

Eco-Friendly Burial

A new initiative for the bodies of the deceased sound suspiciously like Judaism's ancient traditions.

The Trend to Cremation

Over the past fifty years, Americans have been trending away from traditional burials and moving towards cremation. In the 1950s, only three percent of the population chose to cremate their loved ones, but in recent years, the numbers have reached over fifty percent. More than half of Americans prefer to cremate the bodies of their deceased family members.

The main reason, as always, is price. Cremation is simply two thirds cheaper than a burial.

Another reason is space. Land is limited, and in large cities, every inch of space is utilized. Cemeteries are running out of room. Cremation answers that problem.

A third reason is that the world is no longer stationary. People move from place to place and no longer have the opportunity to visit their parent's burial grounds. Cremation allows you to keep the ashes in your home and take your parents along when you move.

So, first of all, it's important to emphasize that cremation is absolutely forbidden by Jewish law. As the Rebbe explained it, "The body has a source of life even after the soul leaves it. As long as the body is not fully decomposed, an element of the

soul remains connected to it. By instructing or agreeing to cremate a body, you agree to burn a part of the soul. That is akin to burning a person alive...and it is a terrible brutality." (4 Teves 5743)

An Idea from the Cows

But recently, a new initiative began in Washington state.

One woman decided to conduct some research on bodies after death. She first researched traditional burial as it is done here in the United States, and it didn't appeal to her. The custom here is to bury the body in a wooden coffin which is often quite expensive. The coffin is placed inside a vault fashioned from cement and metal, which is then sealed with a heavy cement cover as well.

According to research, the amount of metal and cement used each year in American burials is the equivalent of the Golden Gate Bridge. The wood would be enough to build 1800 homes. Additionally, cemeteries are simply running out of space.

The other option is cremation. According to polls, 54% of people choose that approach because it is better for the environment. But the truth turned out to be quite different. The fumes from the ovens are quite damaging to the environment. Cremations in the US emit a staggering 600 million pounds of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere annually.

So, she came up with a new idea.

Many farms have a technique which turns dead cows into soil. They cover the carcasses with several feet of wood chips and,

over a period of about nine months, the entire body including the bones, decomposes and all that's left is rich soil. The cow essentially returns to the earth.

If it's good for cows, it could be good for humans too! She began a new approach called Human Composting: The body is placed in a steel box covered with wood chips and straw and, within a month or so, the body turns to soil. In our day, the hottest "religious belief" is to save the world from climate change, and this seems to be the most environmentally friendly approach — you can literally donate your body to earth.

Two years ago, Washington became the first state in America to legalize this method. After the body decomposes, you are free to use the soil as you wish: some people plant a vegetable garden in their backyard, and others donate it to a public park.

What is most fascinating about this new discovery is that Jews have been doing so for thousands of years. In Israel, until today, the deceased are buried without coffins and without metal and cement containers. The body is wrapped in a simple shroud and is laid on the bare ground. We thereby fulfill the verse that states "You are dust, and you shall return to dust." The brilliant discovery made in Seattle, Washington in 2019 was already written in the book of Genesis.

But Judaism does it a different way. The Torah tells us that it's a Mitzvah to bury our dead. We give the body an honorable burial and allow nature to take its course. The idea of transforming the body into soil and using it to plant a vegetable garden is absolutely forbidden in Jewish law, because we are

not allowed to derive any benefit from the body of a deceased person.

The Cow's Ashes

This week, in addition to the regular Torah portion, we read Parshat Parah. According to Jewish law, a person who comes into close contact with a dead body is ritually impure and may not enter the Holy Temple or partake in any sacrifices. With the approach of Passover each year, all impure Jews in the Land of Israel would go through a purification process.

This Torah portion tells us to obtain a red heifer, slaughter it, burn its carcass to ash, mix the ash with water, and then sprinkle the mixture on the impure people. After a series of sprinkles, the person was considered ritually pure, and permitted to enter the Temple and partake in the Passover sacrifice.

Today, when we do not have a Temple or the ashes of a red heifer, we are all considered ritually impure and are therefore forbidden to go on to the Temple Mount. However, before Passover each year, we read this Torah portion to commemorate the ritual of purification that took place at this time of year.

What is the spiritual message of Parshat Parah? What can we learn from this Torah portion?

The Torah tells us that together with the cow, they would burn an *"eitz erez"* and an *"eizov."* The *erez* is usually identified as the Lebanese Cedar, tall cedar trees that can reach up to 150

feet tall. The *eizov* is a hyssop, a plant that doesn't grow more than several inches long. These two plants represent the two extremes of world of vegetation. As the Midrash says, "There is nothing taller than the cedar, and nothing shorter than the hyssop." (Tanchuma Metzora 3)

The Midrash continues to explain: "Why is the cedar and hyssop included? To teach us that if we raise ourselves like a cedar, G-d will humble us like a hyssop. And if we humble ourselves like a hyssop, G-d will raise us like a cedar."

In other words, the path to purification and connection to G-d is through humility. When we imagine ourselves to be cedars, thinking our success is our own and that we control our destiny, we lock G-d out of our lives. We become so full of ourselves that no space is left for G-d. In the Rebbe's words, "The cedar represents arrogance and conceit, character traits that make you as tough as a cedar tree, and that is the source of many more bad things." (Toras Menachem vol. 16 pg. 184).

But when a person acts like a hyssop — when he realizes that he is just a tiny part of the larger picture and that it is G-d who grants him life, health and success — such a person gives space for G-d in his life and has the privilege to connect with the ultimate Life.