

Misconceptions about Cremation

By Doron Kornbluth

Cremation is becoming more and more popular. At first glance, this new ‘fad’ makes sense: it seems to be better for the environment, quick and clean, and costs less. Also, since few people want to visit a grave anyway, why bother having one? Let us consider each of these ideas.

In reality, cremation is *bad* for the environment. Cremation uses up tremendous amounts of fossil fuels and releases many toxins (including mercury) into the air. While metal caskets and embalming are bad for the planet, neither takes place in traditional Jewish burials, which are a model of environmental consciousness. Burial is the eco-choice. As author and naturalist Aldo Leopold wrote, “A rock decays and forms soil. In the soil grows an oak, which bears an acorn, which feeds a squirrel, which feeds an Indian, who ultimately lays him down in his last sleep to grow another oak.”

In reality, cremation is neither quick nor clean. The cremation of an average-sized body takes between 1.5 and 2 hours. During that time, the body moves around as the muscles expand and contract. The brain sizzles. Without getting too gory, the process is loud, smelly, and violent. Furthermore, it is a completely artificial process. Compare it to decomposition which, while not pleasant to contemplate, is the natural way of every living being. As environmentalist Edward Abbey said, “[After] the moment of death ... we should get ... out of the way, with our bodies decently planted in the earth to nourish other forms of life — weeds, flowers, shrubs, trees, which support other forms of life, which support the ongoing human pageant — the lives of our children. That seems good enough to me.”

Cemetery visitation is good, but burial is important even without it. At the end of the Bible, G-d buries Moses and hides the place of burial (to avoid it becoming a place of idol worship). No one ever has or ever will visit Moses’ grave. Yet, despite many options already common in the world thousands of years ago (including cremation), G-d didn’t choose any of them. He chose burial. Burial is important regardless of visitation or lack thereof.

Is cremation cheaper? Usually – but burial is worth it. The reasons for burial are numerous and profound. Just consider a few: Burial represents calm acceptance of G-d’s final decree, rather than one last act of control. Burial is a commandment – part of our religion. Furthermore, burial connects us with almost four thousand years of Jewish history, when Jews respectfully buried the bodies of their loved ones in the traditional Jewish way - even when it was not easy to do. In choosing burial, a person is saying, in essence: ‘At the end of my life, in my last decision, I want to be buried as my ancestors have been for thousands of years. I’m a proud Jew, and I’m proud of Judaism.’

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.