

AND NOTHING REMAINS

More Jews than ever are making the painful decision to have their remains **cremated**, instead of opting for burial in a traditional Jewish fashion.

Estranged from mitzvah observance, unfamiliar with the dignity accorded to a **deceased Jew**, they view cremation as the ecologically and economically sound choice.

How can we assure that every Jew will depart from this earth in the most dignified possible way?

BY *Shimmy Blum*



The following story reads like fiction, but this true tale illustrates an alarming trend in the American Jewish community.

In March of 2011, an 80-year-old nonreligious Jew named Arnold Isaacs passed away in Las Vegas. His wife and children made the decision to cremate his remains despite the pleas of his *frum* niece, Mrs. Robin Meyerson, to opt for a traditional burial. Due to a delay on the funeral home's part, the cremation had still not been performed eight days later, and that night, Mr. Isaacs appeared in his daughter Valerie's dream and requested that the cremation not take place.

Two days later, Valerie found herself at a restaurant with her siblings, where, staring at the establishment's crackling fireplace, she shuddered at the thought of the fate awaiting her beloved father's remains. She and her

THE NEED

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siblings decided to scrap the plans for cremation, and Arnold Isaacs merited a Jewish burial several days later.

In an amazing postscript, precisely one year later, on Arnold's first *yahrtzeit*, Mrs. Meyerson gave birth, at age 44, to a beautiful baby boy. Since her uncle Arnold was not known to have a Hebrew name, the baby was named Azriel Mordechai, the beginning A alluding to Arnold.

Growing Trend Arnold Isaacs's story is, tragically, far from an anomaly among American Jews today. Apparently, the axiom of “*Vies chrisallt zich, azoi yiddilt zich*” (as goes non-Jewish society, so goes the Jewish one) pertains even after the soul departs. Half a century ago, virtually all Americans were laid to rest in a casket, after an honorable funeral procession to the cemetery. But today, according to the Cremation Association of North America (CANA), approximately 40% of deceased Americans have their remains cremated, with that percentage expected to rise to 60% by 2025.

Though the world's major Western religions

have long shunned cremation, Judaism and, *l'havdil*, Islam are the only faiths that remain unwaveringly opposed to incinerating human remains after death. In the 1970s, the Reform movement officially began allowing cremation and large segments of the Conservative movement now only mildly oppose or implicitly sanction the choice. Rabbi Elchonon Zohn, director of the *chevra kadisha* of the Vaad Harabonim of Queens and the National Association of Chevra Kadisha (NASCK), estimates that approximately 30% of the American Jewish population already cremates and the numbers are increasing in proportion with the general American population.

The rise of the cremation phenomenon among American Jews has driven noted Israel-based author and lecturer Doron Kornbluth to take this on as a personal cause. While visiting Florida four years ago, Kornbluth came across an advertisement for cremation in a local Jewish publication, and he began researching the phenomenon, culminating in his publication this year of a book on the topic entitled *Cremation or Burial? A Jewish View*. Kornbluth doesn't sugarcoat the situation. “The Jewish

community is at a tipping point now,” he says, with the likelihood that if nothing radical is done within the next few years to stem the tide, burial will occur almost exclusively in the *frum* community, *chas v'shalom*.

There are a variety of reasons given for the steep rise in cremation. One factor is the economic downturn of recent years. A cremation — from hospital pickup to urn delivery — can cost under \$1,000, while it is nearly impossible to keep funeral costs — the ceremony, hearse, plot, burial, and monument — under \$8,000.

But the expense isn't the only factor at play. Indeed, Rabbi Zohn estimates that cremations are rising as quickly amongst upper class Americans as among the poor — or perhaps faster. Another major reason given for the turn toward cremation is the sense that it is simpler, more environmentally friendly, and less burdensome than transporting a body, burying it, and letting it remain in the ground to decompose over years — which is, in any event, a troubling thought to many.

Religious faith, though, remains the greatest determinative factor. The more closely

one adheres to his religion's doctrines, the less likely he is to cremate. One study found that a state's cremation rates are correlated to the level of religious participation among its citizens. Oregon, for example, with the country's lowest participation in organized religion in America, has a cremation rate of 65%, whereas Bible Belt states like Alabama and Mississippi have rates below 15% for the practice.

Florida is among the 13 states that already have cremation rates of over 50%, and its sizable population of elderly Jewish residents, many of whom reside far from their children and other relatives, has the highest cremation rate of any Jewish community in America.

Beyond the cold statistics lie real stories about real people, and Rabbi Zohn has some rather hair-raising ones to share from personal experience. He came across one couple that insisted on being cremated despite both husband and wife being yeshivah graduates. One frail husband requested that his wife be cremated after her death despite her request to be buried, because he felt that it would be more “convenient” to have her ashes at home.

Close to Home Some among us may be tempted to dismiss this all as a crisis with little bearing on *frum* Jews, but Rabbi Zohn and Mr. Kornbluth beg to differ. Rabbi Zohn recounted a recent stunning experience in which he was contacted by a *rav* on the West Coast who encountered a Jew in a hospice center whose ex-mother-in-law wished to be cremated after her passing. The *rav* recommended that he contact a rabbi before proceeding, whereupon the man said, “I have a rabbi in my family named Rabbi Elchonon Zohn.” When the two eventually spoke, it became clear that they were distant cousins.

“Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky *ztz”l* said that ensuring the proper *kavod hameis* [honor of the dead] of these Yidden is in the category of a *meis mitzvah*, which is the responsibility of everyone in Klal Yisrael,” says Rabbi Zohn. He adds that preventing them from committing a sin as grave as cremation is particularly worthy. “A *meshumed* [convert to Christianity], someone who intermarried, or was killed by *beis din* is allowed to be buried in a Jewish cemetery,” Rabbi Zohn explains, “but there is a *gezeiras hakadmonim* [decree of the scholars of previous generations] not to bury the ashes of a Jew who was [willingly] cremated in a Jewish cemetery.”

With heartfelt emotion palpable despite the 2,500-mile distance between us, Mrs. Meyerson pleads the case of secular American Jewry: “Even if a Jew doesn't look and act like us, they are our family and they are special. They are lost, and we must help them, just like Hashem does to His children.”

Besides the responsibility we bear for our secular brethren, Doron Kornbluth also points to the importance to the *frum* community of stopping the cremation phenomenon. Although it will not gain acceptance within mainstream Orthodox circles, Kornbluth says that Orthodox individuals with weak backgrounds could be vulnerable. “The need to bury could eventually be seen as not that important, as just ‘one of those things’ we do,” he states, pointing to the all-too-real phenomenon of interreligious dating amongst college youths in some Orthodox circles.

Kornbluth also notes the struggle that Jews

around the globe have had in recent years to preserve the mitzvah and traditions of *bris milah*. “Once the Torah stands out against the norms of society, it ends up hurting us,” he states. “If the majority of Jews as a whole also cremate, then we have no legs to stand on.” A cautionary tale in this regard is the state of affairs in Belgium, where the law states that bodies can be removed from cemeteries after half a century if the plots aren't claimed and “renewed.” Due to this reality, Jews in the country have for long gone to neighboring Holland to bury *niftarim*.

Mission Possible On the bright side, Kornbluth contends that combating cremation in the secular Jewish world is easier than combating intermarriage and other spiritually destructive trends. “It is a topic that secular Jews are interested in hearing about,” he says, and on which they are open to changing their minds.

In addition to the need to debunk the myths about the benefits of cremation (see sidebar), personal and religious issues must also often be addressed. One common reason given for choosing cremation is the fear that no one will visit the grave, particularly when the person leaves no children or doesn't expect them to visit often. It is this fear that is captured by the black humor of the old Jewish joke about the mother who says, “Please sprinkle my ashes in Bloomingdale's. I know that my daughter will visit once a month.” To counter this notion, relatives and friends must impress upon those considering cremation how important it is for them and their descendants to have a physical plot to visit in order to satisfy the basic human need to grieve and to gain psychological closure.

As for those who believe that providing their ashes to relatives or having them buried in a cemetery is the equivalent of having a gravesite to visit, Mrs. Rachele Lifpitz, daughter of Mrs. Meyerson's Uncle Arnold wonders, “Whoever I met who had a relative cremated, doesn't want their ashes. Who wants to be remembered that way?” In fact, a large percentage of cremated remains are never even retrieved by relatives from funeral homes.

And Nothing Remains

For many years, recalling the millions of Jews who were *R"l* incinerated in the Holocaust was a potent argument for dissuading Jews from volunteering for a similar end, but, Rabbi Zohn warns, as time passes, the effectiveness of that tack has diminished. There are even some Holocaust survivors who claim to desire cremation as a show of "solidarity" with their martyred relatives, *Hy"d*. Rabbi Zohn tells of how he managed to convince one Holocaust survivor who had made that very argument. "I asked her," he says, "Don't you think that part of the pain that your mother and sister felt while being led to the crematorium was that their family will have nowhere to go to?"

If there are financial concerns about footing the bill for a funeral, family assistance and pre-need funeral payment plans are good options, and there are several *chevra kadisha*-related organizations that subsidize burials in such cases.

In some cases, assuming one has lots of patience and sensitivity, speaking even to nonreligious Jews about *techiyas hameisim* and Olam HaBa, which those cremated do not merit to experience, can be very effective too, especially with a Jew who is aging or in frail health. "They all have a *pintele Yid*," says Mrs. Meyerson, "and know that it's not right."

Living in Peace Though the battle against Jewish cremation is a difficult one, it is being waged on ever



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FACTS vs. POPULAR FICTION

Mr. Kornbluth and Rabbi Zohn concur that, generally speaking, an explicitly religious "Jews never do that" approach is to be avoided in seeking to convince nonreligious Jews to abandon plans to cremate. Instead, they recommend pointing out the flaws in the arguments for cremation, while expressing respect for the fact that the original decision was made rationally.

