

To The Editor,

We all know that cremation exists in the Jewish community. (I remember closets-full of unclaimed cans of human ashes stored at local Jewish funeral homes 35-40 years ago.) We even know that it is on the rise. But the capitulation by Jewish “leadership” and “Jewish funeral directors” to this sad trend is an outrage.

My response to several people who called me to express their shock at Stewart Ainsworth’s article (“Burying The Last Taboo”) was to point to the very title of the article. A quick look at the online free dictionary will show the definition of “taboo” as: *an inhibition resulting from social custom or emotional aversion*. If that’s all that traditions that have been preserved through millennia of challenge mean to today’s Jewish leadership, then it’s a small wonder that Jewish values are disappearing. When circumcision, marrying within the faith, and burial are simply understood as a list of taboos, we have a world where Judaism and even Jewish identity are being diluted and altered into nonexistence.

Centuries ago, when cremation became an issue, the Jewish community accepted a ban on the burial of ashes in a Jewish cemetery. Many cemeteries still adhere to that today. Communities that would bury agnostics, atheists, and murderers in their cemeteries, nevertheless excluded the cremated because it was seen as the open denial of the most basic principles of our faith.

A cemetery is called a “Bais HaChaim,” *the home of the living*, because we firmly believe in the eternal life of the souls that rest there. When one believes in a Creator of heaven and earth Who clearly commanded us to be buried, believes in an eternal world of truth, reward and punishment, and the ultimate resurrection (three of the 13 principles of Jewish faith defined by Maimonides), then societal trends and economic considerations do not sway one’s commitment.

At the Vaad Harabonim of Queens and The National Association of Chevra Kadisha, we are working to educate and promote traditional Jewish burial for all Jews. We are working with religious and lay leaders, funeral homes and cemeteries, as well as agencies that serve the elderly, and the community-at-large. We are also working to assist and ensure reasonable burial costs for those with real financial difficulties. It is my sincere hope and belief that the Jewish community is not ready to give up on this “last” mitzvah.

What we have to bury is the notion that G-d-given Jewish practices are just taboos. They are in fact Divine Law very much worth standing up for.

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