

## Why does Judaism appose cremations?

*By Rabbi YY Jacobson*

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This is one of the main reasons Judaism apposes cremation.

One point has to do with to do with the mourners. Someone once shared their feelings about coming to pay respects to a loved one cremated. At the front of the room stood an urn. Try as he might, he was unable to make the association between his friend and the urn. There was no sense that honor was being paid to the departed — her presence was no longer felt.

Being cremated is unfair to the mourners. They cannot be expected to say farewell to an urn. They have no gravesite to visit. The soul has no resting place in this world. A Jewish burial gives some form of comfort to family and friends.

But there is another, more crucial point, which has to do with the deceased himself or herself. There is a drastic physio-chemical differences between an organism which decomposes in the earth, and one which is consumed by fire. As the process of decomposition begins, the elements of the organism are broken down; but they by no means disappear. Its inherent components remain, and are merely returned to and absorbed by the surrounding earth. In the case of a decomposing plant, for example, its minerals and nutrients are retained in the ground. These elements — which remain in the soil — actually provide sustenance and life to whatever seedlings should sprout in this area. The original elements give life once again and regenerate in the form of new vegetation. So, the old plant did not die, it just returned in a new and different form. Everything that goes back to the earth comes back in the forms of different living organisms.

What would happen to the same plant should it be consumed by flames? The entire organism would undergo a radical physical change. Reduced to ash, its inherent organic materials would by and large be whisked away into the atmosphere and disappear. No new, significant life would be affected through its termination.

The same is true with the human body. When cremated, the body becomes ash. When buried, the body becomes one with the soil. There is a big difference between the two. Soil is fertile, ash is not. The soil allows new growth and further life. Ash is barren and lifeless. Turning the body to ash is unnatural. But the gradual process of returning to the soil is true to the inner meaning of death. The passing of one generation allows the sprouting of another, and the living are nourished and inspired by the legacy of the dead. Our forebears are the soil from which we sprout. Even in their death, they are a source of life.

And it goes one step deeper. (Explained by Rabbi Yechiel Michel Tukachinski (Geshet Hachaim, vol. 2, ch. 13; see also vol. 1, 16:9) who discussed the ritual of burial against this backdrop.)

One of the tenets of our faith is the principle of 'Techiyas hameisim', the resurrection of the dead. As sorrowful as the burial procedure is, and it is one of the most heartbreaking experiences, the Jew knows deep down that he will see his loved one once again, in a future era. Not only does the soul live on, but it will one day return to its remains, and the body itself — rejuvenated and reunited with its soul — will return to life. The very elements that had constituted his original body, are never lost, and will be reconfigured and rebuilt, just as a new plant is replenished from the nourishment of the original materials.

In Judaism, then, burial of a loved one is a form of planting. It is not the end; it is the beginning. When you plant a seed, you do not destroy it; to the contrary, it is the genesis of a new birth. When we inter a body after its demise, we are planting it into the earth so that one day it will sprout up, as its elements will rejoin to once again walk this earth.<sup>2</sup>

There is another reason for our opposition to cremation. This extraordinary idea was explained by the Lubavitcher Rebbe in an answer dated 4 Teves, 5743 (writing to someone who was trying to convince his father not to request his own cremation). Here is the summation: Even as a soul departs, the body still has some form of life; as long as the body does not completely decompose, part of the soul still clings to it. When someone burns the body, it is akin to burning part of the soul which is still connected to the body. In that sense, it is like burning a living person. But not burning the entire person, only part of him, which is extremely painful and cruel. Even agreeing to do it to yourself is wrong and cruel. The fact that many do this does not justify it. Would anyone justify burning, G-d forbid, living people because thousands of Nazis, including scientists, merchants, family members, burnt living people?