

NATURE'S ASHES

BY ROBIN MEYERSON

*Never shall I forget the little faces of the children
whose bodies turned into wreaths of smoke
beneath a silent blue sky.*

– Elie Wiesel

Just as I was beginning the journey of exploring my Jewish heritage, my father's sister Hazel died suddenly. I asked my dad if I should go to the funeral in Hawaii. He said no, that there wouldn't be one. Instead Aunt Hazel's ashes were dumped in the Pacific Ocean off an island in Hawaii. Cremation and ash scattering is a Hawaiian custom and my Aunt Hazel was enamored with Hawaiian culture knowing practically nothing of her own rich Jewish heritage.

At the time, I had no real knowledge of what a Jewish burial was like anyway, but I didn't know the details of a cremation either; yet, somehow, I was unsettled about the whole cremation thing. When my father also mentioned in passing that he might want a cremation, something just didn't sit right with me. I could not explain my uneasiness. It was only as I became aware of the Jewish view of cremation versus burial several years later that it became imperative for me to share the knowledge with my other relatives.

I have several fond memories of my mother's sister, Aunt Sandy. She lived in Northern California near the Redwood Forest. When I was a little girl, and would visit, she would take us exploring in the forest and point out all the huge trees and tiniest snails. Aunt Sandy had a PhD in some sort of "snail science" and knew a tre-

mendous amount about every single kind of snail in the world. She was super fun to be around. When I grew up and got married, she came to my wedding with plastic red noses to light up the party with her hysterical sense of humor.

As my family grew, Aunt Sandy developed a close bond with my children, taking them to science museums and bookstores. She was super scientific and intellectual yet she had had a hard life. As a child, she suffered. Despite having a wonderful marriage for nearly fifty years, she struggled for most of her life to raise a special needs child. She also knew practically nothing about Judaism.

Before she died, my aunt confided in me, sharing her plans for cremation. I was devastated as I could not imagine my jolly aunt burning in a crematorium. I looked online and searched for books on the subject, but could not really find anything that explained the choices in a comprehensive manner that would be personally meaningful to her. I found both religious and secular reasons for both choices online but they were all commercial in nature. Since it was all I had, I went ahead and shared this information, but it did not really speak to my aunt. I wrote her an email which she promised to read and think about. But she called me back one day to tell me that she didn't really believe in God, that she had considered my email, but that her papers were already made out and her mind was made up.

A few months later, she was diagnosed with cancer and, to my horror, Aunt Sandy was cremated and her ashes scattered across the California Redwood Forest.

Aunt Sandy, with her limited information, believed cremation was better for the environment – but it is not. One time I remember Aunt Sandy telling me she didn't think there was enough land in America for cemeteries. She thought it was a waste of land to bury her. But it didn't make any sense. "There is so much land," I responded!

Environmentalists worldwide prefer green burial - never embalming because of all the toxic chemicals that leak into the ground or using metal caskets (both forbidden in Jewish law). Discarding ashes even damages soil. Environmentalists report that cremation uses a tremendous amount of fossil fuel and pollutes the air and

water when mercury and other toxic chemicals are released as the body burns for several hours. Crematoriums are not situated near suburban neighborhoods for this very reason.

While I can do positive things in Aunt Sandy's memory now that she is gone and remember her favorably, I and several other close relatives are extremely saddened that we can never "visit" her place of rest - ever. And we have nightmares thinking of Aunt Sandy's body burning for several hours at 1800 degrees and her bones being pulverized and crushed. Her arms and body had cuddled and kissed us and made us laugh but instead of a gentle burial, she had a violent end. I later learned that ashes can be mixed up and there is no way to tell whose ashes are whose since there is no DNA in ashes. Ashes are just ashes and can be put in the garbage.

My kids loved their Great-Aunt Sandy very much. She made us all laugh. My kids asked me about visiting her soul at the cemetery because they thought that would bring them some measure of comfort. Unfortunately, they can't. There is no one to visit and no comfort to be had because she chose cremation. It was so painful to tell my sweet children this as they looked up at me with confusion, shock, fear and tears in their eyes.

To this day, so many years later, my mind relives those last days with her on the phone and I still think regretfully, "If only I had been able to change Aunt Sandy's mind."

LAND OF THE FREE

BY RAHEL

She thought about what Billy had said, about throwing on the clod of dirt, of releasing something of the memory into the earth. What did one release with a cremation? Where was the ritual, the ending of the story, when there was no grave to visit, no place to set down a posy of primroses or an armful of fresh daffodils?

– Jacqueline Winspear, *Maisie Dobbs - An Incomplete Revenge*



As the words on the base of the Statue of Liberty imply, the United States took in the huddled masses from all over, opening its doors to dreamers from around the globe. Many who came escaped terrible fates of persecution and poverty in their countries of origin. The goal was to form a new people steeped in freedom and a just society - a land of golden opportunity. And so, regardless of ethnicity and religion, Americans were legally free to marry each other in this melting pot.

