בס"ד

FROM THE SHIURIM OF

Rabbi Avraham Zajac

Respecting the Body 2026-08-17

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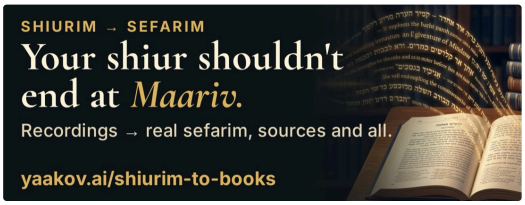
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Set 20 September 2026

◆ *A Dedication, and Why I Keep Returning to Burial*

This class is dedicated to the memory of Batya bas Eliezer, a woman I met many years ago when we moved from Brazil to Los Angeles, twenty-one years ago. She passed away, and unfortunately the Chevra Kadisha was not called. She has no close kin here, the city took possession, and now we are trying to expedite matters. Imagine — ten days, eleven days in, and she still does not have a Jewish burial.

Having a Jewish burial is one of the many mitzvos that appear in this week's Parsha. And I speak about it whenever I can, because in our larger circle we face so many families whose instinct, after a person's passing, is to cremate. Here in Los Angeles, every single one of the Jewish cemeteries offers cremation as an option. All of them.

So I want to speak about the beauty of burial and the importance of burial — not simply as a piece of life that happens to be morbid, but as something real. To do that, I have to begin somewhere else entirely.

◆ *The Rebbe at the Airport*

Sometime in the 1970s there was a communal activist, not a Chabad chassid, I believe from Eretz Yisrael, who valued the Rebbe's practical, wise guidance. Whenever he came to the East Coast he made an effort to speak with the Rebbe — not as a chassid, but to get input on the many beautiful projects he was involved in on behalf of the community.

During one such audience he felt that the Rebbe was not present. That is rare; of all the thousands of people who had an audience with the Rebbe, presence was precisely what they describe. A chassid wouldn't say boo. But the advantage of not being a chassid — if one may say such a thing, and I am saying it — is that he felt he had the liberty. He asked the Rebbe in Yiddish: Is something wrong? Did I say something offensive? He was surely coming from a good place, and that is how it works: the Rebbe opened up and shared something that was otherwise private.

A short while earlier, a newly married couple had come to ask for a blessing to go out on shlichus — to a place with no Jewish infrastructure at all. It is becoming less common in the world, but such places exist, places with nothing. You have to build a mikvah, establish Jewish education, import kosher food. (A shout-out to the shluchim in Sri Lanka; you have shluchim everywhere, and they are always at the forefront.) The Rebbe told them what he told almost everyone: he would give the blessing if they obtained the consent of both sets of parents. They got the consent, they came back, and the Rebbe gave his blessing.

Then the Rebbe went on. The young wife is the youngest of six, the only girl, with five older brothers. All of them are married, and all of them are already out on shlichus — the Rebbe named where each couple was. The parents live in Crown Heights, and now their final child is leaving, which means they will live out their lives alone. "And right now they are at the airport, saying goodbye, crying tears of joy — but they are still tears." And then, as I understand what the Rebbe meant: **and I am with them now.**

How beautiful that the Rebbe was sensitive to that. He understood the sadness of it, the sacrifice of it, and he acknowledged it: I am not fully present with you, because this is where I am right now.

◆ *Do Not Replace Anguish With Gratitude*

I want to use this for something that applies to everything, but let me take it to gratitude and anguish. Real gratitude is when we feel we are receiving more than our due — Hashem, I am grateful, I don't even deserve all the greatness You are giving me. And the opposite of that is anguish. Not the difficulty a person understands. When someone undergoes a challenge and grasps, to whatever limited degree we grasp anything, why it is happening — fine, it is hard, but it's a kaparah. I say that all the time myself. But notice what that does: if you go straight to kaparah, you cut the anguish short. You don't honor the anguish. And you get away with that until you can't, and Hashem has His way — her way, its way, however you wish to refer to G-d — of letting you know that there is such a thing as anguish, the opposite of gratitude.

