

# What's in Your Anti-Cremation Toolkit?

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Jewish Law

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In January 2017, National Public Radio reported on the increase in the number of families opting to cremate their departed loved ones. The story contained the following startling lines: “Nearly half of all Americans who died this past year were cremated. Cremation rates have reportedly doubled in the United States over the past fifteen years, despite some religious objections and squeamishness about the idea of our loved ones being reduced to ashes.”<sup>1</sup>

Curious to know how this trend has affected America’s Jewish community, I reached out to Rabbi Elchonon Zohn, director of the Chevra Kadisha of the Vaad Harabonim of Queens (New York) and founder and president of the National Association of Chevra Kadisha (NASCK). In addition to his invaluable *chevra kadisha* work (both in the New York area and nationally), Rabbi Zohn has been working tirelessly over the past number of years to raise awareness of the growing cremation trend that is seeping into the American Jewish community.

Based on his extensive work in this area, Rabbi Zohn told me he estimates that 25 percent of Jews in the greater New York area are now opting for cremation over traditional Jewish burial. While Jewish cremation rates around the country vary, he estimates that the national average of American Jews currently choosing cremation is at 40 percent.<sup>2</sup>

With the number of Jews opting for cremation unfortunately on the rise, one never knows when he or she might be able to help another Jew choose a traditional Jewish burial over cremation. Do you know a Jew who is considering cremation? If so, here is an uncomplicated approach that might succeed in changing someone's mind.

Several years ago, I was approached with the following scenario: The father of Rachel (not her real name) was not halachically observant. Now he was at death's door. Despite Rachel's best efforts to explain why cremation was absolutely incompatible with Judaism, for years her father had insisted on being cremated. Rachel—who had become a meticulously observant woman—called me to ask for an idea she could use in a final effort to dissuade her father from being cremated.

Given that her father was gravely ill, now was not the time for her to share a lengthy explanation of why cremation was antithetical to Judaism. What idea made the most sense for Rachel to share with her dying father? I was unsure what to suggest, so I reached out to Rabbi Chaim Schertz of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Based on his decades of experiences as a pulpit rabbi, he suggested the following approach:

Since Rachel's father did not live his life in accordance with halachah, the fact that cremation is completely antithetical to Jewish tradition, law and values was extremely unlikely to resonate with him. In order to talk her father out of being cremated, Rachel needed to explain to her father how his being cremated would affect *her*—not how it would affect *him*.

Rabbi Schertz suggested that Rachel have a heart-to-heart talk with her father, saying something along these lines: "Dad, I love you so much. I know that being cremated doesn't bother you, but your decision to be cremated deeply hurts me. As devastated as I will feel when you pass away, your being cremated will greatly add to my anguish. Since I know that you love me, I'm asking you to cause me the least amount of pain possible. Please agree to a traditional Jewish burial instead of a cremation. I'm begging you to make the choice that will cause me less pain."

Considering her father's long insistence on cremation, Rachel doubted her plea would work. With nothing to lose, though, she told me that she would give

this approach a shot.

Later that day, after spending several hours visiting her father in the hospital, Rachel called me back. She was shocked; Rabbi Schertz's approach had worked. After years of insisting on being cremated, Rachel's father had changed his mind that afternoon and decided to have a traditional Jewish burial instead. After all, how could a loving father knowingly choose to hurt his daughter?<sup>3</sup>

Of course, there are many different anti-cremation approaches one can choose to employ.<sup>4</sup> Depending on the people involved and the set of circumstances one faces, one approach may be more effective than others. As the number of Jews choosing cremation is unfortunately rising, I believe each of us (not just pulpit rabbis) should familiarize ourselves with some of these approaches. After witnessing the success of the above-mentioned approach first hand, I suggest that we each add this approach to our "anti-cremation toolkits."<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

