

Community News & Features

Dying in Austin: Community has Options When it Comes to Jewish Burial

BY TONYIA CONE

As society has become increasingly individualized, people have grown accustomed to personalized options in most areas of life. That trend now extends even to death.

Jewish law requires a body to be buried in its entirety in a Jewish cemetery as soon as possible after death, but like Jewish observance, kosher burials comprise a spectrum.

Congregation Agudas Achim, Congregation Beth Israel and Temple Beth Shalom own space within larger cemeteries. Congregation Agudas Achim and Temple Beth Shalom have cemetery space in Austin Memorial Park, located at Hancock Drive and Bull Creek Road in North Austin. Congregation Beth Israel has space available

Austin Natural Funerals

www.austinnaturalfunerals.com

Congregation Agudas Achim

Contact Joe Steinberg at 512-944-2276 or joe.steinberg@gmail.com, or Sarah Fleschman at 512-626-1197 or fleschman@usa.net.

Congregation Beth Israel

www.bethisrael.org/cemetery or contact Phil Baum at 512-917-7987 or philbaum1964@gmail.com.

Cook-Walden

www.dignitymemorial.com/funeral-homes/pflugerville-tx/cook-waldencapital-parks-funeral-home/4993

Eloise Woods

www.eloisewoods.com



Credit: Tonyia Cone

Congregation Agudas Achim's space at Austin Memorial Park is an option for those looking for a traditional Jewish burial space in North Austin.

in Cook-Walden/Capital Parks Inc. Memorial Gardens Cemetery in Pflugerville.

Congregation Agudas Achim has a section reserved for Orthodox congregation members, an all-Jewish section, and an interfaith section. Spaces are available to members and non-members of the Conservative congregation.

Temple Beth Shalom's consecrated cemetery is available to congregation members and anyone else who is Jewish, as well as non-Jews who are immediate family of congregation members.

Congregation Beth Israel, Austin's oldest synagogue, has two sections at Oakwood, Austin's oldest city-owned cemetery. With graves dating back to the 1800s, some of the congregation's founding fathers' remains are there.

Congregation Beth Israel's space at Oakwood is full,

Chafetz pointed out that it is possible to have a Jewish burial – with a Jewish service and by being buried as simply as possible – in pretty much any cemetery, including the large cemeteries outside of the congregations' sections, and small country cemeteries located around Austin, like Bagdad Cemetery in Leander.

Rabbi Marie Betcher pointed out that many congregations, especially those that are small, do not have their own cemetery spaces.

"There are times when a rabbi can consecrate ground for a person, or people who can get together and get space," she said. "People have lots of options, but when the time comes it's too late to plan."

Not only can other cemeteries offer burial space closer to home, they can help families save money. Some cemeteries

www.eloisewoods.com

Temple Beth Shalom

www.bethshalomaustin.org/lifecycle/death/cemetery

Or contact Sam Scheer at 512-343-1733.

Texas State Veterans Cemeteries

www.glo.texas.gov/vlb/cemeteries/index.html

Congregation Beth Israel's space at Oakwood is full, and the congregation has plots available for members and non-members at Cook-Walden/Capital Parks Inc. Memorial Gardens Cemetery. Plots there may also be purchased for non-Jewish immediate family members. Graveside services may be led by anyone, but the service itself must be fundamentally Jewish.

Mitzi Chafetz, funeral director at Austin Natural Funerals, explained that there are plenty of ways people can be buried halachically, aside from being in a congregation's space, or in a larger city, a Jewish cemetery.

home, they can help families save money. Some cemeteries require grave liners to prevent graves from sinking, for example. Cemeteries without the requirement spare families that expense.

Texas State and federal Veterans Affairs cemeteries honor veterans, offering burial free of charge for veterans, their spouses and eligible dependents.

Eloise Woods Community Natural Burial Park in Cedar Creek, Texas, owned by Jewish community member Ellen Macdonald, is a woodland burial ground with Jewish space.

Teva (Hebrew for "nature") | Continued on **Page 50**

Jewish Burial from Page 6 | Garden is separated from the rest of the park by six-foot-wide trails. The section is divided into a Reform section, called East Teva, and a Conservative and Orthodox section, West Teva. In East Teva, family members are allowed to be buried with non-Jewish spouses and family members, pets and cremated remains.

"The park is 9.4 acres of woods and that's what it looks like," Macdonald said. "What we offer here are Israeli-style burials where people can be buried in a shroud or sheet (there are no laws requiring caskets), families can open and close the grave themselves as well as lower the body into the grave themselves."

While there are no concrete grave liners and all the earth that comes out of the grave goes back into the grave at Eloise Woods, people can be buried in a plain wood casket and use a backhoe to open the grave and a hydraulic lowering device to lower the casket.

"I just think it is closer to what Jewish tradition encourages for healing - as much participation in the burial process

as the family chooses," said Macdonald, who established Eloise Woods in 2010 in order to provide natural burials in harmony with nature.

Eloise Woods burials are permitted only where burial will not degrade the land. As fewer resources are used in natural burial, burial at Eloise Woods is economical as well as environmentally friendly.

"Our cemetery will allow one to be part of a natural cycle," Eloise Woods' website states.

As an increasing number of Jews secularize and fewer affiliate with congregations, Betcher explained, some are choosing cremation over traditional Jewish burial.

"Lack of Jewish community drives this," she said, adding that as society becomes more mobile and less rooted, people do not necessarily plan on being buried with family members or visit graves as much as in the past.

"There's a lack of attachment," Betcher said. "I think we're really losing something here." ■