

Dear Mentors,

The following was received from a former Partners in Torah student, and I believe it is incumbent on each and every mentor to read and act upon. I am, as always, available to speak with any of you as needed, should you find yourself in need of advice or guidance when discussing this sensitive matter with your study partner.

Rabbi Elazar Meisels

Dear Mentors, עמור"ש

My name is Robin Meyerson and I became a *Baalas Teshuvah* through Partners in Torah.

One Sunday afternoon, I received a call from Mr. Mermelstein; a Partners in Torah mentor from Brooklyn. He and his partner Eric had studied together for 12 years and enjoyed a close and growth-filled relationship. Sadly, Eric's wife had just emailed to tell him that Eric died suddenly in his sleep.

She further shared that it was Eric's will to be cremated! Mr. Mermelstein loved Eric dearly and could not hold back the tears. Over the years, he and Eric had met a number of times and Eric's wife had joined them too. He knew that her heart was in the right place, but that unless he could come up with a winning argument, she would honor what she believed were Eric's wishes that he be cremated.

He called me and Rabbi Elchonon Zohn from NASCK [National Association of Chevra Kadisha] seeking assistance in this matter after being referred to us by his son, a rabbi in Bucks County, PA, who "just happened" to be giving a class on the importance of burial vs. cremation.

This may come as a surprise to you, but did you know that 50 Jews are cremated every single day! Sadly, members of my own family have chosen cremation despite my efforts to dissuade them. Thankfully I've succeeded in changing the minds of some, but others have been more insistent. Although it's rare in Torah-observant families, it's unfortunately all too common in non-observant families and it's a problem that Rabbi Zohn and I deal with daily.

We discussed with Mr. Mermelstein the most frequently raised objections to Jewish burial and hethen crafted these ideas into a personalized email to Eric's wife.

- **Burial Is a Waste of Land** - Actually burial uses very little land! If ALL Americans were buried, it would take 10,000 years to use up just 1% of America's land.
- **Burial Pollutes the Environment** - False. Environmentalists worldwide actually choose green burial (with no embalming or metal caskets - both in line with Jewish tradition) Cremation is what actually causes pollution by releasing mercury and other toxins into the air.
- **Who Will Visit the Gravesite** - this line of reasoning reckons that by keeping the ashes, one can always visit them and pay respects to the departed. The reality, however, is that over the long term, people don't retain ashes. Our homes and our lives aren't designed for storage of ashes and since they have no human DNA and can be thrown away, they usually are although it may take a generation or two. Burial gives closure to family for generations and a place to visit.
- **I'm Scared of Decomposing** - Burial respects the cycle of nature. Our bodies return and give back to the Earth from whence they came. Burial represents a calm acceptance of

death and an eventual rebirth; a fundamental Jewish belief. Cremating a body means that it will burn for hours and the bones are then ground up and placed in an urn. Cremation is a violent and unnatural end. Furthermore, according to Jewish tradition, it causes great anguish to the soul and hinders its return to G-d. "The dust returns to the earth as it was and the soul returns to G-d who gifted it." (Ecclesiastes)

- **Cremation is Less Expensive** - Sometimes, but not always. Once you add the cost of the funeral service and the hidden costs, cremation is often the more expensive option. Furthermore, price aside, important life events are not the time to worry about obtaining the cheapest option. Burial is a decision that has ramifications and one must prioritize other more important considerations. Additionally, pre-planning and seeking guidance from a Chevra Kadisha can make the cost of burial much more affordable.
- **Tradition** - For more than 3,000 years, Jews have avoided cremation and chosen burial. In the final act of the Torah, G-d Himself buried Moshe. Burial respects and honors the body that housed the holy soul - the Divine Spark - "*Chelek Elokah Mi'Maal*". Jews go to great length to bury a Jewish soldier's remains even when it entails great hardship and danger. We bury worn out Torah scrolls and other sacred ritual objects. We bury our treasures and we burn our trash. Like the Nazis, throughout history our enemies sought to destroy the Jew through fire and cremation. We ought not follow in their traditions!
- **Jewish Law** - Although Jewish law mandates that we follow the wishes of the deceased in many important matters such as inheritance etc., it forbids us from doing so in regard to cremation. Even if the deceased requested to be cremated, we must proceed with a burial instead.

As mentors for Partners in Torah you are in an excellent position to prevent another Jew from *chas v'chalilah* being cremated; your very own study partner. You are teaching your Partner the laws of *Shabbos, Kashrus, and Taharas Mishpachah, Gemara, and Chumash with Rashi* and Talmud. Have you ever considered having a discussion about the importance of being buried?

This discussion, while possibly initially uncomfortable, is an important one to have. You can gently explain that Jewish tradition teaches that we can look forward to life in the World-to-Come. We are not only a body, but primarily a soul housed in a temporary body which must be returned to its origins.

There are many occasions to raise this important topic with your Partner and here are just a few suggestions:

- *Parshas Vayechi* when Yaakov tells his children his final wishes to be buried
- *Parshas Chaye Sarah* when Avraham buys the Cave of Mechpelah for the burial of Sarah
- Just reflect on the news of the day...the three boys this summer were buried, the seven Sassoon children who were brought to Israel to be buried
- The four martyred in HarNof were buried, the French Jews were buried in Israel
- Anytime a prominent Jew is buried, or

Chas v'Shalom cremated, is an opportunity to get into the discussion

- Anytime a family member or someone close to you or your Partner passes away
- When discussing the Holocaust, *Yom HaShoah* or even on *Tisha B'Av*

Don't be afraid, have the conversation with your study partner. That's what they signed up for.

Everyone needs a form with their burial wishes spelled out before there is a crisis. A one-page burial form as well as numerous articles, videos, brochures and educational links are available for free at www.peacefulreturn.org.

For any study partner who wishes to read the book; *Cremation or Burial? A Jewish View*, we have a sponsor who will cover the cost of the book, plus shipping- it answers all these questions. Just send an email to Partners@NASCK.org with your name and address to receive a free copy of the book.

Please have the conversation with your study partner; it might just be the most important conversation the two of you ever have. Ascertain the personal reasons someone might have chosen cremation instead of burial and sensitively and lovingly address their concerns; understanding that this is a process and not a quick decision. If you need any further assistance, please be in touch.

Sincerely,

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