

BURIAL v CREMATION

Rabbi David Freedman

There was a time when there were various certainties in Jewish life, even up to fairly recent times. Every infant Jewish boy would have a bris, almost every family would come together to celebrate in some way a Pesach Seder and virtually every Jew would be buried according to Jewish tradition.

In recent years some of these practices have become less-widely observed and there is no doubt that of the three mentioned above, the trend towards cremation rather than burial has become a worrying feature of modern Judaism.

The concept of burial is an ancient one for our people. At the very dawn of our history, our ancestors were buried; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, Joseph, Aaron and Moses – most were buried by their children, the latter was buried by God Himself. It is an amazing and inspiring connection with our past, that we remain able to visit the final resting places of so many of our most famous and illustrious leaders and scholars; biblical kings, Mishnaic teachers, medieval scholars and early Zionist pioneers.

Whether we are visiting the graves of great personalities from the past, or simply standing beside the *kever* of our own dear parents, the symbolism remains the same - that while the body is allowed to slowly and peacefully return to earth, the soul is allowed to continue on with its eternal, spiritual journey. As we are taught in the Biblical book of Kohelet (12:7), “The dust (of mortals) returns to the earth as it was, but the spirit return to God who gave it.”

There is something soothing about a dignified burial, and even more, something highly respectful about a *matzevah* – a tombstone, which represents a human life, indicating when a person was born, when he or she died, and, most significantly, who in our world laments their passing.

It is no surprise, or coincidence, that in attempting to erase the memory of Jews from the world, the Nazis in their utter wickedness in Auschwitz-Birkenau cremated the sacred bodies of our beloved kinsfolk, rather than burying them.

Burial and cremation, the processes of decomposition and burning, reflect two radically different approaches to our concern for the future. Decomposition of any plant or animal matter replaces nutrients into the ground, assisting future growth and life. The intrinsic elements of the matter are unchanged.

Cremation, on the other hand, leaves only burnt ashes, and often worse, a residue of other mixed remains; particles of wood from the coffin, firebrick from the oven, and even other human remains from earlier cremations.

Decomposition is a natural process that occurs to all living beings after death. Though not pretty, it is the natural way of the earth. On the other hand, to quote Doron Kornbluth (*Cremation or Burial, A Jewish View*, Mosaica Press 2012) “cremation is loud, violent, disgusting and artificial.” Burial respects nature, cremation attempts to control it! When burying the remains of our loved ones, we calmly return what we have received. Burial reflects the rhythm of the universe.

As a rabbi, one could argue about the spiritual benefits of burial, one could equally debate with scientists the ecological and environmental advantages and disadvantages on both sides – but I ask a different question, how could any post-holocaust Jew send their parents into a furnace after the Shoah? Seeing what our enemies did to our loved ones in an attempt to remove any record of their existence on this planet, how could any child do the same thing to their parents?

Burning in Judaism, wrote Rabbi Avi Shafran, is a declaration of utter abandon and nullification. Jews burn chametz before Pesach because the Torah insists that no vestige of such material may remain. Needless to say, writes Shafran, God is able to resurrect even those who suffered in this way during the Shoah, but he adds, that actually choosing to have one’s body incinerated is an act which “expresses denial of the fact that the body is still valuable, that it retains worth, indeed potential life.”

Will it cost more to bury? Probably, although in a place such as Sydney, where all forms of real estate are tremendously valuable, the Sydney Chevra Kadisha

has been able to procure a limited number of graves on the extremity of the metropolis to assist people where finance has become the major issue.

Finally, again to quote Kornbluth, it is good to be reminded that for thousands of years, Jews and Judaism have insisted on proper Jewish burial. Roughly 2,000 years ago, Roman historian Tacitus wrote that “the Jews bury rather than burn their dead,” and even today, the State of Israel will not rest until they have recovered each and every soldier missing in action and given him the dignity of a traditional *levaya* or Jewish burial. The very word *levaya* means ‘to join’ – for in burying a Jew in consecrated ground, we insure that his/her soul is re-united with all the souls of their departed family together with all the righteous in heaven.

By choosing burial, we are aligning ourselves with Jewish history and with the Jewish people. In our final decisive act on earth, by choosing Jewish burial, we make a solemn declaration, that throughout our life we tried to live as a Jew, and now in death we will be buried as a Jew, proudly and for all eternity.

Rabbi David Freedman is the associate rabbi at The Central Synagogue, Sydney.