

Dust to Dust – But Not Ashes to Ashes Why Jewish Tradition Prohibits Cremation

Since Biblical times, cremation has been forbidden. The prohibition runs deep and speaks to our very understanding of human purpose and our standing in the world.

A traditional Jewish burial is known as “*kever Yisrael*.” It is marked with dignity and simplicity, a plain pine casket, the earth shoveled by the mourners themselves.

In our own time, we have witnessed how cremation was used to degrade and dehumanize our martyrs. Beyond the mass murder of millions, the infamous Nazi crematoria – which burned their lifeless bodies – are the evil antithesis of all that Judaism holds and cherishes: a belief in the eternal spirit that animates all life, respect for the human form, dignity in life and even in death.

“For out of dust you were formed and to dust you shall return,” G-d tells Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:19). The injunction to bury – to allow the human form to return to dust – extends even to executed criminals. The Torah admonishes us: “You shall surely bury him (Deuteronomy 21:23).”

We bury the dead because we believe that we belong

to our Creator. He gave us the human body and it is not our right to defile it. We don’t own our bodies; they are on loan to us. They provide physical shape to the souls that animate us.

HFBA Steps In

Joseph was 93 and alone when he died in a local nursing home. The social worker marked “cremation” as his preference, even though there were no supporting documents and no witnesses to support the claim.

HFBA prevented the cremation, with just hours to spare. Joseph is now buried at HFBA’s Mount Richmond Cemetery. There, volunteers performed the *tahara* (ritual cleansing) and accompanied him to his final resting place. They said the final *kaddish* and filled the grave. A permanent marker records his name.

our own; this was in defiance of local custom (History 5:5). Cremation was a pagan rite – and the Torah tells us to reject all idolatrous practice.

In Jewish thought, the soul and the body are partners. They are not separate entities. The body is not to be discarded when the soul departs. Since soul and body have worked together to create a lifetime of achievement and purpose, we respect the human vessel even as it is emptied. Jewish mystical thought goes further. It tells us that the soul departs the body gradually; cremation hurts the soul and damages the very spirit that once lived in human form.

Throughout our history, we have been known to bury our dead even at great risk – and even when the local culture sneered at the practice. Tacitus, the 1st century Roman historian who was no friend of the Jews, noted that we buried

continued on page 2

HFBA MISSION STATEMENT

THE HEBREW FREE BURIAL ASSOCIATION devotes its resources to performing *chesed shel emet* (the ultimate act of loving kindness). It is the only agency in the New York metropolitan area dedicated to assuring that every Jew, regardless of financial means or religious affiliation, receives a dignified, traditional Jewish funeral and burial.

HFBA Helps



Homeless, Israeli-born 61 year-old **Dov**, was living in a storage unit where he was found dead. His divorced wife and son did not have the resources to pay for his funeral and HFBA was contacted by a cousin. We buried Dov with 20 people in attendance, including our HFBA volunteer *minyán*. We learned, with great sadness, that Dov had committed suicide. *(Note: It is recognized that suicide is a result of mental illness and these souls are accorded a dignified funeral and burial in the main part of the cemetery.)*

Blanche, 88 years old at the time of her death, cared for her two mentally disabled adult sons, one of whom has cancer. In 2012, Blanche had arranged her sister Dora's funeral with HFBA but at that time she did not pre-plan her own. When she died, her niece contacted HFBA but, maintaining that she had no legal obligation to pay for her burial because she was not considered "real family," contributed only minimally to the cost of the funeral and burial. HFBA reached out to Blanche's sons who seemed to have no grasp of finances or an understanding of the government benefits which might help them. We learned that they were connected to a social worker through a local agency and she arranged for a taxi to take the men to and from their mother's burial in Staten Island.

Blanche was buried near her sister and we advised the social service agency that her sons are registered with HFBA in the event of their own deaths.

