

DEBATABLE Is Cremation an Acceptable Practice for Reform Jews?

→ YES

Rabbi Samuel M. Stahl

A growing number of Reform Jews, including several Reform rabbis, are electing to be cremated. Some are repelled by the thought of their bodies decomposing slowly in the ground. Some environmentally conscious Jews believe it is wasteful to reserve large sections of precious land for burial. The cost of cremation, too, is far less than for a casket and a full-size cemetery plot. Although I have chosen traditional burial for myself, I believe their choice must be honored.



Historically, Reform has never opposed cremation. In fact, in 1892, the Central Conference of American Rabbis granted indirect approval to the practice by 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 is anti-Jewish or irreligious.” And the former CCAR *Rabbi’s Manual* (1961) even included a selection with this superscription: “When the body is to be cremated, the following prayer is suggested...”

Most Reform Jews do not believe in the literal resurrection of the dead, which lies at the basis of the traditional Jewish prohibition against cremation. Whereas our more traditional co-religionists focus on what happens to the body after death—because they believe in physical resurrection when the Messiah comes—this perspective is not as important to us. We stress instead that people live on in spirit—in the hearts and minds of their loved ones who survive them.

Understandably, some Reform rabbis discourage or forbid cremation because of its association with the crematoria of the Holocaust. At the same time, however, some Holocaust survivors have asked to be cremated as a way of identifying with their family members who died in the Nazi death camps.

Whatever the context, cremation should be carried out in a way that bestows honor on the deceased and brings comfort to the mourners. That is why I strongly encourage families to bury the ashes in a temple cemetery or mausoleum with an appropriate marker. The survivors will then have a tangible focal point to revere their loved one’s memory.

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Rabbi Arnold S. Gluck

NO ←



It is a *mitzvah* to bury the dead. Our tradition calls it a *chesed shel emet*, a true act of kindness. Long before Jews ever contemplated the possibility of bodily resurrection, burying the dead was a core Jewish value. When Sarah dies in Genesis 23, Abraham goes to great lengths to acquire an *achuzat*

kever; a burial place, for her.

Why did Abraham go to such trouble, and why should we continue to do so? Sarah has died, but Abraham’s love for her lives

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on and finds expression in the care he shows for her earthly remains. In life he held and caressed the holy vessel that

housed her spirit. Now he honors it by giving her a proper burial. Sarah will not return to him, but until the day he will lie beside her, Abraham will find comfort in visiting her grave—as we Jews have done with our loved ones ever since.

We Jews view our bodies as gifts from God—tangible evidence of God’s love for us. In life we are forbidden to harm them, and in death we are commanded to treat them with dignity. Jewish law prescribes the gentle washing of the body by the *chevra kaddisha*, members of the community who are called “holy” because they perform this great *mitzvah*. A Jewish funeral is called a *l’vayah*, literally, accompanying the dead and laying them to rest with our own hands. In so doing we imitate God who, according to our tradition, performed the *mitzvah* of burying Moses.

And what of cremation? After the Holocaust, many Jews associate cremation with the attempt to destroy our people. For the Nazis, it was not enough to kill us. They fired up the crematoria to eliminate every last vestige of our being.

Burying our loved ones is an act of preservation, of holding fast to that which God has given. This is the way we Jews honor our dead.

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