

# *Cremation, compassion and choice.*

Rabbi Lisa Grushcow

**W**hen I was a young student rabbi, I served a small congregation in Long Island, N.Y. One day I got a call from a member in his 50s whose wife had suddenly died. She was going to be cremated, he told me. It was what she had always wanted. Would I officiate at the funeral?

My first instinct, firmly rooted in tradition, was to say no. My second instinct was to educate myself about the Reform movement's stance on the issue. (I had been raised as a Conservative Jew and was a newcomer to Reform.)

But then I stopped and I listened. This man was heartbroken. He was in need. The only question was whether I would use whatever ability I had to respond. And so it was that the first funeral I ever officiated involved cremation.

The original Reform rabbinic statement on cremation goes back to 1891. It insists that cremation can be in keeping with dignity for the dead, and that to comfort the mourners is a vital command. Decades later, after the horrors of the Holocaust and with more of a turn to tradition, the Reform movement endorsed burial as ideal.

But Reform has always remained open to individual choice. We do not see cremation as inherently un-Jewish, nor do we see it as a sin. We also believe that whatever the form of the body, burial itself is a mitzvah, giving a resting place for the deceased and for the families to

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mourn. Still, it is clear that cremation is not a traditional Jewish practice.

Jewish burial practices have certain core values, such as an aversion to ostentatiousness, a focus on the needs of the living, an insistence on the dignity of the dead. And yet, Jewish burial rituals have changed drastically over the years. In recent years, for example, the ultra-Orthodox rabbinate has approved multi-level, parking-lot-style burials on the Mount of Olives, creating a change in policy in response to the practical need for space.

My own belief is that there is great comfort, beauty and meaning to be found in the return of the body to the earth. But over the years, I have encountered reasons in favour of cremation that I could never – and would never – contradict, such as the Holocaust survivor who wants to be cremated so he can feel united with family members burned in the ovens of Auschwitz, or the young woman, a victim of anorexia, whose grieving parents chose cremation to free her from her body at last.

I believe it is our community's responsibility to be there in those situations, and to respond with compassion and care.

For decades, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom has been the place to which Montreal Jews turn when they want both a Jewish funeral and cremation. For almost two decades, we have had a place in our cemetery for the burial of cremated remains, marked by a single headstone inscribed with multiple names. Later, we started getting requests for burials with individual stones, and so we have built a cremation garden in our cemetery on Mount Royal. To our knowledge, this garden is the only one of its kind in a Jewish cemetery in Canada.

In doing so, I believe we are fulfilling the Jewish teachings of educated choice and compassion. Other Jews and other synagogues will make different decisions based on different understandings – that is as it should be.

The mortality rate, alas, stays constant at 100 per cent. And so, I urge you: talk to your family, talk to your rabbi (and if you don't have one, find one). Learn, and decide. Encourage your community to have conversations about end-of-life decisions, which are only growing more complicated.

Judaism teaches us to honour our dead and comfort those who mourn. May those values continue to guide us.

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*Rabbi Lisa Grushcow is the senior rabbi at Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom in Montreal.*