

Shabbat Shalom Weekly: Shoftim 5775

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Shoftim 5775

GOOD MORNING! Recently, a good friend died. Per his long-standing and last wishes, his family cremated him. I'd like to think that in the World of Souls, he now has a different perspective -- and his last wish would have been different. In his memory, I share with you some thoughts of mine as well as excerpts from Rabbi Doron Kornbluth's book. I highly recommend his book and the website PeacefulReturn.com for a comprehensive understanding of the issues.

The time to decide how to bury is before a loved one passes away. It is a great kindness to your relatives to think this through and make your arrangements in advance. The more information a person has, the better decision he will make. Here are 5 perspectives regarding cremation vs. burial: Spiritual, Philosophical, Practical, Jewish Consciousness, Lessons for the Living:

SPIRITUAL: The Torah teaches that life is a gift from the Almighty. We are created with a soul and a body. However, our essence is the soul. The body is a vessel on loan from the Almighty to house the soul. Like all objects which are on loan, we are obligated to care for the body to the best of our ability and eventually to return it to its Owner according to His instructions. The Almighty told Adam, the first man, "From dust you are and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19) In the Book of Deuteronomy 21:23, the Almighty says, "You shall surely bury him."

What difference does a proper Jewish burial make to the soul? Kabbalists, mystics, speak of the confusion that a soul experiences in separating from the body in which it had spent its years on earth. The soul hovers over the body. After the burial it then hovers in the place of residence (which is why we try to sit *Shiva* -- mourn -- in the place where the person lived) before moving on. What does the soul of the deceased experience when the body is placed into the furnace while watching the flames burning it, the flames consuming it?

If one believes in God and in an afterlife, having himself or a loved one cremated is not something that one wants on his "heavenly ledger" to give an accounting for and receive judgment on. Jewish law is so adamant against cremation that -- except for extenuating circumstances -- if one has himself cremated, *Shiva* is not observed, *Kaddish* is not said and no mourning takes place. According to Rabbi Maurice Lamm's explanation in [The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning](#), "Those who are cremated are considered by tradition to have abandoned, unalterably, all of Jewish law and, therefore, to have surrendered their rights to posthumous honor."

PHILOSOPHICAL: How we treat our dead tells us a lot about ourselves and our society. After everything is said and done, do we burn things we love? We burn trash and bury treasure! Think back to your first pet. When faced with life's first lessons in mortality — the dead kitten or bunny rabbit, or bird fallen from its nest on high — good parents search out shoe boxes and shovels instead of kindling wood and bonfires.

There are those who consider spreading their ashes over a scenic or meaningful location to be meaningful and romantic. For thousands of years people have been cremated, but society has reserved spreading the ashes for those convicted of the most heinous crimes in order to obliterate them and their memory!

Cremation destroys the body, symbolizing and promoting the marginalization of the worth of physical life, and of the individual.

PRACTICAL: Some people think that cremation is ecological. No. It consumes tremendous amount of fossil fuels and generates toxic wastes, particularly heavy metals (the EPA estimates that in 2005 -- 6,600 pounds of mercury was vaporized into the air via cremation which eventually finds its way back into the waterways, the fish and the ecosystem).

Ofentimes parents will opt for cremation thinking that they are doing their children a favor -- saving them money and the trouble of making choices. Cremation is not always significantly less money -- and it robs the children of having a grave to visit on Mother's Day, Father's Day or before Rosh Hashana.

Because children are so geographically dispersed these days, some people think that having a portable urn makes it easier on the kids. How many urns can a child take with him through how many moves in a lifetime? And what happens to those urns with the next generation? Thousands are abandoned or unclaimed from funeral homes every year.

People think that cremation is antiseptic and wholesome. One moment a body, the next moment a sealed urn of fine ashes. The reality: Think of the smell when you leave a roast too long in the oven. Even after incineration, cremation does not reduce everything to ashes. Actually, the ashes are discarded. The bones, however, are then put in a grinder -- and what is given to the family in the urn are the pulverized bones. Is this the final honor we wish to give our loved ones?

JEWISH CONSCIOUSNESS: After the Holocaust it is hard to believe that a Jew could request to be cremated or agree to cremate another Jew. I can only imagine Adolph Hitler, may his name and memory be blotted out, laughing with glee and saying, "What I failed to do to all of the Jews, now they are doing it to themselves!"

LESSONS FOR THE LIVING: Graves are not wasted land. We, the living, need them. Graves teach about life's finality -- not to be over-focussed on acquisitions or ego. They connect us to each other through commemorating loved ones. They remind us of love, devotion, and bonds that we don't always feel in the present -- the importance of the affection given from parent to child, grandparent to grandchild.

Graves motivate us to consider what will be written on our epitaphs -- what will be my contribution? How will I be remembered? Graves obligate us to assure their maintenance and perhaps to visit. We need obligations to be fully human. We need to be reminded that our lives are important and that we will be remembered. That the world will take note, in some way, that we lived. That we died. That our lives had meaning.

In Loving Memory of
Leon Fishman
White Oak, Maryland

In Loving Memory of
Harlan Antler
Sacramento, California



Shabbat Shalom,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kalman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rabbi Kalman Packouz

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