
Contemplating Cremation?

A Jewish and Ecological Perspective

Why does Judaism emphasize burial and disapprove of cremation?

- **Burial is a fundamental concept in Judaism**

The Torah mentions burial repeatedly, emphasizing its importance. It tells of Abraham's purchasing the Cave of the Machpelah where he buried his wife, Sarah. At the end of Devarim, God buries Moses. Traditionally, the care of the dead and their proper burial was regarded as a primary responsibility of the community. Even Torah scrolls (as well as other sacred texts) receive earth burial when they are too worn to be used.

- **Preciousness of the body**

Jewish tradition believes in the inherent value of our bodies. Even after death, tradition mandates that our bodies be treated with great kindness and respect. This attitude is fundamental to Jewish thought. For example, when preparing a deceased person for burial (the process of *Tahara*), those performing the ritual make every effort to treat the body with respect and honor.

- **Respecting the soul**

Much of Jewish teaching assumes the existence of an ineffable life force, often called the soul. Some believe that the soul may not leave the body at the moment of death. Just as a mourner requires time to adapt to the loss of a loved one, the soul may also need time to depart the familiarity of its earthly home. It is believed by some that the proper care of the dead can help ease the soul from this life to whatever follows.

- **Judaism takes the natural path in both life and death**

In contemporary Jewish practices, the natural path is preferred. Traditional Jewish burial practices emphasize simplicity and a gradual process of 'returning the body to the earth' through a simple cleansing of the body (no embalming), the use of biodegradable clothing with no jewelry or other adornments and an all wood coffin (with no metal fasteners).

- **Preparing the dead for a Jewish burial emphasizes love and respect for the body through the ritualized activities during *Tahara***

Tahara (purification) is the process of preparing the dead for a Jewish burial. A team of experienced volunteers who are members of a *Hevra Kadisha* (often referred to as a holy or burial society) follow a clearly prescribed series of rituals in cleaning, ritually purifying and dressing the deceased and then placing the body into a simple coffin. At all stages of this process, the deceased is honored, shown great respect and treated with love and kindness. In fact, it is considered a great honor to serve on a *Tahara* team.

What happens during a cremation?

Unless specific arrangements have been made, there is no special preparation or washing of the body prior to cremation, nor is there any attention given to the handling of the body. If the deceased had any surgical implants (e.g., joints and pacemakers), these must be removed. After a state-required 48 hour waiting period, the body is placed in a container and moved into the combustion chamber (called a retort) where the cremation occurs. Locally, cremation takes approximately 4 hours with temperatures up to 1800 degrees F, which incinerates all of the body with the exception of the bones.

Cremated remains are not just ashes. Bones are rarely fully broken down during the incineration process. Therefore, all of the ash material and bone fragments are swept out of the incinerator and placed in a cremulator, a powerful blender that pulverizes the bone. The 'cremains' are then placed in a small plastic bag and given to the family. The 'cremains' weigh about 5 pounds.

Use this link to a video of the cremation process:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHBaCZ3slis>

Warning – this video is graphic and potentially disturbing

continued on reverse side

continued from front side

Are the contents of the plastic bag only the remains of the deceased?

By US law, only one person may be cremated at a time in a retort or combustion chamber. However, an unavoidable consequence of cremation is that the residue of bodily remains from other cremations can be left in the cremation chamber and may mix with subsequent cremations.

What are the ecological considerations of cremation versus burial?

Cremation uses about 28 gallons of fuel and releases about 540 pounds of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Thus, the roughly 1 million bodies that are cremated annually in the United States produce 270,000 tons of carbon dioxide. That's more CO₂ pollution than what 22,000 average American homes generate in a year. [Herzog, Katie (29 May 2016). "A different way to die: the story of a natural burial"].

Environmentalists advocate 'green burials,' which use no cement lining of the burial plot, no embalming or other substances to preserve the body; no jewelry or other metal adornments and no metal in the construction of the coffin. This essentially describes a traditional Jewish burial, namely, everything about the burial process is biodegradable with no metals, toxic embalming fluid or other preserving agents.

Don't burials use a lot of land that could be used for other purposes?

It is estimated that if every currently living American was buried, it would take 10,000 years to use up 1% of America's land mass. With Jews making up 2.2% of the US population, the amount of land used for burials would be insignificant.

How does the cost of a cremation compare to a traditional in-ground burial?

In general, cremation is less expensive than burial primarily because there are usually no cemetery costs. However depending on your religious beliefs and practices, the less expensive option is not always the best choice. If the cost of a traditional Jewish cemetery burial creates a hardship for the family, they should discuss this issue with the funeral director or a rabbi in the community to make sure the burial wishes of the deceased and his/her family can be honored.



Compiled by:
Hal Miller-Jacobs
Judith Hember
Allen Spivack