Sarah, who was disabled since birth, was under the care of her non-Jewish stepmother along with her disabled siblings. When she died at the age of 53 years, her impoverished caregiver had no money for a burial and was ready to have her cremated. Sarah's siblings, however, insisted that she be buried according to Jewish tradition. HFBA stepped in and conducted the funeral. Sarah's stepmother, sibling and a close friend attended.

Lorraine's son Paul called HFBA looking for a burial plot for his father's cremated remains. HFBA does not handle cremations or cremains but in the course of the conversation with HFBA staff, he mentioned his mother who was suffering from cancer. Lorraine was insistent on not being cremated but being buried according to Jewish tradition. Paul was informed about pre-planning for those who will need our services and he began the process for his mother.

Eric called HFBA to discuss his mother **Sue** who was about to be moved from the hospital into hospice. However, Sue passed away sooner than anticipated before being transferred to hospice. Arrangements for burial were made during a second call later that same day.

Names and details have been changed to protect confidentiality.



In the Mail

About a month ago I discovered that my father had another brother who died at age one and a half in 1914. Nobody in the family ever mentioned this. Going on line, we discovered he was buried in your cemetery on Staten Island. I took a ride out there a couple of days ago to find that your organization had put up a gravestone about 20 years ago. We could not believe it.

Enclosed is a donation for your organization. Thank you for all the work you do.

Alan Miller
Morganville, NJ

Dust to Dust continued from page 1

Even the Israeli armed forces, whose highest priority is the defense of its country, places utmost importance on this *mitzvah*. Israeli soldiers have taken great risks to rescue the bodies of their fallen comrades, even behind enemy lines. Every soldier knows that "*kever Yisrael*," a proper Jewish burial, is the last comfort that the Israel Defense Forces can offer to the families of the fallen.

The Hebrew Free Burial Association is often called upon to intervene as cremation is being considered. Last year, we arranged 18 burials which would have been cremations. In the first four months of 2018, we have already prevented nine! In your support of HFBA, you are also participating in this most important and essential of *mitzvot*.

Written by Margy-Ruth Davis

Chesed Shel Emet and the Next Generation

As part of its active volunteer program across the tri-state area, HFBA hosts students who help clean and maintain our historic Silver Lake Cemetery, which was closed to burials in 1909 after 13,600 graves were filled.

This spring, students from **The Frisch School, Torah Academy of Bergen County, and Solomon Schechter School of Westchester** attended funerals and burials at Mount Richmond Cemetery. They learned about the significance of Jewish burial rites, participated in those rituals and represented the Jewish community at funerals at which no family member or friend is present.

Described a by a teacher as an “intense experience” for the students, it was also revelatory.

The Frisch School *Chesed* Program coordinator, Rabbi Joshua Shulman, told us about the students’ reactions based on their feedback. He reported that, knowing only comfortable circumstances, loving families and friends and supportive communities, they were surprised that the HFBA clients could not afford their own funeral and that no one who may have



Solomon Schechter School of Westchester



The Frisch School

loved them, or even known them, accompanied them to their grave.

“For some of the students, this was their first time attending a funeral and certainly the first time that they played such an active role in a *kevura* (burial,)” recalled Rabbi Ariel Auman, who accompanied the Frisch students. As they stood at the gravesite, the students filled the grave with dirt according to custom and answered Rabbi Plafker’s moving recitation of the *kaddish*. Although, as one student said, “going into the experience I was very nervous and was not sure what to expect, assuming it would be very depressing,” he was glad he came for “such a powerful and moving experience,” performing this very special *chesed shel emet*.



Torah Academy of Bergen County

Meet David Knapp HFBA Board Member

“My clients are terrified of ending up in potter’s field,” says David Knapp, a social worker with New York City’s Department of the Aging and HFBA’s newest Board Member.

Originally from L.A., David came to New York to study historical sociology at The New School before working with youth, adults and families at organizations such as AmeriCorp and JCC’s. He eventually went to Wurzweiler School of Social Work where he received his MSW with a concentration in gerontology and additional specialized certificates. He focused on community social work, at various times working in the Bronx, Queens and Westchester.



