

# Resources for Jews Considering Cremation: Importance of Jewish Values and Practices

Gamliel Institute – Fall 2015  
Sally Shannon, M.A.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This project is completed as partial fulfillment of the Gamliel Institute Course 3: Chevrah Kadisha: Educating, Organizing, and Training

### **Overview**

*Project Vision* - This Gamliel Project provides resources so that whether or not Jews choose cremation, they understand Jewish values and traditions; they choose taharah, shmira and Jewish burial of their cremated remains. (Why and How)

*Mission* - This Gamliel Project provides online information and resources for professionals advising, and lay people making, funeral and burial plans. (What and Who)

### *Goals*

1. To initiate and enliven discussion about death after-care as part of advance planning for Jews and non-Jews.
2. To support individuals making more informed and conscious decisions about cremation, to reduce the number of default and casually chosen cremations.
3. To increase the number of Jews who choose taharah, shmira and other Jewish practices for care of their deceased loved ones, even if they choose cremation.
4. To encourage end-of-life planning in a proactive, thoughtful and personal way. To facilitate making well-considered choices
5. To demonstrate what a difference PRE-PLANNING can make to create a values-determined, thoughtful, conscious after-death care plan.

## **Summary Outline**

### About Cremation

- Trends
- Definition
- Summary of Jewish Perspectives

### Choosing Cremation

- Values

- Tikkun Olam
- L'dor v'Dor
- Business Practices
- Kavod v'Nichum, Chesed Shel Emet
- Emotions
  - Denial
  - Fear
  - Grief
  - Anger
  - Shame

### Concerns That Arise When Choosing Cremation

- Closure
- Death Denial
- Traditional Care of the Meit/ah
  - Tahara
  - Shmira
- Transition to Mourning
- Community Involvement
- Ritual

### Conclusion

## **ABOUT CREMATION**

Sam Salkin, Executive Director of Sinai Chapel Chevra Kadisha in the San Francisco Bay Area, refers to the "tsunami of cremation of Jews." (San Francisco Zayin Adar Dinner, 2012).

It is difficult to find statistics about the frequency of cremation of Jews. And it seems to vary significantly by geography. "Cremation rates in and around Philadelphia appear to be particularly high, according to some funeral professionals in the city. Brett Schwartz, a funeral director at Goldstein's Rosenberg's Raphael Sacks, a large funeral home with two locations in the Philadelphia area, said that 14% of the deaths they handle are cremations. Joe Levine, of the city's other major Jewish funeral home, Joseph Levine & Sons, said that roughly 10% or 11% of the funerals he handles are cremations. "If you were to go back as little as 15 years ago, it was 3%," Levine said. <http://forward.com/news/158218/more-jews-opt-for-cremation/#ixzz3v0j112b0> "More Jews Opt for Cremation" Josh Nathan-Kazis. June 27, 2012.

Rabbi Elchonon Zohn, of the Chevra Kadisha of the Vaad Harabonim of Queens and founder of the National Association of Chevra Kadisha (NASCK), has calculated that in Jewish funeral homes in the New York area, at least 25 percent of the dead are cremated. Nationally, the rate is much higher. "The Cremation Challenge" by Jewish Action Magazine, November 21, 2012 in Jewish Thought.

The U.S. is also experiencing an increase in total cremations. Recent years show increases from 21% in 1996 to 42% in 2011 and is projected to be 60% by 2020 (Cremation Association of North America). Currently, the state of California reports 70% cremations, and in some counties, it is as high as 92%. The deep South, on the other hand, has very low rates.

### **Definition**

Cremation is classically defined as: Disposing of (a dead person's body) by heating and burning it until soft tissues are vaporized and dry bone fragments remain.

It is interesting to note the use of the word "dispose." This is a notion in direct contrast to Jewish notions of "caring" for the meit(im). "Kavod" – to honor the body and soul of the deceased. It is with careful thought, consideration, practice, love and tradition that the body is attended to and given its final rest.

This paper will not be addressing alkaline hydrolysis which is sometimes referred to as "liquid cremation."

