



**CREMATION, CREMAINS AND THE JOURNEY OF CONSCIOUSNESS -  
REFLECTIONS FROM A JEWISH RENEWAL PERSPECTIVE  
REB SIMCHA RAPHAEL, PH.D.**

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Over the years there has been a lot of discussion on various professional and Rabbinic lists on the topic of cremation in Jewish life. I have tried to discern my way through the pastiche of theological and pastoral issues related to cremation. Above all, it is clear that the practice of cremation is growing across North America. Given that many people are alienated from Jewish death practices because of the commercialization and high cost of funeral and burial, cremation will continue to be a practice we will encounter in the Jewish community.

**TRADITION AND CREMATION**

Historically, there is not a clear-cut prohibition against cremation in the Talmud. (See Solomon B. Freehof, *Contemporary Reform Responsa*, p. 228 ff.). In Palestine and Babylonia in Rabbinic times, the underlying assumption was that cremation was not practiced. Given the desert climate of the Middle East, in-ground and cave burial were the standard operating procedures. And further, certainly in Mishnaic times, cremation was to be avoided simply because it was a Roman practice, and as such seen as idolatrous. Both Talmud (Sanhedrin 46b) and Maimonides (Sefer HaMitzvot 231, 536) emphasize the practice of in-ground burial; and Yosef Karo, author of the Shulkhan Arukh speak of it as a Mitzvah (Yoreh Deah 362:1). Elsewhere in the Shulkhan Arukh, and other classical Codes there is no overt condemnation of cremation.

According to Solomon Freehof, a direct campaign against cremation began only in the 19th and 20th century as this practice developed in western lands. Once the Reform movement began advocating for the permissibility of cremation, as early as the 1880's and 1890's, this in turn provoked a more vociferous Orthodox backlash. Burning the body through cremation came to be seen as a denial of the resurrection (see Greenwald, *Kol Bo Al Aveilut*, p 53ff).

In addition, along with the Reform movement, it seems there was also an acceptance of cremation among the Jews of Italy in the late 19th century. A Rabbi Vittorio Castiglioni, who was Chief Rabbi of Rome, requested that, upon his death, he be cremated and his remains buried in the Jewish cemetery. Since this was a practice antithetical to Judaism at that time, Castiglioni's actions catalyzed a wave of protest. Rabbi Meir Lerner of Altona (1857-1930), a vigorous opponent of the Reform movement, published a treatise called *Chayei Olam*, condemning cremation. Lerner presented refutations of the practice of cremation, articulating how cremation was clearly a denial of the resurrection of the dead. In support of his position, he gathered responsa from approximately 200 Rabbis from all over the world, running the gamut from Lithuanian authorities such as R. Yechiel Michal

Epstein, author of Aruch HaShulchan, to Hasidic Rebbes such as R. Chaim Elazar Shapiro of Munkatch, German Rabbinical scholars such as R. Asher Marx of Darmstadt and from Eretz Israel.

<http://ishimshitos.blogspot.com/2009/08/ashes-to-ashescremation-controversies.html>

A link to an online version of Rabbi Meir Lerner's publication Chayei Olam (1905) can be found here: <http://www.hebrewbooks.org/905>.

So while this was the early modern Orthodox response to cremation, and has remained so the past two centuries, there is no evidence from classical texts that cremation was seen as a denial of the resurrection.

### **THE THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND - RESURRECTION**

However, today when we speak of the reasons for the prohibition against cremation, we do refer back to the doctrine of resurrection of the dead. Resurrection - *tehiyat hametim* - is a central Rabbinic tenet that at the end-of-time, God will intervene in the human realm, the socio-political order will be divinized, there will be a messianic transformation, and all the dead will be brought back to life. We find this belief in *tehiyat hametim* in traditional liturgy, recited three times a day, although in the 19th and 20th centuries this notion was rejected and changed by the Reform and Reconstructionist movements. However, the underlying theological, cosmological view of the human condition, according to Mishna Avot 4:29 is this: "They that are born are destined to die and the dead be brought to life again". And how and where shall the dead be brought life? According to *Pesikta Rabbati* 1:6: "God will make underground passages for the righteous who, rolling through them...will get to the Land of Israel, and when they get to the Land of Israel, God will restore their breath to them." In the era of messianic transformation, God will transport the dead to Israel so they could be resurrected in the Holy Land.

(Interestingly enough, if you are buried in the Diaspora it is a *minhag* of *Hevra Kaddisha* practice to sprinkle a satchel earth from the Mount of Olives, where the resurrection is said to begin, and to insert twigs into the coffin so, at the time of the resurrection, the deceased would be able to bury through the earth to get to Jerusalem to participate in the resurrection.)