David’s introduction to HFBA came through his wife, Betsey, who met HFBA Executive Director Amy Koplow professionally. At the time, David was working at JASA where, among other duties, he organized cemetery trips for older adults before Rosh Hashana. He was struck by the importance to his clients of visiting deceased relatives and

began to appreciate the significance of caring for the dead and maintaining cemeteries, as well as the Jewish rituals surrounding death.

Currently living in Riverdale, the Knapps have two sons, Frederick, 21 years old, and Alexander, 19. Of HFBA, David remarks, “It is the best organization too few people are familiar with.” David hopes to correct that by working with us to achieve our mission of providing burials to any and all Jews.

РУССКИЙ ДАЙДЖЕСТ

BELOW ARE TRANSLATED SUMMARIES OF THE ARTICLES APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE OF CHESED.

«Прах есмь и возвращаюсь в прах» - но не в пепел. Почему еврейская традиция запрещает кремацию (статья Марди-Рут Дэвис)

С библейских времён кремация для евреев была запрещена. Этот запрет имеет глубокие корни и отражает само наше понимание места и предназначения человека в этом мире. Традиционный еврейский обряд погребения – «кевер (могила) израэль» – исполнен достоинства и простоты: гроб должен быть из простых сосновых досок, а скорбящие сами бросают горсти земли в могилу.

В наше время мы были свидетелями того, как кремация использовалась, чтобы унижить еврейских мучеников. Нацисты не просто убивали миллионы людей, они сжигали их тела в специальных печах, тем самым противостоя всему тому, что иудаизм считает священным, а именно, вере в вечность духа, живущего в каждом существе, уважению к человеческому телу при жизни и даже после смерти.

Мы погребаем усопших, поскольку верим, что мы принадлежим Создателю. Он даровал нам наши тела, и не в нашем праве глумиться над ними. Наши тела нам даны как бы взаймы. Они всего лишь форма для души, оживляющей наше существование, и их нельзя просто «выбросить», после того как душа покидает тело. Таким образом мы выражаем уважение к сосуду, даже когда он опустел.

На протяжении всей еврейской истории, сожжение тел считалось проявлением язычества, а Тора предписывает отвергать все языческие, идолопоклонческие обряды.

В наши дни еврейские вооружённые силы, чьей главной целью является защита страны, придают огромное значение мицве погребения усопших. Израильские солдаты часто подвергают себя огромному риску, вынося тела погибших товарищей с места боя, в том числе с вражеской территории. Каждый солдат знает, что «кевер израэль», правильно проведённый еврейский обряд погребения – это святая обязанность армии перед семьями погибших бойцов.

Еврейское Благотворительное Похоронное Бюро (HFBA) часто вынуждено вмешиваться, когда родственники усопших евреев рассматривают возможность их кремации. В прошлом году HFBA организовало 18 похорон по еврейскому обычаю, когда родственники изначально планировали кремировать усопших. За первые четыре месяца нынешнего, 2018-го года, было уже девять подобных случаев. Когда Вы поддерживаете деятельность HFBA, вы тоже участвуете в выполнении этой важной мицвы.

Нам пишут

«Около месяца назад я обнаружил, что у моего отца был брат, умерший в возрасте полутора лет в 1914-м году. Никто в

моей семье никогда об этом не упоминал. Поискав в Интернете, мы выяснили, что брат моего отца был погребён на кладбище вашей организации на Стейтен Айленде. Я съездил туда несколько дней назад и увидел, что HFBA установило надгробный камень примерно 20 лет назад. Я был потрясён.

Пожалуйста примите пожертвование для HFBA, и огромное спасибо за то дело, которое вы делаете».

