

# Cremation or Burial? A Jewish View

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## Why Jewish burial is important — for you and the soul of the departed.

Throughout history, societies have adopted varying approaches to dealing with corpses. Some have buried them in the ground and some have cremated them. Others sealed them away in elaborate mausoleums with food and drink, mummified them, left them for the vultures, cannibalized them and done the unthinkable to the bodies of their loved ones. Presumably, most people simply followed their neighbors' example in deciding what method to choose.

Since the very beginning of the Jewish people thousands of years ago, although many options were available, Jews have always insisted on burial.

Until recently.

Today, mirroring the developments in Western society, at least 30 percent of Jewish deaths in North America and Europe are followed by cremations, and the percentage is on the rise.

What is the cause of cremation's increasing popularity? Here are some of the top reasons:

1. Environmental concerns: Burial seems to waste land and pollute the environment.
2. Mobility concerns: Kids don't live close anyway. Why feel guilty about not visiting the gravesite?
3. Discomfort with decomposition: Cremation seems quicker and cleaner.
4. Financial concerns: Cremation seems — and often is — cheaper than burial.

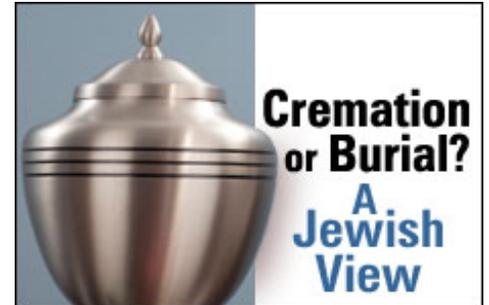
As Professor Stephen Prothero put it, "whether to bury or to burn is ... no trivial matter. It touches on issues as important as perceptions of the self, attitudes toward the body, views of history, styles of ritual, and beliefs in God and the afterlife."<sup>1</sup>

Because this decision is so important, it is crucial not to leave it until the rushed and stressful times of ultimate grief. Let's examine the facts.

Environmentalists Are Not in Favor of Cremation.

Why? Simply because, contrary to common perception, cremation is bad for the environment.

Cremation uses a tremendous amount of fossil fuels — over one million Btu's (British thermal units) per hour with an average cremation lasting between one and a half and two hours, sometimes more — a tremendous amount of energy at a time when, finally, society is realizing it needs to *lower* the use of fossil fuels.



| Environmentalists admire Jewish tradition which prohibits metal caskets and embalming.

Furthermore, cremation released toxic chemicals into the air. The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency estimated in 2001 that cremations accounted for 32 percent of mercury emissions to the atmosphere in that country and a recent Canadian Study found the problem so serious that it recommended simply that “A crematorium should not be sited close to a neighborhood.”<sup>2</sup> Finally, there is plenty of land available for burial: When you crunch the numbers, burials in the U.S. use far less land per year than the construction of new Walmarts (187,000 square feet per Supercenter, excluding their massive parking lots). Even if *all* Americans were buried, it would take over 10,000 years to use up just 1% of America’s land mass. And, of course, Jews constitute less than 2% of the dead, and few cemeteries would last that long anyway.

So where does this misconception come from? Environmentalists *are* critical of embalming chemicals and metal caskets. They recommend what are called ‘green burials’ without the metal caskets or embalming – and openly admire the Jewish tradition which prohibits both. Environmentalists are against cremation.<sup>3</sup>

### Cremation Does Not Solve Mobility Concerns

Modern mobility certainly makes cemetery visitation much harder. However, upon further reflection, things aren’t so simple. First of all, it is hard to find an appropriate place for cremated remains. Feels strange to have them in the house. Even when the children *do* find an appropriate place for the remains of their deceased parents, how long will they keep them for?

Until they switch jobs and move? Until they retire? What will they do with them then? And when, in ten or twenty years, they are no longer living independently, will their children want the remains? Will they take them? What will *they* do with the remains?