### **Jewish Perspectives**

There is no clear Biblical or rabbinic source that forbids cremation. It is not specifically forbidden (Rabbi Morris M. Shapiro, paper adopted unanimously by CJLS (Committee on Jewish Law and Standards) in 1986. However, at the very least, Jewish religious and cultural custom strongly DISCOURAGES cremation; the prohibition against cremation is minhag for most observant Jews. It is not codified but is very authoritative (Rabbi Menachem Creditor, February 13, 2013). However, that doesn't mean that all Jews, including clergy, find cremation objectionable.

Rabbi Shapiro concludes that a rabbi may choose to officiate at the funeral of a Jew who is to be cremated. He also concludes that cremated remains

should be buried in a Jewish cemetery. However, he states that the burial should be private and without the participation of a rabbi.

## **CHOOSING CREMATION**

A common or even familiar scene when cremation is the choice for after-death care: Shortly after death occurs and death is pronounced, a representative (sometimes, 2, depending on location) arrives with a church cart. The body is bagged and whisked away. A few days later, the mourners receive a box, bag, or container filled with cremated remains. Sometimes the family goes to the crematory or mortuary to pick up the remains. They may remain on the mantle or DR table for a while, eventually ending up in a drawer or closet. The remains may be celebrated later with a scattering or burial.

Now, remember the first significant birth in your adult life. The anticipation. The celebration. The many firsts of the child that are documented and gifts that welcome the newborn. Or a recent wedding. More often than not, we spend at least a year planning. Choices overwhelm the couple. Budget limits are pushed. Every detail from colors to favors to flowers to menus to venues are carefully considered.

What would it be like if we planned the last rite of passage in this life - death? Burial clothing-garments or shroud? Venue - crematory? consecrated burial ground? Green burial? Attendants - bathing by friends and family? Anonymous mortuary employees? A trained Chevra Kaddish (holy society)? How will you choose a mortuary or crematory to entrust the care of the body of your loved one - or your own body?

Underlying the discussions, data, and information of this paper is the notion of "Advance Planning." Have you decided how you want to be cared for as you die? Have you made plans for the care of your body? Have you discussed them with you family, friends, partner, attorney, spiritual leader? An Advance Directive or Living Will is not enough.

Please consider this paper as a tool to ask questions and start conversations.

### **Why do People Choose Cremation**

Individuals, family members and others faced with the decision of caring for a loved one's body increasingly choose cremation. Many factors may drive that decision. If, as a Jew, you are going against tradition, it behooves you to consider why you are making this choice. Does cremation reflect different

values? Does the choice reflect ALL data and conclusions? What values do you want to honor if you make the choice of cremation?

Or are you struggling with strong emotions as you face into mortality? Are you struggling to accept the death of this person? Are you moved by emotions? Close examination may reveal that you are motivated by feelings that you want to respect or honor. However, you might be surprised at other emotions and my well consider working with feelings, separate for after-death care choices.

## **VALUES**

Values are commonly defined as “principles, or ethics, or a moral code.” They inform our behavior, our choices. We have political, spiritual, financial and other values.

### **The Environmental - Tikkun Olam - Healing, Repairing the World**

The most commonly cited value for choosing cremation is concern the environment. We commonly hear “What about all the land that is used for cemeteries and burial. Doesn’t cremation preserve land?” The conventional wisdom is that cremation saves land and is good for the planet. And, even though conventional burial introduces more chemicals through embalming and through use of landscaping chemicals, cremation also has an environmental cost.

First, consider the amount of fossil fuels used in a single cremation. A cremation chamber (retort) may run at temperatures of 1,400 to 2,100 F, (usually 1,400-1,800 F) or 760 to 1,150 C for 2-2 ½ hrs.

Data cited varies substantially. At Forbes.com, it is stated that a single cremation uses enough fuel to drive a sedan 4,800 miles (and it’s not a hybrid!). (Laura Moses, Forbes.com, December 2, 2011 @ 10:27 AM).

