

REFORM RESPONSA Cremation of a Parent

➔ A dying father has instructed that his body be cremated upon death. His adult children are uncomfortable with that request. Does Jewish tradition, as Reform Jews understand it, obligate them to honor their father's wish?

In 2006 the Central Conference of American Rabbis' Responsa Committee studied the practice of cremation, deliberated this question, and issued a responsum, summarized below.

Our tradition teaches that it is a *mitzvah* to honor a dying person's request, provided that the person does not ask us to commit a sin. Cremation is not a sin, because neither the Torah nor rabbinic *halachah* ever explicitly prohibited the practice. The Central Conference of American Rabbis accepted cremation as a legitimate option in an 1892 resolution stating: "In case we should be invited to officiate as ministers of religion at the cremation of a departed co-religionist, we ought not to refuse on

the plea that cremation be anti-Jewish or anti-religion." The 1961 *Rabbi's Manual* reaffirmed this decision, noting that "most Reform Jews have gone beyond this cautious tolerance and have accepted cremation as an entirely proper procedure. A number of leading Reform rabbis have requested that their bodies be cremated." And many Reform families have continued the practice.

In the nineteenth century, however, when cremation became increasingly common in Western countries, Orthodox rabbis began to define it as a transgression against Jewish law; and over the past several decades, the CCAR has spoken more negatively of the practice, preferring traditional burial, a universal Jewish custom until relatively recent times. As the responsum puts it: "The CCAR discourages the choice of cremation; it supports the choice of

traditional burial; and Reform thought today recognizes the right of our people to adopt traditional standards of religious practice that previous generations of Reform Jews may have abandoned."

In light of this complex history, the Responsa Committee concluded that adult children are entitled to honor their father's request, but they are not obligated to do so.

They may refuse on grounds of conscience and Jewish values—so long as they have made no promise, explicit or implicit, that they will fulfill their parent's wishes.

—Rabbi Mark Washofsky, professor of Rabbinics at HUC-JIR in Cincinnati and chairman of the CCAR's Responsa Committee. To read the full responsum please visit <http://ccarnet.org/documentsandpositions/responsa> and type "5766.2" into the search box.



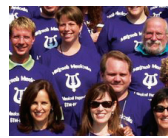
HAPPENINGS *from page 69*

July 12-16: Join in choral and ensemble singing, workshops, and performances at the 20th annual **North American Jewish Choral Festival**, Hudson Valley Resort and Spa, Kerhonksen, NY. <http://zamirfdn.org/>

July 14-19: Study, worship, and connect in sacred community at the **20th Annual Union Kallah**, Franklin Pierce College, Rindge, NH.

<http://urj.org/educate/adultstudy/>

July 26-30: Network with synagogue musicians; learn new repertoire, cantillation, *nusach*, and choral conducting at the **Mifgash Musicale Summer Institute for Synagogue**



SYNAGOGUE MUSICIANS AT MIFGASH MUSICALE, 2008.

Musicians, HUC-JIR, Cincinnati. www.urj.org/worship/musictraining

July 22-August 5: Journey through Israel—the history, the people, the land—at the **EIE Adult Summer Institute**, Kibbutz Tzuba in the Judean Hills. <http://urj.org/educate/adultstudy/> □

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strength to persist in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges. We need a prayer that opens us to the courage to continue in life even as we face the reality of death. We need a prayer that allows us to rage and to praise, to curse and to bless, and to reject and to accept what medical sci-

ence has told us of our fate.

I ask you: what prayer(s) would you create to help those of us engaged in struggle without the hope of full recovery? Add a comment on the Reform Movement blog, rj.org, for us all to share and email me at rabbipelc@gmail.com.

Jewish tradition is full of resources

that offer comfort, supplication, hope, and light to the world of those who suffer.

It is upon us to help renew our tradition.

—Rabbi Julie Pelc (photo #7), assistant director of the HUC-JIR Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health and director of the Berit Mila Program of Reform Judaism