My mum did not receive a formal Jewish education but she did absorb American values. In 1948, after her observant mother had passed away, my beautiful Jewish mum, a bat Levi, daughter of Polish and Russian immigrants, married my handsome Catholic Dad, also the son of Polish immigrants, in a civil ceremony.

In 1960, they remarried in a Catholic ceremony. Mum never converted to Catholicism but promised the priest that her large family would be raised Catholic. By doing this, Dad could return to Catholic practices and ensure he receive a Catholic burial.

We were raised, prior to their second wedding, in a wholesome environment with old-fashioned American values: the public school system, frugality, hard work, patriotism, love of family, morality, respect, humor, and song. After the Catholic ceremony, we attended Catholic schools.

We were not taught about the mitzvot of Judaism in our home, although Mum shared a few Jewish songs, an interest in Jewish entertainers, a few Yiddish words and childhood memories of her observant mother. In fact, neither parent, nor we, even knew that according to *Halacha*, Jewish law, we siblings are all Jewish.

Mum, was a kind, humble, loving, hardworking, generous, selfless, giving, funny woman, a beautiful soul who received joy from many “little things”. Her *middot* (good qualities) were extraordinary. She was the best of the best. She loved us each equally but uniquely. All of us adored her as a mother and miss her - and Dad - terribly. She was an incredible grandmother to her many grandchildren, and that included my foster sons.

We siblings eventually each chose different religious and philosophical paths. The family loyalty instilled in us by our parents remains strong. Mum believed everybody had to seek what made her or him happy; she believed in the words of the ingenious and tolerant Declaration of Independence - each person was entitled to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”. My brothers and sisters are all exemplary people. We aging siblings are helpful and loving to one other, even to this day.

After I became observant in the 1980s, Mum gave me a little note that said, “I want a Jewish burial.” She also gave the note to another sister. By this time, my parents had separated. Born a Jew, Mum told me, she would die a Jew. I am personally very thankful she had the foresight to write that note. The Jewish practices added layers of meaning, historical roots and comfort to the deep pain of her loss. It was elevating for her soul and for ours.

Mum’s brother was the president of a Jewish philanthropic organization, and while Mum was living, he purchased a gravesite for her in its section of the Jewish cemetery. Several of the family rest there and there are spaces for more of us.

Spring was coming and Mum was anticipating the flowers. Mum lived with one of my sisters and that sister took my mum shopping on a Friday in 1998. Mum had a happy day. And then that evening, an *Erev Shabbat* (Sabbath eve) in Adar, the Jewish month symbolic of increasing joy, she left us in her sleep. To die on Shabbat is an honor, the kiss of *Hashem*, according to tradition. My sister found her in the morning.

I didn't live in the same town as Mum so I was unaware of what was going on. However, there was an invisible yet physical bond of consciousness extending beyond space between my mum and myself.

Still, while she was transcending, I could barely move as I prepared for Shabbat. It felt as if I was having a heart attack (and I have no cardiac issues). My darling husband was worried; he urged me to rest, stop preparations. Falling, holding on to the wall after the brief meal, I kind of staggered to the couch, unable to function.

To say we were anguished with grief is such a mild understatement of the paralyzing pain we each felt. How could we live without Mum? Unimaginable.

My siblings came from across the country. One of my brothers sought out the Chabad rabbi.

"What was her Hebrew name?" asked the rabbi. I said I didn't know her Hebrew name but she was called Lake or Lakie. "Lakie is a form of Leah," replied the rabbi. So Mum was Leah bat Rahel and Yakov HaLevi.

A traditional Jewish burial is very different from cremation or embalming. A body, the vessel of the soul that does the work of Hashem in the lower world, is treated with utmost respect. A *shomer*, watcher from the Jewish community says *Tehillim* (Psalms), in the presence of the departed person night and day until he or she is buried. No light conversation is permitted. While saying *Tehillim*, the women volunteers of the *Chevra Kaddisha* washed (this is called *tahara*) and wrapped our darling Mum in a white shroud. The belt of the shroud is tied in the form of the letter *shin*, standing for *Shaddai*, a name of *Hashem*. Forgiveness is asked for any unintentional disrespect or embarrassment caused. Soil and herbs from the Land of Israel are placed on the body. There is no

public showing. “The *tahara* was so beautiful,” one woman volunteer gently told me after it was finished.

In the funeral home, the Chabad rabbi explained *kriah* and we all wept as we tore our garments. Our hearts tore too. Even now, eighteen years later, I weep as I type. *Baruch Dayan HaEmet...* Blessed is the True Judge.

The rabbi, one of my brothers and my husband spoke very touchingly and lovingly of Mum during the *hespedim*, eulogies, at the funeral home.

My Mum had wanted my brothers to carry her coffin and so they did. The coffin was a traditional, simple pine box.

It was raining very hard that day. The heavens sobbed and wailed with us. When the last thud of dirt heartbreakingly hit the coffin, the rains ceased. The storm clouds parted. A ray of light danced through the gray. My Israeli friend told me there is an ancient tradition that teaches that the sunbeam after a rain symbolizes the welcoming back of a soul who served *Hashem* well. Welcome home, *Neshamale*, little soul.

