

## Community Feature / By Gavriel Horan

# The Final Question: A Look at the Cremation Epidemic Facing the Jewish World

When Robin's uncle passed away suddenly, the family was overwhelmed with grief. But for Robin — a *baalas teshuvah* — the battle had just begun, considering that her uncle had requested cremation.

The topic of end of life is not a pleasant subject — but it is one that everyone must face at some point. For *frum* Jews, there isn't much to discuss: a kosher burial is non-negotiable. Throughout time, societies have adopted varying approaches to dealing with the dead — from cremation to mummification to cannibalization. Tibetan Buddhists even today practice what is known as “sky burials” — bodies are ritually prepared and left to be eaten by vultures and other animals. Despite many alternatives, Jews have never considered anything other than burial in the ground since the dawn of our history.

The Torah itself includes numerous accounts of burials, from Avraham Avinu, who purchased Me'aras Hamachpelah, to Moshe Rabbeinu, who was buried by Hashem Himself. *Devarim* 21:23 discusses the case of a 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 — all the more so for a righteous person. Roughly two thousand years ago, Roman historian Tacitus wrote that “the Jews bury rather than burn their dead.”

The body and soul are partners in the world; the body acts as the soul's primary vehicle for *mitzvah* performance and, as such, earns a degree of holiness. In light of this, Jews would never consider mistreating the body of the departed.

Until recently, that is, in the unfortunate case of non-Orthodox Jews.

Today, for the first time in Jewish history, almost 40 percent of non-Orthodox Jewish deaths in North America and Europe are followed by cremations. In an ironic twist of fate, large numbers of elderly Holocaust survivors are even choosing cremation today. The first crematorium in Israel, Aley Shalechet (Autumn Leaves), was opened in 2005 — although it was destroyed by arson shortly after, in 2007. Since then it has been rebuilt in an undisclosed location and continues to perform hundreds of cremations each year. Before its opening in 2005, the only previous cremation in Israel was in 1962 — of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, *ym"vs*.

These dire statistics are really just mirroring the greater sociological trends of the modern world. Although the Bible largely influenced Christian Europe to prohibit cremation and other alternatives for over 1,500 years, cremation is making a comeback. In recent years, cremation rates have risen throughout the western world with over 70 percent in Switzerland and Great Britain choosing cremation today. The U.S. is close behind with over 40 percent throughout the country and as much as 60 percent in liberal California and New York. The pope even officially permitted cremation in 1963.

### A Growing Crisis

Rabbi Elchonon Zohn, the head of the Chevra Kadisha of Queens and Long Island and the Director of the National Association of Chevra Kadisha (NASCK), heads the fight against cremation in America. He noted that when he helped found the *chevrah kaddisha* back in 1971, fewer than 5 percent of Jews in the Queens area were having *taharah* — although almost all Jews used the services of Jewish funeral homes. Today, the number of Jews in the area who have *taharah* is closer to 50 percent. On the other hand, however, a large portion of the other half don't even go through Jewish funeral homes anymore. “Assimilation is such that many don't even identify themselves as Jews anymore when they die,” he said. Rabbi Zohn founded NASCK to help strengthen *chevrah kaddisha* around the country and to educate them about how to prevent cremations and encourage kosher burials. He speaks regularly in cities such as Phoenix, Rochester, Dallas, New Orleans and others. “At times we are successful at discouraging cremations and, unfortunately, at others, we are not.”

When Rabbi Zohn, a *musmach* of Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim in Queens, accepted the position as head of the *chevrah kaddisha*, it was only for a year in the hope that he would soon find a position in *chinuch*. When the right position came along, he asked Harav Yaakov Kamenetsky, *zt"l*, for permission to take the job. Rav Yaakov told him that he was forbidden to quit unless he could find someone to take over with the same *mesirus nefesh* as his own. He never left. “It's not a job that is very glamorous or well paid,” he said. “There weren't a lot of applicants.”

“It really is an opportunity and possibly an obligation to reach out to every secular Jew before it's too late, to help and encourage them to choose a Jewish burial. Rav Yaakov once said that every secular Jew who dies in America is a potential *meis mitzvah*. Today's *meis mitzvah* isn't found lying in the street — he has a fancy funeral and is heading straight for the crematorium. Even *kohanim* can get involved. You have to be tactful and can't shove anything

down anyone's throat, but if you open dialogue you can really make a difference.”