However, the Funeral Consumer Alliance of Southern California states that a modern crematory requires an average of 28 gallons of fuel (about the amount of fuel that can be held in an SUV gas tank (<http://www.fcasocal.org>)).

Regardless of which data points cited, cremation uses a lot of fossil fuel.

NOTE: Cremation of an obese body takes longer and uses more fuel (and incurs additional charges). As the American population gets fatter, the fuel used for cremation increases.

Second, there are crematory emissions. Many crematoria are situated in densely populated areas. They release harmful emissions such as nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide, hydrogen chloride, sulphur dioxide, dioxins, furans, formaldehyde, and mercury; as well as tiny portions of dust, called particulate matter.

(<http://villagememorial.blogspot.com/2015/05/cremation-emissions-toxins-air-quality.html>)

In the U.K. where 70% of bodies are cremated, cremation accounts for 16% of Mercury emissions (L.A. Times, "Cremation a Hazard to the Living?" December 26, 2007. DeeDee Correll).

Not only is the environment exposed to these emissions, there is a question of Mercury exposure to crematoria workers.

If a single cremation uses as little as 28 gallons of fuel, it is emitting about 540 pounds of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. That's about 250,000 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> per year in the U.S.

(Huffington Post, "How Your Death Affects Climate Change," Katrina Spade. 12-03-2014.

So, if you choose cremation, how can you do it in an environmentally sensitive way that reflects Jewish values? CHOOSE a crematory that has made efforts to minimize its environmental impact. Ask them:

1. How old is their retort (fuel efficiency)?
2. Do they have extra scrubbers, especially wet scrubbers for particulate matter (PM) and bag filters?
3. How long does a cremation take and how much fuel is used (they may not know the answer but listen to how they respond to the question).
4. How are their workers protected from emissions? And not just crematory technicians - other cemetery staff.
5. You can also prevent a particularly toxic emission - PCDD/F - from being emitted by asking about plastics in their containers, especially. Do they sell a Plain Pine Box for cremation?

## **Business Practices**

Jews value humane, ethical, fair business practices. Ask questions when you are choosing a mortuary.

What do you know about the mortuary that you are using? Do they support the community? Are the part of a mega-corporation that puts profit before

ethics? Or are they family owned? Congregationally owned? Owned by a chevra kaddisha?

How are the employees treated? Are they compensated fairly, at all levels?

Do the mortuary and crematory post the General Price List (GPL) required by the Federal Trade Commission? Do they offer it to prospective clients and families? Is it posted on their website? Do all employees understand the "Funeral Rule" enforced by the Fair Trade Commission? Do they respect the intention of the GPL - to help consumers make informed decisions and to prevent exploitation and up-selling when consumers are vulnerable in their grief.

### **L'dor v'dor**

Another value-based statement that we've all heard, or even said, "I don't want to be a burden to my children." Parents do not want their after-death care to be a financial imposition on their children. We all know the Jewish emphasis on legacy. L'dor v'dor. Generation to generation.

Bottom line - Cremation is cheaper than burial. Cremation can save \$8-10K compared to earth burial. Average cremations cost \$1.0 - \$2.0K. In 2014, the average burial cost \$8,508, not including plot and stone and vault if required by the cemetery.

However, having a plan can limit the costs of a ground burial, and especially a Jewish burial. Most Jewish mortuaries and cemeteries will make an effort to contain costs in order to make a ground burial possible. But without planning and research, it is more likely that the choice of cremation is made in order to contain costs.

### **Honor and Comfort and Loving Kindness - Kavod v'Nichum, Chesed Shel Emet**

Tahara, the ritual washing and blessing and dressing and prayers for the deceased, is less frequently provided for Jews. Many believe that tahara is a way of caring for the soul as it leaves its body and moves on to the next realm. Tahara offers that care. It is experiencing a resurgence as Jews return to observing Jewish traditions. These are powerful words. Honor. Comfort. Compassion. If cremation is chosen, do you want to offer that to your friends and family? Do you want it for yourself?

