

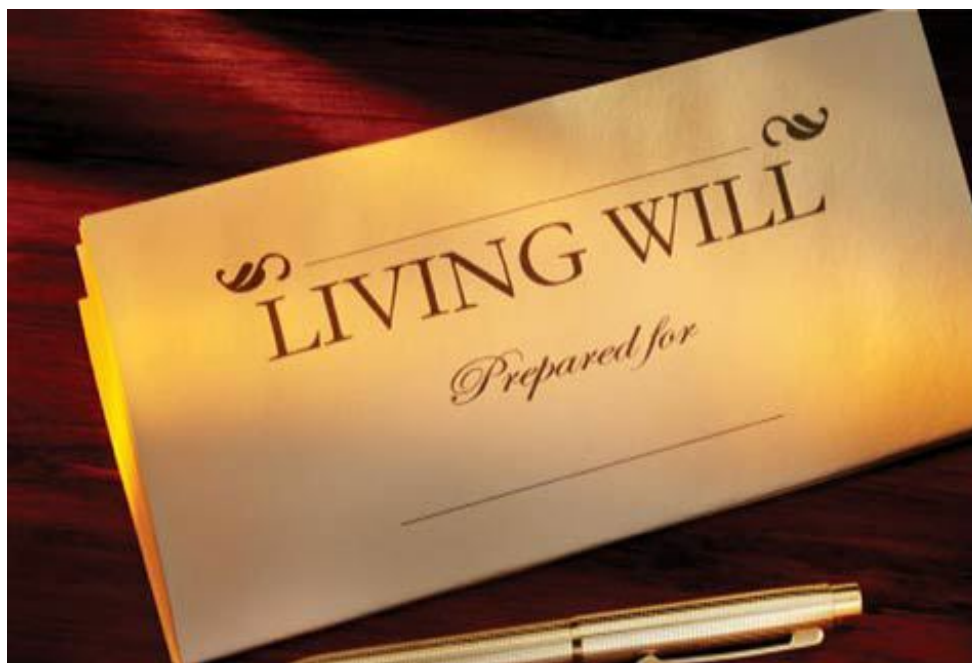
Lessons Learned From Martin Mendelsohn

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By: [Sandy Eller](#)

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His was a story that captivated the hearts of Jews worldwide.

Martin Mendelsohn, a resident of the Evergreen Court Home for Adults in Spring Valley, New York died on September 15, 2015, just hours after hearing the shofar being blown. A traditional Jew who participated in religious services at the adult care facility, the 69-year-old Mendelsohn was well known for his warmth and friendliness. But despite his clear connection to Judaism, it was Mendelsohn's irreligious next of kin who controlled his affairs and, in the absence of any legal documents specifying that Mendelsohn wanted to be buried according to Jewish tradition, plans were made for the former accountant's cremation. After a 70-day battle for an Orthodox Jewish burial that went to court and involved Chesed Shel Emes, Evergreen's owner, Agudath Israel of America, the Monsey Chevra Kadisha, several prominent *rabbanim* and a GoFundMe campaign that raised over \$30,000, Mendelsohn's body was, sadly, cremated.

The Mendelsohn saga clearly illustrates the importance of pre-need funeral arrangements. Most people prefer not to contemplate their own mortality or decide to defer it to a later time, but not specifying personal preferences means that someone else is making important decisions with major ramifications. And if there is one thing we can learn from Martin Mendelsohn it's just how wrong things can go when a person's closest relative has a very different value system or when people are simply unaware of the importance of a proper Jewish burial.

"This story highlights the need for each of us to reach out to the uneducated Jews in our own circles, open the conversation and discuss their end-of-life plans," Rabbi Elchonon Zohn, founder and director of the National Association of Chevra Kadisha (NASCK), told *Olam Yehudi*. "It is an opportunity to educate all Jews on the most basic concepts of our faith, but by doing so, we will also have an opportunity to help them make appropriate choices

in accordance with Jewish tradition.”

What’s the most crucial part of that education process, once the choice for a proper Jewish burial has been made?

“It is extremely important to make sure that we have it in writing, either in a will or at least in a statement that is witnessed,” said Rabbi Zohn.

NASCK was founded 19 years ago in response to the increasingly large numbers of Jews who were being cremated.

“My belief is that nationally among Jews the extent of cremation is between 35 to 40 percent,” said Rabbi Zohn. “In the Northeast it is probably below 30 percent but if you go out West or down South that number will be well over 50 percent.”

One of the biggest reasons that people will opt for cremation, either for themselves or a loved one, is financial.

“The cost is under \$1,000 while the cost of graves and burial is much higher,” said Rabbi Zohn. “Almost every single Jewish funeral home, with the exception of the ones in Boro Park, will arrange for cremation.”

Zvi Gluck, director of Amudim Community Resources which deals with crisis intervention, noted that when the reasons for cremations are largely financial, exchanging those arrangements for a Jewish burial is still a distinct possibility.

“We got a call from a Chabad *shaliach* in a hospice who had a Jewish person who died and was about to be cremated,” said Gluck. “He was literally prepped for the oven. The man had one child who was a Buddhist and had no interest in the sanctity of his father’s soul. His father had told his children that if it cost too much to bury him they could cremate him instead and it cost just \$500 to have his father cremated. I was sitting in a room with six people when I got that call and within five minutes we had raised the \$10,000 we needed for a proper Jewish burial. Most of the time, if it is a money issue it can be done.”

According to Gluck, in cases where cremation is chosen for reasons that are deliberately anti-religion, such as the Mendelsohn case, efforts to arrange a halachic burial are typically fruitless.

“Even with all the lawsuits in the world it can’t be done,” observed Gluck.

Hoping to generate awareness, education and conversation about end-of-life issues, NASCK organized a nationwide effort on the last Shabbos of December, with rabbis in over 250 synagogues across the country discussing end-of-life issues in their weekly sermons.

“The goal is to open up a lot of subjects and also address issues like the value of life and cremation,” said Rabbi Zohn.

Discussing burial preferences is a good place to start, but ensuring that those wishes are made known at the proper time is essential. The NASCK Emergency Medical Education and Sign-up (EMES) card, designed to be attached to a driver’s license, can indicate both medical and post-death preferences at times when a person is unable to communicate his or her wishes. Chayim Aruchim, a project of Agudath Israel of America that offers culturally sensitive health advocacy and counseling for those who want to make health care decisions in accordance with Jewish law, offers downloadable halachic living wills that are legally valid in seventeen states as well as Ontario and Quebec, and which include a section specifying that all post-mortem decisions be made in accordance with Orthodox Jewish law.

Rabbi Berish Fried, New York State project director for Chayim Aruchim, noted the importance of designating a single qualified person to make the momentous decisions that accompany serious health issues and end-of-life decisions.

“When it comes to these decisions, the fewer people involved the better,” said Rabbi Fried. “When push comes to shove you need one person making important decisions. If you designate your children, or your family, you haven’t helped much. You need to be as specific as possible.”

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Resources

Amudim Community Resources – www.amudim.org 646 517 0222

Chayim Aruchim – www.chayimaruchim.com 718 301 9800

National Association of Chevra Kadisha – nasck.org 718 847 6280

About the Author: *Sandy Eller is a freelance writer who writes for numerous websites, newspapers, magazines and many private clients. She can be contacted at sandyeller1@gmail.com.*