I have said in the past that people misuse gratitude in a very unhealthy way, by insisting that we must always be in gratitude. Listen to what such a person is really saying: that G-d is not to be found in anguish. That G-d is only in gratitude. And therefore — let me cut myself off from the part of me that carries anguish, and that way I'll be connected to G-d. **It is the biggest insult to G-d**, and it is an insult to yourself.

Let me word this as plainly as I can, because if there is one takeaway here, this is it. I made this mistake myself. Gratitude says: G-d, You are amazing. Anguish leads to prayer: G-d, I need. I need because I don't have; if I have, I don't need. If everything is wonderful and I have more than I need, there is nothing to ask for — then don't say boo. But we have plenty of asks, and that is truthful, because there are many things which, in our understanding — and all we have is our understanding — we genuinely need. We believe in G-d, so we ask the Source.

So when a person is in anguish, do not think that the ideal is to replace the anguish with gratitude. That is unhealthy thinking. Take it to trust, to keser. A person feels mistrust — horrible — as against feeling trust. And what is the fantasy? I need to get to trust. I would love to be there; it feels wonderful there and it feels terrible here. Emes. But do not replace mistrust with trust. Do not replace anguish with gratitude. Don't do it.

Then what should I be thinking? How do I deal with it? There is a level of growth available to us dafka only when we learn to endure the mistrust, to endure the anguish. There is growth from anguish, growth from the

wounding, growth from the fear that the wounding triggers inside a person. All of that has to be endured, and in enduring it we come to a broader understanding of what is. Ultimately — and I am using religious words, so if you are struggling with G-d, use your own words, but this is the emes — we find G-d there. Replace the anguish with G-d, the right way. Not with gratitude.

◆ *Why G-d's Name Is Said Twice*

Our Sefardi brothers have already begun saying Selichos, and it is beautiful that they come every single day. We Ashkenazim sin a great deal less, so we get to start much later. I think the Sefardim simply love davening more.

One of the verses repeated again and again in Selichos and in the tefillos of the Yamim Noraim is the thirteen attributes of mercy, and it opens by saying G-d's name twice: [1] ה' ה' אל רחום וחנון ארך אפים. Why twice? There is only one G-d. Elsewhere in Scripture most of these same words appear with a single Name. So the Gemara explains: I am G-d before a person sins, and I am G-d after he sins. Rashi says: I have compassion before the sin and I have compassion after the sin. Why we need G-d's compassion before we sin is a question for another time. I only want ה' ה'.

ה' ה' means that although there is one G-d, there are two opposite ways in which we encounter Him. The way we prefer, certainly when we are younger, is: Come on, G-d, give me blessings, give me abundance, give me everything I need and more, and I will be grateful. And we are grateful. I will find You in the good, I will find You in the light. If a person does not find G-d in the blessings, then let G-d give him even more blessings, until he has no option left but to say, I'm winning the lottery every single day, there has got to be a G-d. Let us hope that is our portion.

But the very same G-d is to be found when we are in the lacking — and by "sin" here I do not mean bad behavior; I mean the place of anguish, where it does not feel good, where I don't like this and I can't take this. And therefore what? We have no option. We have to endure. But there is value in it, because being in the place where you do not want to be gives you something. Dealing with the nudnik customer you would rather not deal with — there is something you gain from it. We would prefer that you make the sale, the person pays, שלום על ישראל, and he reorders. You will have some of those. And you will have others. What is the purpose of them? In the outer world, maybe to get rid of them. In the inner world it doesn't work that way — and even in the outer world you often can't get rid of them, and they don't get rid of you. There is something there.

Back to the airport. There are tears of joy, and people assume that G-d is found in tears of joy. Perhaps the Rebbe felt that the family was focusing only on the joy — the children going out to a mission-oriented life, the great merit of it, the great things they will accomplish. All of that is true. What was missing was the acknowledgment that there is also anguish: the anguish of separation, the anguish of the challenges a young

couple faces moving to a place with nothing to support an observant life. That has to be respected. And if it brings tears that are not tears of joy — who told you that G-d is only to be found in tears of joy? ה' ה'. G-d is found here too. It is a different encounter, a different flavor, and we are meant to have both, and G-d determines how much of which.

