried remains holds the code needed to reproduce our physical selves. (Intriguingly, the Hebrew word “*etzem*” can mean not only “bone” but “essence.”)

To be sure, the Creator is capable of bringing even ashes to life again (as the ashes of the Nazis’ crematoria victims will demonstrate one day, may it come soon). But in Judaism, consciously reducing something to ashes is a declaration of utter abandon and nullification. Jews burn leaven and bread before Pesach, when the Torah insists no vestige of such material may be in their possession. The proper means of disposing of an idol is to pulverize or burn it.

And so, to actually *choose* to have one’s body incinerated is an act that, whether so intended or not, expresses denial of the fact that the body is a holy vessel, that it deserves respect, that it retains worth—indeed that it contains the seeds of future life.

All of us who understand those things need, today more than ever, to share them with those who, tragically, may not.

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