Shmira, the guarding or watching of the deceased, referred to as the meit or meitah, is practiced from the time of death to burial. If the body is to be cremated, shmira may also be considered and offered. Another Jew may sit



beside or near the meit(ah), reading prayers, Psalms and other appropriate readings. The body and soul are never alone, are comforted and honored during this profound transition.

## **EMOTIONS**

Emotions, however can be even more powerful motivators. They are not intellectual. Rather, they are basic, energy - driving from the core. It is so easy to make a choice without understanding or awareness of the feelings driving that choice. In order to make a conscious choice, whether well-considered in advance or as a spontaneous choice in urgency, it is important to examine how emotions may be driving the choice.

### **Fear**

We live in a culture that reveres youth and beauty. We go to extraordinary measures and spend extraordinary amounts of money pursuing youth and beauty. We hide those who are critically ill and/or dying. We've learned to avert our eyes. It's not much of a leap to find the idea of the breakdown of the human body - decomposition - abhorrent, even obscene. Mouldering and putrefying. Not only is body decomposition offensive to some, it can even frightening. The antidote - cremation. For some cremation is a form of purification, cleansing.

Even claustrophobia, an intense fear, may drive someone to request cremation instead of ground burial.

Cremation is easy to plan. You can even arrange a cremation online. In a death-denying culture rooted in fear, how appealing could cremation appear?

Fear of our own mortality. The unimaginable - "I won't be here someday and the world will move on without me. How can that be? Maybe I can avoid my mortality just a bit longer if I can make this death more brief and less in my face." None of that shoveling earth on a pine box for me; no raw open grave, a tear in the earth.

### **Grief**

For example, when a death is sudden, unexpected and/or traumatic it is not uncommon to act out of shock. There can be a powerful drive to get rid of the meit(im) as soon as possible. The survivors don't want to look at the body. Rather, they want to "remember them how they were." It can be an

expression of their denial. They don't want to look at a casket or pine box. They don't want to hear the thud of earth on the casket.

Intense grief and shock might also result in choosing cremation. An unexpected and/or traumatic/violent death can send someone reeling. It's difficult to consider values and meaning when we can't feel ANYthing. Cremation - a quick, easy solution to one of the avalanche of decisions that occur at the time of death.

### **Anger**

And what about the powerful motivator of anger? What better retribution than to ignore family tradition, religious preference and practice, by choosing cremation. Fire often represents rage. It can represent lashing out. An anger at tradition - I'll show you - I reject tradition and I choose cremation.

### **Shame**

A death because of suicide often generates shame. AIDS deaths and drug-related deaths may also trigger shame. At a time when survivors are struggling with anger and/or shame they are making decisions about care of the deceased. Understandably, when the pain is unbearable cremation offers a quick escape.

## **DEMOGRAPHICS**

Families are increasingly scattered across the U.S., North America and the World. It is a challenge to coordinate schedules and travel so that everyone can arrive in time for burial. Life is already stressful and full of logistical challenges. Cremation can be performed independent of the location of family members and friends.

Because families are scattered it is also difficult to decide where to bury a family member. They may disagree or "compete" for the right of location of the burial. Death often renews old family dynamics just as any stressor might.

Also, families move around, a lot. This compromises their ability to tend to a burial site. Children may worry about neglecting a parent's grave and the resulting guilt. And parents may feel sad and reluctant at the possibility of having a grave and headstone without the loving march of remembrance stones across the top.

## **CONCERNS THAT ARISE WHEN CHOOSING CREMATION**

### **Closure**

"I can't tell you the number of times people who have had close relatives cremated come to me and say it's as if they just disappeared," Kelman said. "There's no closure for them." Rabbi Stuart Kelman, "National Jewish Burial Society Tries to Stem Increased Cremation." Sue Fishkoff and published by JTA, the Global News Service of the Jewish People, June 8, 2009.

### **Perpetuates Death Denial**

When we face into the death of someone we know and love, we inevitably get a glimpse of our own mortality, no matter how brief. That's the *good* news. Knowing we will die can motivate us - to make amends, to make efforts to reach goals, to complete legacy work, to live each moment fully. A friend or family member's death has a hidden gift for the survivors. But if we continue the death denial, we waste that gift.