Алан Миллер, г. Морганвилль, штат Нью-Джерси

HFBA помогает

- Родившийся в Израиле Дов Р* был бездомным. Он жил в складском помещении в пригороде Нью-Йорка и скончался в 61 год. У его бывшей жены и сына не было средств заплатить за похороны, и двоюродный брат Дова связался с HFBA. Мы организовали похороны Дова, на которые пришли 20 человек, включая миньян из наших волонтеров. К нашему пригорю мы узнали, что Дов покончил с собой. *(примечание: теперь считается, что самоубийство – результат душевной болезни, и покончившие с собой удостоиваются похорон и погребения в основной части кладбища).*
- Бланш Ф*, скончавшаяся в возрасте 88-и лет, много лет ухаживала за своими двумя взрослыми сыновьями, у которых были проблемы развития. У одного из них был диагностирован рак. В 2012 году Бланш сделала нужные приготовления через HFBA для похорон своей сестры Доры, но не позаботилась заранее о своих похоронах. Когда Бланш умерла, её племянница связалась с нами, но при этом утверждала, что её семья не обязана платить за похороны, поскольку Бланш не была «настоящим членом семьи», и в итоге заплатила символическую сумму за похороны и погребение. HFBA связалось с сыновьями Бланш, но те по-видимому не имели никакого представления ни о финансах вообще, ни о возможной государственной помощи в таких ситуациях. Мы установили, что к сыновьям Бланш была «прикреплена» женщина – социальный работник из местного сообщества. Она организовала такси, чтобы отвезти обоих на похороны их матери на Стейтен-Айленд. Бланш была похоронена рядом с сестрой, и мы проинформировали сообщество о том, что оба сына Бланш зарегистрированы в HFBA на случай их смерти.
- Сара Х* была инвалидом с детства. Её мачеха-нееврейка заботилась и о Саре, и о её братьях и сёстрах, тоже инвалидах. Когда Сара скончалась в возрасте 53-х лет, ухаживавшая за ней женщина, за неимением денег собиралась устроить кремацию Сары. Но другие дети настаивали, что Сара должна быть похоронена согласно еврейской традиции. HFBA помогло в этой ситуации и организовало похороны Сары, на которых присутствовали её семья – мачеха и другие дети, и близкий друг этой семьи.

** имена изменены*



When was HFBA founded?

The Hebrew Free Burial Association was organized in 1888 as a free burial society serving the residents of Manhattan’s Lower East Side and was incorporated in 1889.

What makes HFBA unique?

HFBA is unique in that it cares for impoverished, marginalized Jews after death, regardless of denominational affiliation. HFBA owns and maintains its own cemeteries, unlike other benevolent associations.

Where are the HFBA graves?

HFBA graves are mostly located on Staten Island in our two cemeteries: Silver Lake which was purchased in 1892 and filled by 1909, and Mount Richmond, purchased and in use since 1909. In some cases, people have donated unused graves to our organization or provided a previously purchased grave for a loved one.

Is there a funeral service?

Yes. HFBA’s Rabbi Shmuel Plafker performs all funerals, often with the volunteer *minyán*. Frequently, family members or friends of the deceased attend, too.

If there is no family, who puts up a monument on the grave?

HFBA’s “Leave Your Mark Campaign” raises funds from HFBA donors to mark graves at a cost of \$150 per stone.



How large is your staff?

Eight people work in our Lower Manhattan office, including Executive Director Amy Koplów. At our cemeteries, Rabbi Shmuel Plafker serves as Cemetery Chaplain with two other staff members on site including

our cemetery superintendent and cemetery operations coordinator.

How many languages does your staff speak?

Besides English and Russian, our staff can communicate in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Spanish.

How do you find out about the people who have died?

Many people with different relationships to the deceased contact our staff. They include family members, friends, neighbors, rabbis, clergy of other faiths, social workers, building superintendents, hospital and care facility chaplains, Public Administrators, doctors, the Medical Examiner’s office and NYPD missing persons detectives.



Are there any services that HFBA provides to the larger HFBA community, besides arranging burials for the indigent?

HFBA can arrange for *kaddish* to be said and will send *yahrzeit* reminders when requested.

What is the percentage of HFBA cases from the Russian-speaking community?