My brothers, those sweet former altar boys, joined with my sisters and me and the rabbi in reading a transliteration of the *Kaddish*, the ancient Aramaic prayer exalting God. There is no mention of death in the *Kaddish*, only praise, glory, and magnification of *Hashem*.

After the ceremony, at my sister's home, the rabbi explained to our family that neither physical nor spiritual energy is created or destroyed. The soul is eternal, he taught. Love never dies. Our mother's mission on earth was done but she would continue to be a mother to us from the world beyond; she was forever our advocate and forever connected. While in a body, a soul can only be in one place at a time but now Mum could be with each of us at any time or place. We would one day rejoin her and in some future time in the days of *Mashiach* there would be *Techiyat Hameitim*, the Resurrection of the Dead, to reward the body for enabling the soul to do her work. He told us to do mitzvot in Mum's memory and when we visit her grave, there would still be a spark of her that remained on earth. She would live on in our acts, in our good deeds, in our love, in our soul and memory. I have found this to be very true

and so have my siblings. She is a beloved living presence. Even her perfume scent lingers periodically in her former bedroom and we each have taken on some of her kind ways.

Months later, on a cold day in late fall, we had the unveiling of the *matzeva*, gravestone. The Chabad rabbi, who helped us bury Mum, and many of my siblings gathered while we read more Jewish meditations on Mum and more prayers. The date of the unveiling fell on my little son Jon's birthday and he was happy to honor Mum on his day. Her gravestone has piles of stones on its ledge, showing countless visits from loved ones.

Mum had a prayer written by Phyllis Ingram tucked into the corner of a family photo.

*"It seems like only yesterday we crossed the street together
And with his little hand in mine we faced the stormy weather.
We shared the laughter and the fun and sometimes there were
tears,
And I was happy to be there to chase his childhood fears.
In retrospect, I can't believe how quickly time has flown,
And with a mother's pride I see how fine my son has grown.
No longer shall I lead the way, his hand is larger than mine,
And so, dear Lord I place his hand forever into Thine."*

I believe it revealed how she felt about us and about God.
May her memory continue to always be for a blessing.

AFTERWORD

*Twenty years from now
you will be more disappointed
by the things that you didn't do
than by the ones you did do.*

– Mark Twain

A

few weeks ago, I received an email from a lovely lady whose husband had just passed away. And although many days and events have elapsed since its arrival in my inbox, her question, hasn't left my mind.

It wasn't the complexity of her question that left me baffled. It wasn't even the intensity of emotion with which it was asked, that left me pondering. Rather, it was "her question behind her question," as my dear mentor, Rabbi Steinsaltz, would call it. For within her question, lies the cry of the Jewish soul. It is a cry that we all share, and that each of us must respond to, every single day.

So, with all humility, allow me to share parts of this exchange with you.

Dear Rabbi,

Just before my husband passed away yesterday, he asked to have a Jewish burial and be buried in a Jewish cemetery. I was taken aback by his request, as my husband never practiced Judaism, in any shape or form. Moreover, he married me, a non-Jew, and I would have preferred to bury him in a non-Jewish cemetery, next to a plot that was purchased for me many years

ago. I also heard that Jewish law may not allow him to be buried in a Jewish cemetery, since he had a tattoo and he also “married out” of his faith. But I also want to be respectful of his wish, and do the right thing. So, Rabbi, what should I do?

Thank you,

J.



Dear J.,

Your poignant question moves me. I read it again and again, for somewhere, beyond your words, I heard the cry of the deceased’s soul.

You are right: you ought to be respectful of his wish, in spite of your concerns. Many Jewish legal authorities rule that every Jew, including Jews who have tattoos and Jews who “marry out”, ought to be buried among their people in a Jewish cemetery. (Even one who commits suicide – a crime of the highest order in Torah and Halacha – may be buried inside a Jewish cemetery as we assume that he was not in a normal state of mind at that moment).

But your question, J., struck a profound chord deep within, for it told the super-rational story of the Jewish soul:

As you described, here lived a Jew, who “married out”, and “never practiced Judaism in any shape or form.” But as the end of his life looms, this assimilated Jew seems to have but one request: “Bury me as a Jew.” It defies logic, doesn’t it? Here’s a man who had no apparent commitment to Judaism, and to his Jewish roots, yet when faced with death, his sole desire is to die as a Jew!

This, J., is the story of the inextinguishable Jewish soul. It never ceases to yearn for self-fulfillment. It never stops calling upon us to actualize our Divine purpose in life. And it always attempts to come forth and challenge our commitment to our Torah, to our faith, and to our people, even when it hides in the strangest of places.

Lastly, J., allow me to thank you sincerely for your question. Its reverberating echoes will forever remain with me. For just imagine, J., the feats we could achieve if we would listen to our soul's cry, not just during the tough times, but more importantly, at every moment we breathe. Imagine how this could bring meaning into our lives and improve the world around us.

Indeed, to die as a Jew is important. But to live as a Jew is vital. Thank you J. for your question, and for this eternal reminder.

*With my deepest wishes,
Rabbi Pinchas Allouche*