### **Ritual**

So often cremation results in no ritual - formal or informal. As already pointed out, routinely, the *meit(a)* is whisked away, and a container of cremated remains is returned. And from their, often casually stored.

In Judaism, burial is considered a *mitzvah* and as such, should be offered to all Jews, regardless of whether there was a cremation. And there is much to suggest that burial brings atonement or *kapara*. Cremated remains are still a *meit* and must be given the respect and opportunity of burial. And consistent with the practice of allowing the *meit* to have direct contact with the earth by using a biodegradable box, cremated remains may also be buried to ultimately mingle with the earth.

Similarly, how can we deny them a *tahara* and *shmirah*? They are also rituals of Jewish after-death care.

### **Community Involvement**

While ritual is sometimes a private and personal experience, ritual is a powerful community-builder. It reaffirms values and expectations and roles. A death has historically been shared by the community and expected events and acts occur. However, cremation is often performed in isolation or

privacy. It is out of the expected order. The community misses the opportunity to serve.

There may be no tahara, shmira or funeral. A Chevra Kaddish may not be involved. Graveside services and witnessing are by-passed and community doesn't participate, meals of consolation are not offered. No one helps organize and participate in shiva minyanim. This does NOT need to be the case, but is often the default when a cremation occurs.

Tahara is considered the highest mitzvah, one that cannot be thanked. Not frequently discussed, however, is the experience of some tahara team members and some who sit shomer. This may be a time of immense grace, a time when the Divine is clearly present. Some people report participation as transformative. And if tahara and/or shmira are skipped, the possibility of such a profound experience is denied.

### **Transition to Mourning**

It is very easy for mourners to remain isolated. Because cremation is taboo in many congregations, a cremation may occur discreetly. Mourners, including friends and family may not receive the support of the spiritual community and be escorted into Jewish mourning practices.

While memorial or celebration of life may occur, traditional practices of attending the burial (delayed with cremation), joining the family at home for the meal of consolation and sitting shiva may not occur. These practices are part of a series of Jewish mourning rituals that have comforted mourners around the world.

For 30 days after the death, a second mourning period, sheloshim, is observed. Mourners are restricted in their personal and professional lives. The end of that period is marked by a special service.

And yahrtzeit. Notify the office of your congregation when there is a death so that you will receive announcements when a yahrtzeit occurs. And remember the other times of the Jewish year when Yizkor service occurs and Kaddish is said - Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot

It takes a special intention and effort to make sure that mourners know about and are given a chance observe and be comforted by these traditions.

### **Traditional Care of the Meit/ah**

*Tahara*-Rick Light writes about tahara as "To Midwife a Soul." Tahara is the traditional bathing and liturgy and dressing to prepare meitim for burial. During the tahara, participants are respectful and tender in their care, including considering the continued presence of the soul. Judaism tells us that the soul relates to the body until burial.

Unless there is a tahara before cremation, this process is cut short. The love and respect offered by the tahara team is absent. The soul is denied the escort.

*Shmira* or the watching or guarding can slow down the process when someone dies. Reading and reciting the Psalms and other meaningful materials accompanies the soul through this life-cycle event. By interrupting the traditional flow of Jewish after-death care and opting for cremation, these rituals may not even be part of the discussion. The meitim AND the mourners may not receive this ritual care and the continuity of Jewish practice.

## **CONCLUSION**

You may have read all of this and decided not to have a cremation. But if you are considering or have chosen cremation - do it with as much awareness and intention as possible. We can give as much time, thought and attention to death as we do to the birth of a child. CHOOSE the crematory and the care of the cremated remains. DECIDE which after-death care practices and mourning rituals you need or want. Death is a momentous event. Avoid auto-pilot. Stay present as you plan or when you are responsible for the after-death care of someone you love.

This paper is offered to the community of Jews, ALL consumers, and those coaching and counseling people making decisions about after-death care. The hope is that it helps making choices that provide honor and comfort to the deceased and their mourners.