Nearly 1/3 of our cases are from the Russian-speaking community.

Are any “bold-face” names buried in HFBA’s cemetery?

The parents of Eddie Cantor and Clara Bow, and Mel Brooks’ grandparents were buried by HFBA as were 22 victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. We have also buried notable Russian artists, poets and musicians. Occasionally, we are surprised by names in the The New York Times Obituary section which has had articles about some of our clients who were notable or successful earlier in their lives.



Annual Riverdale Breakfast

On March 11, the Riverdale Jewish community once again graciously hosted their annual HFBA breakfast. This year the event took place at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Over 160 people gathered to honor **Shira Gordon** and **Phil Shaw** with the *Chesed Shel Emet* award and **Rena** and **Jonathan Boniuk** with the Community Service award.



Left to R:
Jonathan and
Rena Boniuk,
Shira Gordon
and Phil Shaw

Chesed Shel Emet – How You Can Help

REMEMBER to include HFBA in your will with a bequest.

ESTABLISH an HFBA Forever Gift Annuity or Charitable Trust Plan. In addition to the guaranteed income and tax benefits, these plans ensure that HFBA's promise of a Jewish burial to future generations of indigent Jews will be fulfilled.

CELEBRATE a *simcha* or commemorate a loss with HFBA cards. Cards cost \$18 and can include a personalized message.

CONTRIBUTE to HFBA to ensure an annual *yahrzeit* reminder for your lost loved ones.

INSTITUTE a perpetual *yahrzeit kaddish* for your loved one for a donation of \$180.

ARRANGE for *kaddish* to be said for the eleven month mourning period following a death of a relative or friend for a donation of \$360.

DONATE unused graves. If the graves are not part of a burial society or family plot and are located in New York or New Jersey, please consider donating them to HFBA and receiving a tax deduction for your gift.

SPONSOR perpetual grave care for an indigent's grave for \$600.

ENROLL a Bar/Bat Mitzvah in our "Mitzvah Circle" by suggesting a gift to HFBA to your guests. The generous child who shares his/her *simcha* in this way receives a framed certificate.

VOLUNTEER with your friends, classmates, fellow group members, or family at Silver Lake Cemetery Chesed Days.

GET INVOLVED as a professional with HFBA by donating your expertise and skills in an area that can help us.

DONATE your property, used vehicle or boat and receive a generous tax donation.



PLEASE HELP OUT TODAY BY SENDING A DONATION IN THE ENCLOSED ENVELOPE.

THE HEBREW FREE BURIAL ASSOCIATION was formed in 1888 on Manhattan's Lower East Side by a group of philanthropic and community-minded Jews who were committed to burying their indigent dead according to Jewish tradition, rather than having them buried in a mass grave in city cemetery. Since its inception HFBA has interred over 65,000 Jews in its two cemeteries. HFBA is also committed to retrieving the identities of those interred and is attempting to provide a gravestone for each unmarked grave.



BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Herbert Block
Richard Fishman
Charles M. Greinsky
Gary Katz
David Knapp
Paul Lowenthal
Robert Mendeles
Paul H. Nagelberg

Yitzhak Pastreich
Daniel A. Pilarski
Shari Safra
Minna Monte Seitelman
Rabbi Dr. Henry Sheinkopf
Martha Steinmetz
Norman Weisman

RABBINIC ADVISOR

Rabbi Elchonon Zohn

CEMETERY CHAPLAIN

Rabbi Shmuel Plafker

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Amy Koplow

CHESED IS PUBLISHED BY

THE HEBREW FREE BURIAL ASSOCIATION

Renée Septimus, *Editor* Adam Rawson, *Designer*
Printed by Spencer and Worth, Ltd.

125 Maiden Lane, Unit 5B
New York, NY 10038
Phone: (212) 239-1662 • Fax: (212) 239-1981
info@hebrewfreeburial.org
www.hebrewfreeburial.org
www.facebook.com/hebrewfreeburial