The point is that our homes and families are simply not designed for long term storage of cremated remains. At some point, they are likely to be placed in an inappropriate place, forgotten, or ignored. In *all* cases, the home option is only temporary anyway. Some choose scattering, however in many families, a child or grandchild will eventually develop a desire to visit the gravesite and re-connect with their loved ones who have passed on. Whether important to you or not, or to the deceased, scattering prevents *any* descendants from *ever* having a traditional gravesite to visit. Even in the cases where gravesite visitation will rarely or *never* occur, burial is the right choice – as witnessed by the case of Moses himself, when God buried him and then hid the place of his burial (to avoid it becoming a site of idol worship). Even when it doesn’t seem like there will be any visitors — the body is at rest, and has found a permanent home.

Decomposition: It’s Never Pretty (Skip this section if you get queasy easily)

Many people believe cremation is quick and clean. It isn’t. To quote Professor Stephen Prothero<sup>4</sup>:

*“Think of the horrors ... of the crisping, crackling, roasting, steaming, shriveling, blazing features and hands that yesterday were your soul’s delight. Think of exploding cadavers. Think of the stench of burning flesh and hair. Think of the smoke. Think of the bubbling brains. Then you will be gripped by ‘paralyzing horror’ at even the thought of ‘submitting the remains of ... dear departed relatives to its sizzling process.’ Cremation [is], in a word, repulsive: ‘There is nothing beautiful in being shoved in to an oven, and scientifically barbecued by a patented furnace’ ”*

True, being eaten by worms is not pleasant either. I’m not claiming burial is ‘less gross.’ On a physical level, they are both pretty disgusting. Burial, however, is a natural process of decomposition that occurs to every human being. Cremation is loud, violent, and unnatural.

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## Financial Concerns

Cremations have the reputation of being cheap. It isn't always so. When all the side costs and hidden costs are added in, "Sheri Richardson Stahl, director of Island Funeral Home in Beaufort, S.C., explained that, "Plenty of times, cremations are just as expensive as burials."<sup>5</sup>

There is one type of cremation, however, whose costs can't be beat: direct cremation. In this type of cremation, a cremation company is contacted online or by telephone. They send someone to pick up the body, deliver it to the crematorium, and deliver to the bereaved family a small can full of cremated remains. Costs are often between \$1,000 and \$2,000. In an age of worldwide economic difficulty, direct cremations are becoming more common. That is unfortunate.

Here is why: For some things in life, it is certainly appropriate to find the cheapest solution possible. Times are tough, and we need to live within our means. However, for some life decisions we manage to find the money to do the right thing. For example, I will do whatever is necessary to send my children to a decent school, rather than "going cheap" and putting them in a bad environment. If a loved one needs a medical procedure, I will somehow arrange to make it possible.

Choosing burial *is* important. Even in the cases when it is more expensive. Here's why.

## The Meaning of Burial

When a body is buried, the ground is opened up. A tear in the earth appears. The gaping hole declares, "Something is not right here — there is a tear in the human fabric of life. Take note, world, don't rush through this moment. Recognize the loss. Remember the life." When the body is gently placed in the ground, a new message is given — the calm return to nature, the source of life.

*"After decades of denying our mortality, Americans are starting to accept, if not embrace, this fundamental fact of biology: that the natural end of all life is decomposition and decay. Instead of fighting it at almost all cost as we have for the better part of the last century — with toxic chemicals, bulletproof metal caskets, and the concrete bunker that is the burial vault, all of which will only delay, not halt, the inevitable — we're finally seeing the wisdom of allowing Mother Nature to run her natural course."<sup>6</sup>*

The earth, the dirt, is indeed "the Mother of All Life." The earth provides our sustenance, like a mother who gives birth to and feeds her young. And to it all creatures return, to begin the cycle once again. As British dramatist Francis Beaumont put it,

*"Upon my buried body lay  
Lightly, gently, earth"<sup>7</sup>*

Returning the body of someone we cared for to the earth is a sign of love. Do we burn things we love? Think back to your first pet: "We burned the trash and buried the treasure. That is why, faced with life's first lessons in mortality — the dead kitten or bunny rabbit, or dead bird fallen from its nest on high — most parents search out shoe boxes and shovels instead of kindling wood or barbecues..."<sup>8</sup>