1. See [npr.org/2017/01/07/508668016/more-families-choosing-cremation-for-departed-loved-ones/](http://npr.org/2017/01/07/508668016/more-families-choosing-cremation-for-departed-loved-ones/).
2. In November of 2012, Rabbi Doron Kornbluth addressed this disturbing reality with an article that appeared in these pages entitled, "The Cremation Challenge." See [jewishaction.com/religion/jewish-thought/the-cremation-challenge/](http://jewishaction.com/religion/jewish-thought/the-cremation-challenge/).
3. After I shared a draft of this article with Rabbi Zohn, he asked me to emphasize one critical point. When one changes his or her mind and opts for a traditional Jewish burial instead of a previously planned cremation, it is crucial that this change be recorded in writing and signed by the principal party. Rabbi Zohn has developed the "EMES Card," which serves this function. Please see [nasck.org/emes-card-2/](http://nasck.org/emes-card-2/) to learn more.
4. Visit NASCK's web site for anti-cremation resources: [nasck.org/cremation-2/](http://nasck.org/cremation-2/). Rabbi Doron Kornbluth's *Cremation or Burial? A Jewish View* (Jerusalem, 2012) is a recommended book on the topic.

5. Rabbi Zohn and his colleagues at NASCK are eager to assist anyone in their efforts to prevent cremations. Rabbi Zohn can be contacted at NASCK's office: 718.847.6280, or online: [nasck.org/contact/](http://nasck.org/contact/).

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## **More Tools for the Toolkit**

*By Akiva Males*

In the course of writing this article, I contacted Rabbi Doron Kornbluth—a renowned Jewish educator and author—who travels the world promoting traditional Jewish burial over cremation. Here are some powerful points from Rabbi Kornbluth regarding burial versus cremation:

**Burial Connects Us to Jewish Tradition:** For over 3,000 years, Jews have avoided cremation and chosen burial. Roman historian Tacitus, in describing the Jews, noted that Jews “bury rather than burn” the dead. The Bible itself talks about burial. Burial fulfills a Biblical directive while cremation transgresses Jewish law. Whether or not one is religious, choosing burial is akin to declaring, “I was born a Jew and I will die as a Jew.”

**Burial Leads to Closure While Cremation (Often) Leads to Regrets:** Much anecdotal evidence suggests that many people later regret cremating their loved ones. A sense of closure is often missing, and it can hurt. Burial brings no such regrets. The family says their good-byes, escorts the casket to the cemetery and often participates in the burial.

**Traditional Jewish Burial Is Better for the Environment:** Cremation releases mercury and other toxins into the air, while using enormous amounts of fossil fuels. Many contemporary burial practices (such as embalming and metal caskets) also harm the environment. Environmentalists worldwide are choosing “green burial” (no embalming or metal caskets)—in other words, the traditional Jewish burial.

**We Burn Bad Things, Not Good Ones:** Historically, when one detests something and wants to completely eradicate it, one burns it. Sadly, this is why the Holy Temple in Jerusalem was burned (twice) and ancient cities were burned to the ground by their conquerors. From the days of Avraham to the

Holocaust, our enemies have not only wanted us to disappear, they wanted to deny our very existence via consuming flames. Compare that to burial. Children lovingly bury their pets in the backyard when they pass away—they don't burn them. We bury things we love. In Jewish thought, the body is considered holy and created in the image of God. For this reason, Jews go to great lengths to bury Torah scrolls and other holy objects—including human bodies.

**Burial Is Natural. Cremation Is Artificial and Violent:** While cremation may seem quick and clean, the reality is otherwise. A body burns for approximately two hours, with larger bodies taking even longer. What remains are not ashes but burned and dehydrated bones. Those remains are removed by a crematory worker, ground up, pulverized to dust in a machine and placed into an urn. In contrast, when we bury the body of a loved one, we treat it with care and concern. While decomposition isn't pretty, it is the way of all living things. Burial respects the cycle of nature, and our bodies give back to the Earth that gave so much to us. Burial is calm, natural and respectful. Cremation is a loud, gruesome and violent procedure.

**Burial Has Meaning and Permanence:** If ashes are scattered, there is no physical memorial to the dead. If ashes are kept, other problems develop: How long will one keep the urn? Will one take it with him or her upon moving? Will the grandchildren want it? Eventually urns are thrown out, scattered or forgotten. In contrast, burial provides a permanent resting place for the body and a solemn and meaningful memorial for the eternal soul. Family members often find comfort in visiting the gravesites of their loved ones and ancestors.

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