### Why Die Jewish?

Considering the strong Jewish tradition of burial, we need to ask why cremation is becoming increasingly popular nowadays. Rabbi Doron Kornbluth, author of a recent book on the subject, *Cremation or Burial?* (Mosaic Press), spent the past three years researching the subject to get a better understanding of the issue and find out what we can do about it. Rabbi Kornbluth is also the author of several best-selling *kiruv* books such as *Why Be Jewish?*, and *Why Marry Jewish?* Four years ago, on a speaking tour in Florida, he noticed a disturbing ad in a local Jewish newspaper. The ad was from a Jewish funeral home and read: “Jewish Cremation.”

“I was in shock having seen such an advertisement,” Rabbi Kornbluth recalled. “Having grown up in a traditional environment, I never met a Jew who ate on Yom Kippur or who ate non-kosher meat. Similarly, cremation was literally unheard of. I starting looking into it and quickly discovered that this is not a minor problem among secular Jews today — it is a major problem.” Although cremations were never offered by Jewish funeral homes before, today, 25 percent of all funerals conducted in Jewish funeral homes are followed by a cremation. According to Kornbluth's estimates, cremation is becoming mainstream so rapidly that within a generation, only Orthodox Jews will continue to practice burial.

He emphasizes that now is a crucial time for *frum* people to do something to reverse this trend. His 2003 book, *Why Marry Jewish?* has reportedly helped stop thousands of intermarriages around the world. “As successful as the fight against intermarriage may be, it's way too late. If my book had come out 30 years earlier, it might have made a difference. Now, it works on individuals but it can't reverse the overall picture. Intermarrying has become the norm among secular American Jews. By cremation, however, we're not too late. We haven't hit the tipping point yet. If we make a concerted effort we can change things before it

becomes the norm.”

*Cremation or Burial?* was sponsored by Rabbi Moshe Haikins, the founder and president of Chevrah Lomdei Mishnah, a non-profit organization that helps people finish *Mishnah* for the *sheloshim* and *yahrtzeit* and organizes *Kaddish* to be said for the departed. He recently made a division for non-religious Jews and is working on becoming an educational resource for them besides merely offering services. Hundreds of times each year, rabbis around the world raise money or pay out of their own pockets to fund burials for those who would otherwise choose cremation to save money on burial expenses. Rabbi Haikins is currently working on creating a scholarship fund to sponsor burials for those who would otherwise be cremated. “A major problem is that a lot of people are willing to do burials but they can't afford it or they aren't willing to spend the money,” Rabbi Haikins explained. “We need to educate people that it's a one-time opportunity that you can't go back on.” When he asked the Skverer Rebbe, *shlita*, about sponsoring the book, the Rebbe said that even if it doesn't help the organization it is still a huge *mitzvah* not worth passing up.

### Common Misconceptions

To research the book, Rabbi Kornbluth read through dozens of case studies, academic works, history books and, of course, *sefarim*. He also obtained blueprints and records from numerous crematoria, even sneaking into one undercover. “Most people aren't that stuck on cremation,” he said. “They can be convinced. It's just a matter of dispelling misconceptions and spreading knowledge.”

In general, Rabbi Kornbluth has found there to be four main objections to burial: environmental issues, mobility concerns from children spread out across the country, discomfort with decomposition, and cost.

### An Eco-Friendly Solution?

Many secular, liberal-minded Jews are under the assumption that burial pollutes the environment and uses up valuable land that could be used to produce food or house the homeless. In truth, cremation is actually detrimental for the environment whereas Jewish burial practices are not. Environmental activists are strongly against cremation because it uses up a tremendous amount of fossil fuels — as much as 2 million BTUs per cremation or more — at a time when society is realizing it needs to *lower* the use of fossil fuels. Furthermore, cremation releases toxic chemicals into the air — as much as 32 percent of mercury emissions according to the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency. This led a recent Canadian study to conclude that “a crematorium should not be sited close to a neighborhood.”

Various non-kosher burials may not be much better for the environment than cremation. The use of metal caskets and embalming agents transfer gallons of chemicals into the earth and ground water. In contrast, halachic burials that only permit use of a simple wooden coffin without the use of chemical preservatives cause little, if any, damage to the environment. Finally even if *all* Americans were buried, it would take over 10,000 years to use up just 1

percent of America's land mass. After hearing Rabbi Kornbluth speak in Denver, Colorado, an environmentalist told him that she was always planning on choosing cremation since she assumed it was better for the environment. His speech changed her mind.