◆ *Burial as Respect for What Has No Further Use*

Now let me connect this to burial, because this is where the idea stops being easy and distant and becomes real. There is a disadvantage to speaking personally — it can take the soul out of the conversation. But there is also an advantage, when a person can do it in a somewhat objective way, because that is where an idea becomes incarnate, where you actually see these things of life happening.

In Yiddishkeit we advocate for burial. There are many reasons, but the most basic one is that burial is how we respect the body. The body was used by the soul throughout the person's lifetime. Even though the body is currently of no further use to the neshamah, doing anything to it that the Torah deems disrespectful is unethical.

Every part of our lives has a soul and a body. Hopefully we all graduate to appreciate that the soul of whatever it is you are dealing with is supreme — we give credence to the eternal, the G-dly, the holy. Soul over body, soul over body. But it was never meant, and it never will mean, to disrespect the body. For me, keeping the mitzvos is the ultimate goal, and there are many parts of life that are not directly mitzvah-connected. They are not on the same level. That does not mean they are unimportant, and it does not mean they need not be respected. **They must be respected.**

Take another example. Inside each of us there is what we deem the brilliant and great, and what we deem the inadequate. Whether the assessment is accurate is beside the point. Most of us really learned that the second part is inadequate — we were shamed, we did things or failed to do things that got us into trouble, sometimes big trouble. We all live in societies that deem certain things valuable and certain things not yet valuable, or of no value at all. That, to me, is the soul and the body. You can even flip the labels; there are people not yet spiritually inclined who believe in a soul but arrange the more important and the less important differently. Either way, the mitzvah of burial declares: **what you deem to be less important must be respected.** And when a person figures out how to make that simple statement emes, it changes his life for the better.

◆ *Nelly's Daughters, and the Child I Buried*

Let me share something personal. A number of months ago there was a woman in our shul named Nelly. She was a Persian woman who became religious on her own. Her parents and family were supportive of her journey, which is beautiful, and I do not minimize the grandmother at all — I am sure she has a Shabbos

table. At some point Nelly went to Crown Heights, to Machon Chana, and became very, very observant. During that period she married, and it was a very, very not chassidishe marriage. It was a horrible marriage for her. I never met the man; he is completely out of the picture, by his own choice. They had two children, Emma and Abigail. And one morning, some eight months ago, the mother simply did not wake up. Horrible. She used to bring her daughters to shul; she loved being in shul.

Something very unusual has been happening to me since her passing: both of these girls bonded with me very deeply. To her great credit, one of Nelly's sisters, whose own children are already in their twenties, adopted her nieces, so they are being raised by family. They were away from shul for about six weeks, and when they came back there was a great deal of demonstrative affection shown toward me.

A little about my background: I come from a very Haredi background, and that is not within my comfort zone. I should have hugged my own children more than I did. That is in the past — it is never too late, but those were the most important years. And now here is this girl coming over to hug me and kiss me, at a time when I, like many people, am working my way back to my own childhood. I grew up as a boy in Far Rockaway, in a much less rigid environment. Really less rigid. A very loving environment. Then I moved to Brazil very young, and it was a drastic change. I think there was something in me, a child in me, that needed to be buried, because it was inadequate — not so learned, not so developed. I was the worst kid in my class. I couldn't read properly. It never bothered me then, because it wasn't a judgmental environment; everything was gevaldik. And then I arrived in a different universe, where if you don't know the right answer you get beaten. I didn't know, because I didn't speak the language. I learned Yiddish in two weeks. And I went from the weakest boy in the class to the top boy in the class — to survive. Every one of us has this in his own version.

So I am trying to resurrect a child who is foreign to me. I am inside that work, thinking about it, asking how one integrates such a thing. And then it externalizes itself: a pure, innocent child stands in front of me and all she says is, I miss my mommy. She somehow connects to her mother in a Chabad shul, and dafka through me. Maybe I need to embrace her even more. Maybe I should have picked her up. I have to learn how to navigate it.