*The Talmud compares burial to planting.*

Burial and cremation usually reflect two radically different attitudes, and two mutually exclusive ways of seeing the world and understanding our place in it. Decomposition and burning are vastly different from one another and, in many ways, complete opposites. Decomposition of

a plant or living creature creates fertilizer. The intrinsic elements of the matter are not changed — rather they are given back to the ground. No wonder that the Talmud compares burial to a type of planting.<sup>9</sup>

Cremation, on the other hand, leaves only burnt ashes, its elements forever changed and almost entirely burnt off. Try burning a seed before planting it — nothing will grow. In choosing cremation, humanity shows its power, but to what end?

The message of cremation is to side with man as conqueror, using fire and technology to interfere with and control nature — rather than peacefully accept it. The message of burial is one of respect for the cycle of nature.

When burying the remains of our loved ones, we calmly return what we have received. Burial reflects the rhythm of the universe.

Furthermore, burial is a Torah commandment. Deuteronomy 21:23 discusses the rare case of an evil criminal who is put to death. Even in that extreme case, the command is given, “You shall surely bury him,” teaching a general principle for all cases. The obligation to bury is so strong that even the high priest — who zealously avoided all contact with all forms of death — must personally give the dead a proper burial if no one else can do so. The Talmud, Maimonides, and the Code of Jewish Law all codify the commandment to bury the dead.<sup>10</sup>

### Spiritual Ramifications

The severity, repetition, and focus on providing proper Jewish burial in the Bible, Talmud, and books of Jewish law are remarkable, and hint at its important spiritual ramifications. Jewish mystical works do much more. They explain core concepts about cremation and burial that change the way we think about death — and life. In order to begin to understand the issues (a full understanding would require too much space for this article), here is a point of departure:

Who are funerals for, anyway? It sounds like a silly question, but the answer forms the basis of many decisions made at this sensitive time. Some believe that decisions made after death — for example, whether to bury or burn, and what type of service to conduct — are for the living. To give a sense of closure. To provide comfort. After all, the dead person is ... dead. Whatever we do doesn't matter to him anyway. He or she is already in a “better place.” We presume that the dead don't feel what is happening to the body, don't really care, and probably aren't even aware anyway. Mourning practices, then, are understood to be for the mourners.

The Jewish view is different. While providing comfort to the bereaved is central to Jewish tradition (and is crucial to mourning practices), it is not the only factor to be considered. The soul of the departed needs to be taken into consideration as well, and some questions (what is done with the body at the time of the funeral, for instance) focus almost exclusively on the needs of the soul, rather than on the mourners' needs.

What are the (departed) soul's needs?

| *When death occurs, the soul still feels close to the body.*

In Jewish thought the body and soul are not enemies. The body enables the soul to dwell in this world, to bring meaning into daily life. Without the body, the soul could not fulfill its mission. Body and soul are partners, together for a lifetime. Since they are partners, the soul becomes attached to its body. When death occurs, the soul does not depart immediately. It still feels close to the body.

Jewish mysticism compares body and soul to a loving husband and wife. When a husband departs this world, can a loving wife immediately move on? The bond is so close that time is needed to adjust to the new reality. The soul, then does not abandon the body immediately after death. Since it is confused and disoriented, it stays close to what it knows best — its body. It hovers around the body until burial, and shares in the mourning, going back and forth from gravesite to the shivah house.<sup>11</sup>

The soul is fully aware of what is happening to 'its' body.<sup>12</sup> One way to understand this soul-knowledge is to consider that upon its departure from the physical world, the soul achieves greater closeness and knowledge of God, Who is the Source of all knowledge, and thus the soul shares in God's knowledge of what is happening to its body on earth. This is why traditional Jewish funeral practices are marked by tremendous respect for the body — it is painful for a soul to see its body mishandled, abandoned, or defiled.

Traditional Jewish burial gives the soul great comfort, and provides the transition it requires to enter the purely spiritual world. Cremation, on the other hand, causes the soul tremendous — and unnecessary — agony. The soul cries out in pain as its partner, the body, is burned rather than caringly returned to its Source. The soul is prevented from gently returning to God, instead needing to go through a lengthy and difficult struggle to adjust to a new reality.