#### All or None

Others object to burial because it is challenging for family members spread out throughout the country to visit the gravesite. In contrast, scattering the ashes of the deceased prevents *all* descendants from being able to visit a gravesite to reconnect with their departed loved ones. In most cases, splitting the ashes up amongst children to keep in their homes is not really a viable option.

#### A Hot Topic

Many people today don't want to think about their bodies decomposing in the ground. To them, cremation seems to offer a fast and clean solution to end the process once and for all. The truth is that the cremation process is loud, violent, and highly unnatural. Burial, on the other hand, is a natural process.

Rabbi Kornbluth painstakingly proves in his book that none of the above objections are founded.

The last and final concern, however — of finances — is actually the only objection that is often a realistic complaint. Burials can cost as much as \$3000 more than cremations, although after all is said and done, it is not uncommon for cremation costs to add up to be just as expensive as burials.

The real challenge that *frum* people must meet is less about explaining what is wrong with cremation and more about explaining why burial is so important.

"The natural way is that creatures are born, they live, they die and return to the earth," Rabbi Kornbluth said. "Burial is natural — it's what nature does. The elements return to the earth and act as fertilizer for future growth. Cremation, on the other hand, is artificial, violent, and a waste of energy. When it's all done, there's nothing left at all. The *Gemara* actually compares burial to planting a seed in the ground. Although the seed must first decompose in darkness, it soon gives forth new life. Try burning a seed before planting it and see what comes from it." He points out that garbage and leaves are burned — loved ones are buried.

The burial process reflects acceptance that death is a natural part of the cycle of life. The Torah teaches us that man is a composite of two elements: the body comes from the earth and the soul comes from the breath of G-d. At death, both components return to their source — the soul returns to its Creator and the body returns to the earth.

#### A Time to Mourn

"The Jewish mourning process is a tried and proven process for helping people deal with loss," Rabbi Kornbluth continued. "In the secular world, people don't deal with it at all. Most family members chose to scatter the ashes of their departed. There's nothing left — they're gone. The family doesn't have to be bothered to visit the grave. In some countries, such as Germany, funeral services are even becoming increasingly hard to come by. Their loved one's remains are scattered and they go back to work. If you ignore death, you are ignoring and eroding a big part of life. Western society has become an old age- and death-denying culture. The goal is to stay young forever. In America today, the elderly aren't praised for their wisdom and experience; instead they are only praised when they act young. The



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result is that death and aging are no longer in the national vocabulary."

The *aveilus* process gives mourners the chance to gradually say goodbye and go on with their lives in a healthy way. In addition to taking the needs of the mourners into account, Jewish mourning practices also consider the needs of the departed soul. According to *Kabbalistic* sources, the bond between body and soul is so strong that the soul does not abandon the body immediately after death. Since it is confused and disoriented, it hovers around the body until burial, and shares in the mourning, going back and forth from gravesite to the *shivah* house. Furthermore, since the soul is fully conscious of whatever happens in the world, it is painful for it to see its body mishandled, abandoned, or defiled.

"We are the ones who are privileged to know the Torah," Rabbi Kornbluth continued. "Most secular Jews are total *tinokos sh'nishbu* (innocent victims of circumstances) according to many *poskim*. If we raise the subject with secular friends, relatives, and coworkers, and *chevra kaddishas* and rabbis around the world speak repeatedly about it, we can get the word out there and change the dynamic before it's too late." His book alone has already stopped dozens of cremations in just a few months — but alone, it is too little, too late.

"Sometimes we make a mistake and try to sell Judaism as a whole, but it's not all or nothing," Rabbi Kornbluth continued. "It's too much to convince someone to accept everything at once. Instead, you can get them to do one *mitzvah* at a time. If someone starts making *brachos* or lighting candles, it eventually adds up and can lead them to keep Shabbos and may even bring them to full observance someday. If not, at least they have all those individual *mitzvos*. The departed and their families may not be *frum*, but encouraging a proper burial can have a huge impact on the surviving family members as well as on the soul of the *niftar*. Regardless of how they lived their lives, at least they can die like a Jew. It passes on a strong message to the next generation. This is their last Jewish decision."

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