

Burial, Cremation and the Environment

By Doron Kornbluth

The pictures are appealing: An elderly woman walking on the beach at sunset with her loving middle-aged daughter, dolphins swimming in the sea, and a redwood forest towering above. The cremation industry claims – directly and through imagery such as the examples above – that cremation is better for the environment.

Indeed, there *are* environmental critiques of burial, which almost always relate to three points: (1) metal caskets use up a tremendous amount of resources to create and then pollute the ground; (2) embalming – removing body fluids and injecting chemicals in order to delay decay – adds tons of toxic chemicals to the ground every year; and (c) burial uses up much-needed land.

There is little doubt that the first two points are ... absolutely true! Embalming and metal caskets *are* bad for the environment. Interestingly, both are completely against Jewish tradition and law as well!

In terms of the third point, land is certainly for the living. While there is a limit to the number of Walmarts and golf courses humanity needs, the living need land more than the dead. So, the real question is: how much land are we discussing? On average, one body, takes up about 40 sq. feet (3.7 sq. meters), including access paths. When you run the numbers, in the USA (land mass of 3.8 million sq. miles or 9.7 million sq. km, and a population of 317 million) even if *everyone* would be buried when they die, it would take 10,000 years just to use up to 1% of the surface area! In Australia, with a population density of 2.8 people per sq kilometer (compared to 34.2 in the USA), it would take over 120,000 years to use up just 1% of the surface area. Even if you don't include the Outback, the numbers are still simply astronomical. Also, keep in mind that we are only talking about Jews – a minute percentage of the population. Lastly, note that presumably few, if any, cemeteries would still exist after thousands of years! The point is that burial uses up a minute amount of land, and there is *plenty* of land available - usually within an hour or two of urban centers. Yes, land is for the living – but can't 0.0001% be devoted to the dead?

Not surprisingly, what the cremation industry doesn't tell you is that cremation itself is *terrible* for the environment. Cremation ovens use up an enormous amount of fossil fuels (almost 2 *million* BTU's per hour, with a typical cremation lasting almost 2 hours) and release many toxins into the air. The *New World Encyclopedia* entry on 'cremation' reports that "there exists a body of research that indicates cremation has a significant impact on the environment. Major emissions from crematories include nitrogen oxide, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, particulate matter, mercury, hydrogen fluoride, hydrogen chloride, and other heavy metals, in addition to Persistent Organic Pollutants (POP)."

To summarize, the claim that cremation is better for the environment is simply not true. When you realize how many fossil fuels cremations use – and how many toxins they release into the air – it is no wonder that environmentalists prefer 'green burial' –with no metal caskets or embalming – directly in line with the Jewish tradition.

For more information, full statistics and other related topics, please see [Cremation or Burial? A Jewish View](#) by Doron Kornbluth (Mosaica Press, 2012) and cremationorburial.org.