◆ *The Inadequate Must Be Given Kavod*

Here is what I want to say. The inadequate part of you — that is the body; the soul is whatever you find soulful in you — the inadequate in you has to be respected. It has to be valued. And notice: the inadequate one is the humble one. The successful one is the arrogant one. How horrible is that? On that basis alone they need each other. The inadequate one cannot do everything; where it is undeveloped it is undeveloped, and it will not get you where you need to get, supposing you need to get there. This inner integration is a tremendous challenge. It is hard to find, hard to identify, hard to be sure you are not making things up.

For me, finding the inadequate means finding the area of your life where you fail, or where you cannot function because you become anxious. And a person will label himself as having an anxiety disorder, which may or may not be the case. It could be you are encountering your inadequate part making itself known: I cannot do that. If there is something you cannot do — and if you haven't located it yet you will, sooner or later — that means there is a part of us that simply cannot do it, and we learned to bury it, to bulldoze over it, to do what needs to be done anyway. But that part is necessary, and you have to respect it. Not by suppressing it. Not by doing the thing anyway. **By not doing it.** By saying: there are certain things I just cannot do, even though other people do them with great ease. So what? Because I am inadequate, and my inadequate part wants to be.

Don't replace one with the other. ה' ה'. And if you go down this path you may well encounter more anguish, precisely because you have stopped ignoring it, so it comes up. So what? Embrace it. Not with joy — embrace it with respect. That is why I like the word respect. We bury a body not because the corpse is wonderful. A corpse is not wonderful. It has a bad odor, it does not look good; a living person looks good, a dead person looks like a dead person. Respect it anyway. Give it kavod. Give it honor. Beautiful.

◆ *Burial Is Called Planting*

And there is more. We do not call burial burial; we call it planting. How about that. When you plant a seed in the earth, the seed decomposes — and out of its decomposition comes a new tree, a living tree. From a tiny seed, a tree.

We believe in the resurrection. And we believe the resurrection does not only happen at the resurrection. It can happen right now. Every day you daven and say that G-d brings the dead back to life. I know that every person has an area of his life where he feels he is already dead, and he carries it in the back of his mind. We believe that what you deem dead can come back to life. How? What is my part in it? I don't do it — G-d does it. My part is to respect the dead in me. To give it kavod. I am not celebrating it. I don't have to be happy with it. But I cannot be angry with it.

I spoke last week about judgment having no place in inner work, and this is the clearest example. If you find something inadequate within you, the goal is not to make it adequate. **Don't go there.** You already have adequate. The goal is to bring the inadequate up, to become more inadequate — not by forcing anything, but by allowing it fully to be, and respecting it. And I think things in your life will actually change. This is my experience: things outside of you begin to mirror what is happening inside, which I take as a hint from G-d about where to go, where not to go, how to go.

It is not simple. We can all get lost in it, because there are no signposts and because it is never one size fits all. Out of laziness we can choose the easy route; out of harshness we can choose dafka the hard route — I know many people like that, and judging yourself is not helpful. Getting it right sounds impossible, and the

honest response is: fine, it is impossible, so G-d will make it better for me, G-d will show me the way — once I fully acknowledge that I do not know the way. Every person has areas in which he is in the know, and every person has a part of him that is clueless. All of us must have a cluelessness. We live in a society that denigrates that, and when we internalize it we do it to ourselves constantly: we denigrate the part of us we have judged to be inadequate, to put it nicely. That has to change.

That is the burial of the body as I understand it — to give cover to it. And when you give cover to the body, it comes back to life. Coming back to life does not mean it becomes adequate; you already have adequate. It means you integrate into yourself the humility of the inadequate, the innocence of it, the purity of it. I look at these two girls and I see purity, like something out of Gan Eden. We hold that children up until around nine are more there than here. The value of not exposing youngsters to movies and things that make deep impressions on them is not only the message — it is more than that. Those things distract them from where they are still connected. I think children really do see. They know things that we also once knew and have slowly forgotten.

