

OPINION

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Bury or cremate? Thinking in or out of the box

By Joyce Eisenberg

We buried my mother-in-law, Mitzi Eisenberg, on Feb. 17, 2010. More or less.

A few days earlier, a Snowmageddon so fierce it has its own Wikipedia page dumped 16 inches of snow on Philadelphia. As my husband, Ted, and I were on our way to the funeral, the owner of Har Zion Cemetery in Collingdale called to tell us that he wouldn't be able to bury Mom later that day; he didn't have a snowplow. Borrow one, we told him.

We arrived at the cemetery to find the snow removed but the grave not dug. The ground was frozen. We recited the Mourner's Kaddish prayer with the casket set on the ice. The workers assured us they'd finish the job when the frozen ground thawed. We felt unnerved, unsettled. Burial rituals are meant to comfort us, but there was no comfort here.

When we returned several days later, the hole was partially excavated and filled with water. The casket was half in and half out.

That's when my husband told me that he wanted to be cremated, not buried.

That hadn't been the plan. Ted and I had imagined being buried side by side. In 1982, before a round-the-world backpacking trip, we typed up our funeral requests. We wanted to be buried in the same plain pine box with our glasses, socks, and wedding bands on.

When we were growing up, Jews didn't get cremated. It is a violation of Jewish law and tradition, which commands us to honor the dead with a burial. We did know some Jewish

people who were choosing this option. Among the less observant, like us, the rules seem to be loosening.

"Do you really want to be burned?" I asked Ted.

"If you think you'd be conscious when you're dead, wouldn't it be equally unpleasant to be buried six feet under?" he countered.

Ted suggested I could put him in an urn and keep him on the mantel. If I remarried, I could move him into the closet and spend time with him there now and then. It would be easier than visiting him in the cemetery. Who goes to the cemetery, anyway? he asked.

I do. When my dad died in 2001, I assumed the responsibility of checking that the family graves were in good repair. We had learned that paying for "perpetual care" didn't guarantee good care.



At least once a year I visit the cemeteries where 21 family members are buried. Back in the day, many of them lived in the same Philadelphia neighborhood; now they rest not far from one another in three Delaware