So an important theological question the cremation discussion raises is this: what does it mean to ascribe to a belief in the physical resurrection of the dead? Do we fully buy into the Rabbinic worldview on resurrection? If so, how do we understand it in contemporary terms? And if not, do we allow this ancient belief in resurrection to give weight to pastoral and ritual decisions we make regarding what people want to do at the time of death of the body? Do we give tradition a veto with regard to practices around disposal of dead bodies?

And further: How does Jewish renewal understand this mythic view of resurrection of the dead, so central to Rabbinic Judaism? In the "Forward" to *Jewish Views of Afterlife*, Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi authors a wonderful meditation/reflection on resurrection in which he states:

"I do not believe that the crypts will open up in cemeteries and corpses will crawl out of them... I believe that the resurrection occurs when dead matter proceeds to become

a conscious living being. This resurrection seems to be happening to the totality of this planet right now, at this very moment... this planet is waking up, being raised from being merely dead matter to becoming aware, conscious, alive... I believe Teshiyat Ha-metim is the resurrection of matter...Teshiyat Ha-metim - the resurrection of the dead - can then mean the coming to total awareness of the planet as a living organism with which we are connected. " (Jewish Views of the Afterlife, p. xxxii) [<http://www.daatinstitute.net/publications-av-resources/publications/>]

So theologically the issue of cremation invites us to think about the theology of the resurrection of the dead. Is there congruence with our theological assumptions and contemporary praxis? Does loyalty to the doctrine of the Rabbinic resurrection of the dead - which can be quite strange to our contemporary sensibilities - shape our modern praxis? Or is our modern praxis based on other values?

To throw in a whole other realm of conversation: in our communities we often speak of reincarnation, and past lives. What is the connection to the resurrection of the dead at the end-of-days if we live multiple lives? The Kabbalists of Safed, who did believe in the doctrine of reincarnation - gilgul - actually downplayed the notion of physical resurrection. It's not that they did not believe in it, but it was less important than Lurianic teachings on reincarnation of the soul. So how does cremation impact or inhibit the reincarnational journey of the soul?

### **THE THEOLOGY OF THE POST-MORTEM SOUL**

If we start with the assumption that consciousness survives bodily death, what impact does cremation have on the state of the soul, as opposed to in-ground burial? According to the Kabbalists, after death the soul goes through what is called Hibbut Ha-Kever, the Pangs of the Grave. According to the Zohar (I 218b-219a) this is a process of the nephesh, or bioenergetic (pranic) dimension of the soul leaving go of its attachments to body, and disconnecting from the physical realm. In the Vedic tradition of India, it is believed that cremation speeds up this process. Once the soul sees the incineration of its own physical corpse, the soul can more easily leave go of attachments to the physical realm and continue its post-mortem journey of purgation and ultimately divine recompense (i.e. what we refer to as Gehenna and Gan Eden, which are states of consciousness, not realms of celestial geography).

The spiritual task of (the nephesh aspect of) the soul soon after death is to leave go of attachment to physicality. Fire clearly burns up attachments to the physical realm. From the standpoint of the postmortem journey of the soul, perhaps one could argue that the method of cremation has a greater spiritual efficacy than burial. That is certainly what one can learn from the Hindus and Buddhists who have a very clearly articulated philosophy of the consciousness of the soul at the time of death, and in the world beyond. Either way, the journey of the soul after death is about completion with the physical realm. That is not say that burial cannot support the process of completion. But certainly there is nothing in cremation that would hinder the postmortem tasks of the soul. In fact, the opposite is true.

### **GREEN BURIAL**

It is clear that green burial is emerging as an important trend in the funeral industry and over time we will see more green burial services and cemeteries. There was some

disagreement as to whether cremation or burial is better for the environment. Honestly, I am not familiar with all the different issues and I look forward to reading the work of those who have been studying green burial as a contemporary Jewish approach to burial. But I am wondering what it would take for there to be a focus on "Green cremation". As the practice develops, (and it will), will there be ways of disposing of bodies that are even less toxic than in ground burial? <http://www.greencremation.com>

### **PASTORAL CONSIDERATIONS - HONORING WISHES OF THE DECEASED**

Is one obligated to arrange for cremation if a parent or loved one has so requested? According to guidelines from the Babylonian Talmud "It is a Mitzvah to carry out the intentions of the dead" (Gittin 40a; Taanit 21a). In both Talmud and later in the Shulkhan Arukh (Even Hoezer 54; Choshen Mishpat 252:2) this principle is applied to disposition of property of the deceased. But it also applies if one requests that no eulogy or no Kaddish be offered on one's behalf. But in cases where the deceased person's request violates Jewish law - e.g. prohibiting a mourner from sitting shiva, which is a religious obligation, the request of the deceased need not be honored.