Chazal say that a child learns everything and knows everything, and then an angel slaps him on the mouth and he forgets. I always assumed it meant they forget immediately. Who says they forget immediately? I think the angels are the parents — taka angels, and demons too, good angels and bad angels all mixed together — and I think we slap them on the mouth so much that at a certain age they forget. And the slapping is the judgment. Then we give continuity to it: when they stop slapping us, we take their place and do it to ourselves. And undoing that is oy gevald. We may as well get on with it, because after a person's passing everything gets integrated anyway. So we began that way and we are ending that way: **might as well resurrect your dead while you are still living.** That is a lot better than waiting. We are waiting for the resurrection; we like waiting. Genug with the waiting. Do now what you can do.

◆ *Cremation, and the Fight Worth Fighting*

All of this I see in the mitzvah of burial, in contrast to cremation, which is violent and disrespectful. According to the Zohar it is very painful. There is a part of the soul that continues with the body, the part called nefesh, and when the body is cremated, G-d forbid, the nefesh loses that contact, and it is very difficult for the nefesh when the body is burnt. Intuitively our enemies knew to do exactly this to us. That is why the Nazis burnt us.

And we have a duty here — to do everything in our power to prevent it from happening. As a shul we have been involved in many cases where a person left written instructions to be cremated, and sometimes we managed to have it overturned. You do not give up until it has actually happened. There is a fight to fight.

Burning the body while alive is what we do when we take the part of us we have deemed inadequate and destroy it — because the people around us destroyed it, or because we think we need to destroy it. It is all the

same idea: I will find G-d in gratitude, I will find G-d in light, I will find G-d in perfection, I will find G-d in the good. But there is only one G-d, and there is good and what we deem not good, and G-d has to be found in both. Sinless and sin — in both, G-d is meant to be found. Not in the sin itself, don't misunderstand me, but in the imperfection we become when we fail to do what we are meant to do. That is what sin means: the imperfect, the inadequate.

◆ *There Is No Formula, and There Is a Blessing in Not Knowing*

All of this is far easier said than done. It begins with putting words to it, thinking about it, and seeing whether it fits. If it doesn't fit, reject all of it. You don't have to accept anything. But if it sounds more or less right, then find your own words and make it fit you — because what fits you is not what fits me.

I believe this last point deeply. On some level there can never be a formula that fits everyone. It cannot be. Why does every person look different? There is a reason: because everyone is different. Everything is moving in that direction. Health used to be "this is healthy, this is not healthy." Now they say, let me take your blood type and find out which foods are good for you and which are good for me — and that is true. And if it is true for physical food, it is true for ideas. It is true for everything.

There are still rules, and there are concepts, and there are misunderstandings that most people share — chief among them the wrong replacement theory. I am replacing bad with good. That is a big mistake. I am not looking for bad; but don't replace it with good. Find G-d in it. For that you have to respect it, confront it, own it. All gevaldike words, easy to say and almost impossible to do. How do I do it? I don't know.

And by saying "I don't know how to do it," a person becomes open to knowing — dafka because he did not know. **You cannot know without first not knowing.** Most of us have a problem with not knowing, because in school not knowing got us into trouble. But it is good not to know. There is a goodness in it, a blessing in it. It is good to be uncertain; there is a blessing in it, a G-dliness in it, a humility in it — as against the arrogance of knowing, the arrogance of certainty, which is almost a dangerous arrogance. I say this specifically because we who have the Torah are the ones most liable to become that way, since there is a great deal that we genuinely do know, because G-d gave it to us. But there is a limit to what we know, a limit to how we know it, how it was explained to us, how we understood it and how we practice it. Everything is limited. Beyond that limit we do not know — and we have to live with both.

Sources

1. Shemos 34:6. :ויעבר יהוה ׀ על־פניו ויקרא יהוה ׀ יהוה אל רחום וחנון ארך אפים ורב־חסד ואמת