

Why Bury?

By Doron Kornbluth

The cremation industry is on the defense. Their claims of environmental consciousness have been refuted. People are starting to realize that cremations are neither quick nor clean. In fact, when you look into it, the only thing cremation really has going for it is the cost.

Still, cremations *are* usually (but not always) significantly cheaper than burial. So why bury?

Interestingly, the recent upsurge in cremation rates has not taken place in a vacuum. Over the last years, funerals have gotten shorter. Mourning practices have lessened. Death is unpleasant: People want to get over and done with it. Cremations seem easier and, when followed by ash scattering, there isn't even a grave to feel guilty about not visiting.

All this appeals to our discomfort with death, and is understandable - but it is a mistake. Some human experiences should not be so quick. The bodies of our parents are the same ones that gave birth to us, held us, worked hard to provide for us, and cried for us. They are not meant to be 'gotten rid of.' Proper respect and closure require making the right choices - not just the quickest or cheapest ones.

Burial is meaningful. When a loved one dies, mourners 'tear Kriah,' meaning they tear a part of their outer garment. Doing so declares that their lives are not simply continuing on as if nothing happened. This 'cut' of the clothes is a sign of pain, loss, and tragedy.

While the loss is, of course, greatest to mourners, it affects others as well. A member of our community is no longer. A human being, created in the image of G-d, has passed on. To mark this loss, the planet itself 'tears kriah': A hole is dug and the landscape is 'wounded'. There is a tear - in the 'outer garment' of the planet - a sign of loss. And then, slowly, beautifully, the body is lowered into the hole and the body returns to the ground which gave it sustenance. The healing begins, but is never complete: there is a 'scar' - a headstone to remind us that things will never fully be the same.

Interestingly, Eastern religions and ancient pagan Greeks viewed fire as a type of purifier. In monotheistic teachings, it is water that purifies (think of a *mikveh*). Fire punishes. No wonder that wherever there is strong belief in one G-d, cremation rates are much lower - and where there is belief in many gods (or no G-d, ie in post-Christian societies) cremation rates are higher. The human being was cremated in the Image of G-d. You don't burn the Image of G-d - you lay it down lovingly and let nature do the rest.

When a Torah scroll is damaged beyond repair, we bury it. A human being is even holier than a Torah scroll. Providing proper Jewish burial to its soldiers is a high priority to the State of Israel,

and has been a high priority to Jewish communities - as long as there have been Jewish communities. Burial is the Jewish thing to do.

Burial is beautiful.

Burial is deep.

Burial is Jewish.

Burial is better.

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](#).