

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

County Jewish cemeteries. I go by myself, and I rarely see another person.

I place a small, pretty stone on each grave, as is the Jewish custom. I say simple prayers of gratitude: to my in-laws for deciding to have a third child (my husband), to my Aunt Ruth and Uncle Bernie for babysitting for my children.

The birth and death dates engraved in stone — and the passage of time — reveal facts I never fully grasped. I knew my father lost his mom when he was 25, but I didn't realize till now how young that was — younger than my kids are now. My mother died in 1961 when I was 8, and when I do the math it hits me that I've been without her for 56 years.

My mother's address — Mt. Jacob, Section N, Lot 73 Grave 4 — is in my phone book, along with those of my 20 other deceased relatives. It comforts me to know where to find them.

I wasn't happy about cremation, but if Ted was going to be in an urn, I didn't want to be in the ground. We've been married for more than 40 years. I wanted to be together. If there was an afterlife, I needed to be able to find him.

Soon after my husband's announcement I had lunch with a widowed Jewish friend, who pointed to her husband's remains on her bookshelf beside precious souvenirs from their travels. When she dies, she said, she will be cremated, too, and her children will commingle their parents' ashes and scatter them. I liked that idea.

We hadn't bought plots yet, although some of our friends had, telling us that prices would only be going up. What if we had reserved a space in Philly and both of our kids ended up living out West? Then nobody would visit.

Having a burial plot is like owning a vacation property; you feel obligated to vacation there. Cremation felt like less of a commitment; we

could change our minds about where we wanted to be scattered or decide if we'd rather be turned into compost.

We could even be transformed into diamonds, we learned, when we Googled *cremation*. How crass, we thought, and then we watched the video. We'd be tinted blue, white, or yellow depending on our chemical composition. We could mix our ashes together and make a Mom & Dad diamond ring for each child.

When we asked friends if they wanted to be cremated or buried, some were eager to talk about it; others were visibly uncomfortable. A friend said, "We don't discuss it in my family."

I've had enough of that. In 1961, when my mother died, people didn't talk about cancer and death, especially to kids. They didn't let me go to the funeral. They didn't ask how I felt. I've been filling that hole ever since.

And perhaps because my kids grew up with a motherless mother who didn't want to miss any opportunity because she knows that life is short, they think about death, too. Before my son left for a semester in China, he told us that if he died he wanted a Viking funeral. His archer friend should shoot the flaming arrow; a friend of ours should read from the Tibetan Book of the Dead. When she was in college, my daughter's funeral vision included a spiritual ceremony in a forest clearing, blues guitar, and a communal painting project by hands, not brushes.

It has been a number of years since we've talked to our kids about what they'd like us to do for them if, God forbid, they die before us. And we haven't yet discussed where we'd like them to scatter our ashes. Maybe we'll do it the next time we all have dinner together — after the main course. Then we'll get on with dessert — and with living.