Despite Judaism's great insistence on listening to parents and honoring their wishes, we can now understand why proper Jewish burial overrides a parental request for cremation: Once the body is dead, the soul gains greater closeness to God and therefore greater understanding. It knows what pain cremation will bring and what eternal meaning burial provides. Now, the real 'parent' — their inner soul — wants to avoid the pain and separation of cremation more than anything we can imagine.

#### To Die as a Jew

Finally, for thousands of years, Jews and Judaism have insisted on proper Jewish burial. Roughly 2,000 years ago, Roman historian Tacitus wrote that "the Jews bury rather than burn their dead."<sup>13</sup> Even today, the Israel Defense Forces spends an enormous amount of time, energy, money and resources trying to ensure proper Jewish burial for its fallen. Jews will fly around the world in order to recover ancient Torah Scroll and give it a proper burial — and people are more important than even a Torah Scroll..

By choosing burial, we are aligning ourselves with Jewish history and the Jewish people. In our 'last act' on the planet, choosing Jewish burial means declaring, "I may not have been a perfect Jew. But I'm proud to be one, and I want to die as a Jew."

Adapted with permission from [Cremation or Burial? A Jewish View](#) by Doron Kornbluth (Mosaica Press, 2012).

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1. Stephen Prothero, *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 5
  2. Veerle Willaeyts, *Public Health Impact of Crematoria*, Memorial Society of British Columbia, 2007
  3. For more on burial and the environment, see: (1) Harris, Mark. *Grave Matters: A Journey through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial*. New York: Scribner, 2007; (2) Butz, Bob. *Going Out Green: One Man's Adventure Planning His Own Natural Burial*. Traverse City, MI: Spirituality & Health Books, 2009; (3) Lubowski, Ruben N., Marlow Vesterby, Shawn Bucholtz, Alba Baez, and Michael J. Roberts. *Major Uses of Land in the United States, 2002/EIB-14*. United States Department of Agriculture: Economic Research Service, May 2006, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eib14/>; (4) Wikipedia, s.v. "Cremation." <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cremation>; and (5) my own *Cremation or Burial? A Jewish View* (Mosaica Press, 2012)
  4. *Ibid*, p. 67

5. Molly Kardaes, "Another Sign of the Recession — Cremation on the Rise," CBS News, March 20, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2009/03/20/business/econwatch/entry4879269.shtml>.
6. Mark Harris, *Grave Matters: A Journey through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial* (New York: Scribner, 2007), 186.
7. Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *The Maid's Tragedy*, ed. T. W. Craik (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), II:i.
8. Lynch, *The Undertaking*, 96.
9. Tractate Sanhedrin 90b and Ketubot 111b
10. Sanhedrin 46b, 29 Sefer Ha-Mitzvot 231, 536; Laws of Mourning, ch. 12, Yoreh Dei'ah 362.
11. Zohar 1:122b. Based on Kabbalistic sources, the Geshet HaChaim (1:117) outlines seven stages of departure: (1) Thirty days before death, the soul begins a partial separation from the body. (2) In the last hours before death, there is a further separation. (3) At the moment of death, the soul leaves the body and meets its Maker. (4) For the first three days after death, the soul is confused. It believes it will reenter the body and therefore stays closely attached to it. After three days it ceases trying to reenter the body, but remains confused. During the shivah, the first week after death, the soul goes back and forth from the grave to the shivah house. (5) Between shivah and thirty days, the soul rises in Heaven, but is closely attached to the gravesite. (6) Between thirty days and the first year, the soul rises higher in Heaven, but still returns periodically to the gravesite. (7) After one year, it stays in Heaven, except for a small part of it that remains connected to this world and its body.
12. Talmud, Tractate Berachot 18b; Tosafot, Shabbat 153a, s.v. "venishmato"; Talmud, Tractate Sotah 34b; Rabbi Aaron Berachyah, *Ma'avar Yabok* 2:25; and *Menashe ben israel*, *Nishmat Chaim* 2:22.
13. Tacitus, *Histories* 5:5.

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