Cremation or Burial? A Jewish Perspective includes many facts and perspectives that

undermine or disprove arguments for cremation. For instance, the notion that the method is environmentally preferable is put to rest by studies that show that cremation uses over 1 million BTUs of fossil fuels per hour, in a procedure that typically lasts about two hours. In 2001, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency estimated that cremation caused approximately one-third of the country's mercury emissions to the atmosphere, and a recent Canadian study recommended for similar reasons that no crematorium be situated close to a residential neighborhood. Kornbluth notes the irony that the "green burials" that environmentalists favor — without the use of embalming chemicals or metal caskets — are precisely what halachah requires.

Another common claim is that in-ground burial is a waste of precious earth space. Kornbluth cites statistics showing that if, for the next 10,000 years, every deceased American were to be buried, their plots would not take up even 1% of the country's land mass. More broadly, Kornbluth sees it as imperative to counteract the notion that cremation is "natural." He points out that all living creations, from flowers to animals, return to the earth upon their demise and gradually decompose. In a section of his book that is decidedly not for the squeamish amongst us, he details just how degrading and gruesome the multi-hour cremation process is, with every bone and limb in the body turned into ash in an 1,800 degree oven.

more diverse fronts, and an increasing number of success stories are taking place.

Doron Kornbluth's presentations are featured on Aish.com, Chabad.org and JewishDeathAndMourning.org (a site run by Chevrah Lomdei Mishnah), among others. Rabbi Zohn has launched an innovative new wallet card for the Jewish community that registers the person's wishes for medical proxies and end-of-life medical preferences as well as the desire for a proper burial. A significant benefit of this card is that it can serve as an effective tool to broach this uncomfortable topic with a friend or relative. (More information can be found at www.nasck.org.) He is also working on launching a website (peacefulreturn.com) specifically focused on this topic.

One woman who had a change of heart regarding cremation is Barbara Sommer of Los Angeles. She identifies with the Reform movement and originally desired to be cremated. When she contacted Rabbi Moshe Haikins, director of Chevrah Lomdei Mishnah of Lakewood, about saying Kaddish for her late husband and shared her own postmortem wish, he sent her Kornbluth's book. "I read the book with a magnifier," Mrs. Sommer tells *Mishpacha*, "and realized that I hadn't put all of the facts together. I thought that it would be easier than burial, but it really isn't." Ultimately, she instructed the executor of her will to change her wish to that of burial.

Mrs. Lifpitz similarly relates that her mother changed her mind about cremation after reading Kornbluth's book as well as one authored by Rebbetzin Lori Palatnik, a well-known teacher at Aish HaTorah. "I believe that with education, most Jews would change their minds," she says.

The cremation nightmare behind them, Mrs. Lifpitz says that she and her siblings have seen improvements in various aspects of life. She recalls a vivid dream she had several weeks after her father was buried, in which he came to her, lovingly held her hand, and told her, *Thank you so much for burying me as a Jew. I feel at home and at peace.* "The dream was so real; I kept on trying to open my eyes," she remembers tearfully.

Her sister Valerie volunteered to become a *shomer* at a Jewish funeral home and made other advances in life. Rachele traveled to Israel where she felt her "father's soul guiding me the entire time." She has developed a greater interest in Yiddishkeit, and has once again begun lighting Shabbos candles with a *brachah* each week. "I realize that the things I do here on earth make my father go higher in Heaven," she explains.

Still affected by the memory of the amazing turn of events following her uncle's passing, Mrs. Meyerson is eager to help spare other *neshamos* and families the same agonizing ordeal. She wrote the foreword to Kornbluth's book and participates in some of the online presentations on the topic. "This is a crisis and I'm making it my personal mission to help," she says. "Don't be afraid to intervene." ●



Claims Conference ועידת התביעות
The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany

PENSION PAYMENTS AVAILABLE TO ADDITIONAL HOLOCAUST VICTIMS FOLLOWING NEGOTIATIONS

Recent negotiations with the German government have allowed the Claims Conference to expand eligibility for pension programs. According to these criteria, Jewish Holocaust survivors may be eligible for Claims Conference pensions if they were in:

- (i) Concentration camps; or
- (ii) Ghettos for at least 3 months; or
- (iii) Hiding for at least 6 months without access to the outside world, or lived under false identity for at least 6 months, in Nazi-occupied territory.

The comprehensive criteria and application forms are available on the Claims Conference website on www.claimscon.org.

Payments for approved applications for Claims Conference pensions under the new criteria will be retroactive to November 1, 2012 or January 1, 2013, depending on the basis for eligibility or, if the application was received after that date, from the date of the application.

There is no cost to apply. Applications can be obtained online and filed with the Claims Conference FREE OF CHARGE.

NOTE: Claims Conference pensions may only be paid to survivors who do not already receive a pension from a German source (Article 2 Fund, CEEF, German Federal Indemnification Law – BEG – Bundesentschaedigungsgesetz, PRVG, Austrian OFG – Opferfürsorgegesetz, Israeli Ministry of Finance under the Nazi Persecution Disabled Persons law 5717-1957) and who meet all other criteria, including the income and asset criteria, of the Article 2 Fund.

For information contact:
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The Claims Conference has appointed an Ombudsman. To contact the Office of the Ombudsman, please email Ombudsman@claimscon.org or write to The Ombudsman, PO Box 585, Old Chelsea Station, New York, NY 10113