



SERMON CHAYYEI SARAH:ⁱ WHO BY FIRE AND WHO BY WATER?ⁱⁱ

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 11 November 2023
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

1 In Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, like in most places these days, it's possible to order duplicate birth, marriage and death certificates online. Unlike most places, however, Mecklenburg County's online system asks those seeking order duplicate death certificates: "*Who is on the death certificate? (a) Myself, (b) Someone else.*"ⁱⁱⁱ

2 Daft as that is, it highlights a question that has always interested humanity: are the events that follow death – funeral, mourning, disposal of body and so on – done for the benefit of the deceased, or for the benefit of those who survive them? In Judaism, we find elements of both of these: the principle of כבוד המת,^{iv} respect for the corpse, means we act out of concern for the departed; and the principle of נחום אבלים, comforting mourners,^v means we act out of concern for those left behind.

3 Last week, I spent three days at Kallah, the annual retreat of Liberal Judaism's rabbis to a manor house in rural Oxfordshire. One of our discussion topics was the emergence of two new methods of disposing of dead bodies: terramation and aquamation.

4 Terramation is where the body is covered with wood chips, alfalfa and straw, and, over about 30 days, composted into soil^{vi} – which

ⁱ Genesis 23:3-13

ⁱⁱ This is a very funny title. Appreciate it.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bethania Palma, "Does county in NC give option to request death certificate for 'myself'?", *Snopes* (24 May 2022): <<https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/request-death-certificate-for-myself/>>

^{iv} See eg h.Avel 12:1

^v See eg Rema to Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 335:10

^{vi} Harriet Sherwood, "Church of England to consider greener alternatives to burial", *The Guardian* (6 February 2023): <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/06/church-of-england-to-consider-greener-alternatives-to-burial>>

mourners could then take home and, for example, plant a rose bush in it. Aquamation – which was how Archbishop Tutu requested his remains be dealt with – is similar but involves chemicals being applied which reduce the body to water.^{vii}

5 These two new technologies^{viii} are in the process of being introduced into the UK, where they will stand alongside the existing options of burial and cremation.

6 In reality, what does it matter how one's body is disposed of? In the long term, if we think about it in the scale of centuries, there is virtually no difference. All bodies, whether buried, cremated, composted or turned into water, will eventually lose their form and return to the earth in the form of some basic element or another.

7 But we don't live in centuries; we live in days and weeks and months. And the options we've spoken about this morning have some significant differences between them: firstly, speed, and secondly, the question of what is left behind. And these both affect mourners more than anyone else.

8 In this morning's parashah, Sarah, our matriarch, died. Then we read:^{ix} וַיָּקָם אַבְרָהָם מֵעַל פְּנֵי מֶתוּ And Abraham arose from her corpse. This is not just a factual narrative. It does not simply describe Abraham's physical movements. Rather, it denotes a form of moving on: the emergence of another stage in the grieving process. The 19th-century commentator Rabbi Isaac Samuel Reggio understood it as meaning that Abraham only arose "*after he had wept and eulogised her*".^x

9 In choosing to bury Sarah, Abraham, of course, opted for the longest-standing funerary option. Tomorrow, on Remembrance Sunday, we will no doubt hear the words of the poet Rupert Brooke:

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Strictly speaking, terramation is not in essence a new technology at all. It actually has a long history in ancient Judaism: see Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky, "Alternative kevrurah methods", Rabbinical Assembly (2017): <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/2011-2020/alternative-burial_kalmanofsky_newversion.pdf>

^{ix} Genesis 23:3

^x Yashar *ad loc*



“[T]here’s some corner of a foreign field [t]hat is forever England.”^{xi} Some people take enormous comfort in having a place to visit, a place where their loved one rests in peace, where their body – at least in the imagination – remains intact and as they were when still living. As the American mortician Caitlin Doughty has written, *“[t]he cemetery [is a] venue where the living and the dead mingle[] in social harmony”*.^{xii} But while some, as she puts it, relish the opportunity *“to hang out with the dead”*,^{xiii} others might find that notion uncomfortable or even traumatising. Burial, as an option, simply does not work for some mourners. They might prefer the idea of scattering the ashes of their loved one in a favourite or meaningful place. Others might be deeply moved to have an apple tree grown in soil composted from a deceased relative. Ultimately, everybody grieves in unique ways. Abraham wept and eulogised and then turned his mind to funeral admin. Others will need a journey of bereavement that is altogether different.

10 Now, some might shudder at the idea of eating an apple grown from soil that used to be Granny. Some might have an instinctive ‘yuk’ reaction at the idea of a loved one’s body being reduced to water. But actually, the two Jewish values we discussed earlier – כבוד המת and נחום אבלים – respect for the corpse and comforting the mourner – merge into one overarching principle: *“anything one does for the sake of honouring the deceased, or for their benefit, is not considered shameful or disrespectful”*.^{xiv}

11 In 2011, Caitlin Doughty founded The Order of the Good Death, which aims to promote funerary options that *“create a ring of safety around the family and friends of the dead, providing a place where they can grieve openly and honestly, without fear of being judged”*.^{xv} That, ultimately, is what I think we have to do as a Jewish community as well. I look forward to terramation and aquamation being introduced throughout the UK, not because they necessarily appeal to me, but

^{xi} Rupert Brooke, “The Soldier” in *1914 and Other Poems* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1915): 15.

^{xii} Caitlin Doughty, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes and other lessons from the crematory* (New York: W W Norton, 2014): ebook edition, ch 12.

^{xiii} Caitlin Doughty, *From Here to Eternity: travelling the world to find the good death* (New York: W W Norton, 2017): ebook edition, ch 7.

^{xiv} Radbaz, responsum 1:484

^{xv} Doughty, *From Here to Eternity*, ch 10.



because I want to provide bereaved families with options for how best to manage their grief.

12 Abraham arose from Sarah's body. He was the mourner. The deceased, though, will never again arise – except in our hearts and imaginations. How we help them to attain that place depends on meeting each mourner where they are.