So if cremation were regarded as a contravention of Jewish law, a person's wishes need not be carried out. BUT in the case of someone who does not regard themselves a halakhic Jew, the guidelines are not so clear. In fact, as early as 1892 the Central Conference of American Rabbis indicated that Reform Rabbis would not refuse to officiate at a cremation, changing the status of cremation in Jewish law for Liberal Jews. (Freehof, Contemporary Reform Responsa, pp. 228-231). As I understand it, Reconstructionists do not see their practice of Judaism as predominantly halachic. And renewal Jews, through the process of "psycho-halachic" discernment we aspire to evaluate the psycho-spiritual efficacy of a particular halacha.

So this question begs the question of our own individual and communal commitments to halacha. On some matters - egalitarianism, use of technology, flexibility of liturgical structure and content, many Jews are often a-halachic. So where does one stand with regard to dealing with dead bodies? With our own mortal remains? Are we basing our decisions on halacha? Or other criteria? Do we have a nostalgia for in-ground burial, that it is the "right way" and other ways are "wrong". Is in-ground burial given a higher value of "kavod hamet" than cremation? Why? Is that because we are used to it? Or not?

### **PASTORAL CONSIDERATIONS - USING JEWISH RITUALS**

The question here for me is this: given that so many Jews are choosing cremation, how can we bring a sense of kedusha to those families who are in need of Jewish wisdom and caring at time of death, without being rejecting and judgmental? Just like with inter-marriage, if doing an inter-marriage, or even a co-officiation offends your religious sensitivities, then know to whom you can refer. But as others have stated, we want to be a comforting presence for families at time of death, whether or not they are choosing cremation. The issues here have been outlined by others: can we provide *tahara* and *shemirah* for someone who will be cremated? (Why not?) Can we do a Jewish funeral service for someone who will be cremated? (Why not?) Can we do a burial of cremated remains - if a Jewish cemetery permits. (Why not?)

Years ago, I came upon some research (the source of which I cannot track down right now) indicating that there was a Rabbinic takanah which permitted a coffin to be carried to the cemetery on a horse drawn carriage, rather than by hand. As the baseline of cultural practice changed, the Rabbis were able to make a halachic ruling permitting horse and carriage (obviously someone eventually permitted Cadillac limousines). Similarly, only 150 years ago, burial in coffins was regarded as a practice of assimilated Jews. A Rabbi Guttmacher, of Pleschen urged Jews to refuse to participate in this practice. However, through the spread of Reform movement, this practice became more widespread and was eventually integrated into burial regulations of many synagogues and communities. (Michael Edward Panitz, *Modernity and Mortality: The Transformation of Central European Jewish Responses to Death, 1750-1850*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1989; Rabbi Guttmacher, *She'eloth U-Teshuvot 'Adereth 'Eliyahu*. (Jerusalem: Rav Kook Institute, 1984), #125.)

Today aside from Israel, burial in coffins is normative practice.

Jewish death rituals are in evolution. Will we create new halachic or psycho-halachic guidelines for cremation? With seven billion people on the planet, can in-ground burial last as a predominant way of disposal of human bodies? With the rapid spread of flood zones caused by climate change, will we re-consider how to dispose of dead bodies?

### **PASTORAL CONSIDERATIONS - CREMATION AFTER THE HOLOCAUST**

There are many who say that after the Holocaust one would not want to have anyone cremated. There are those who say that after the Holocaust cremation is acceptable, and also gives honor to those who died in the Shoah. I once knew a Holocaust survivor who would say that upon his death he wanted to have his ashes scattered at Auschwitz to return to his generation. So we cannot legislate for a generation, there are two sides to this issue.

### **PASTORAL CONSIDERATIONS - COMMUNITY PRAXIS**

There are no final answers to the ultimate questions of life and death. We are at a crossroads. I believe that we are witnessing a transformation of Jewish death rituals right before our eyes. People are trying to live consciously, and hence are trying to die consciously. Right to die, hospice, Hevra Kaddisha, family participation in death rituals, shiva as a soul-guiding ritual, etc. - all these practices are up for renewal and transformation. My best advice is to serve the family and don't be so freaked out about ashes. We all end up dead eventually. You may prefer to be buried in the ground, you may want to be burned and returned to the earth, water or scattered to the wind. Either way, as an aunt of mine reminds me: "We all have our expiration date tattooed on our body." She says: "Mine is on my ass, I cannot see it, and I don't worry about it!" Given life's finality, while we are blessed with life and vitality, we want to live a meaningful life! Being a healing presence for people at time of death helps us and them lead a meaningful life.

Simcha Raphael, Ph.D.

DA'AT Institute for Death Awareness, Advocacy and Training

[www.daatinstitute.net](http://www.daatinstitute.net)

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