



## Green Burial Radio Program – Episode 1

Welcome to the Green Burial Radio Program, a show preparing your funeral home for the growing number of families wanting more ecofriendly funeral services. Brought to you by Funeral Radio. And now, your hosts, Joe Sehee and Shari Wolf.

Joe Sehee – Welcome to our podcast. We’re coming to you today from the American Jewish University. And, it’s the occasion of the Chevra Kadisha Society’s annual conference here in Los Angeles. And with us are Rabi Stuart Kelman and Father Charles Morris, who are both participants in the conference this year and also recipients of the Green Burial Council’s 2012 leadership award. Thank you for being here with us today.

Father Morris - Thank you.

Joe Sehee – So we’re wanting to talk about issues with folks in the funeral service industry that are associated with this emerging market for eco friendly death care. We know that you both have been working a lot with the folks in the field. And I wanted just to start off by, wanting to know what you really want funeral directors in particular to understand about your particular religious customs, particularly as it pertains to green burial.

Charles Morris – Rabi? Ok, yeah, I’d like to start-off. This is Father Charles Morris. I didn’t want a potential misunderstanding that maybe some funeral directors may have is that, in the Catholic tradition, that you have to have a vault, that you have to have a particular viewing, like a three day, two day viewing, that you have to have a particular like, metal casket with all the trimmings. Somehow, that there’s been an inflation in the last maybe fifty years, what seems to be a custom, tradition, a way of making that transition, that industry, the funeral industry, here in the United States, with the teachings of the wider church. And, the teachings of the wider church really don’t touch on any of that stuff.

Basically, that there's a sense of reverence, that we are a part of the earth, we're part of creation not apart from. Apart from that, there's, they say very little, I mean, except that we need to do so with a sense of reverence of the body. There's actually a few things that we do require, for instance, there're really not wanting people, not holding on to the ashes for a long time or throwing them to the four winds. They want them to bury them. But aside from those few constraints, there's very very little that they put on for particular customs. So, I would say if someone's not comfortable with someone suggesting, or if you're looking at the cost, or looking at all kinds of potential constraints, you want to do your homework, you want to check things out and go to the source, you know, find out that, for instance, in the case of cremation. Cremation was not done in the Catholic tradition for generations, hundreds of years, until what, thirty, thirty-some years ago? Then it became acceptable. But the thing is, these customs, these traditions, can very easily change. And I think, with green burial, we discover the power and the reverence and the spirituality of a sense of being reconnected again with God's good earth.

Rabi Kelman – This is Rabi Kelman. I must confess that I almost got into this Green Burial Movement by accident. When someone approached me and asked me if I'd be interested creating, in helping them create a new cemetery, I immediately thought about the Jewish community, at least in northern California around San Francisco and what the options were for people, for Jews, in the northern California community for burial. And when I began to learn more about, what is a Green Cemetery and green funeral practices in funeral homes, suddenly the question that keeps coming up over and over again, that started then and keeps coming up with everyone that I meet is, well, aren't we all in the Jewish tradition already doing 'green'? It's something we've been doing for ages. We've been burying in the ground. We've been, not embalming. We've been using as natural caskets as we can possibly use.

Well, at a certain point I began to take a look more seriously at all of these things and found indeed that a lot of what we have been doing is what I would call 'green', but not really. Caskets, for example, in the way that they're made and by the people who make them, which is another category, turned out to be 'Jewishly', according to Jewish law, acceptable, but not really acceptable from a 'green' perspective. Cemeteries, as well, the use of concrete is a big problem in Jewish cemeteries. And, what I'd like to offer to the... suggestions, to funeral directors is very simply that they become aware of some of the environmental aspects of 'green' that are not part of Jewish law and that they begin to offer people who are suddenly in front of them, options. The problem is that that's really not an appropriate time when you can give people a lot of options, that's just not when it happens.

So, what I really want to encourage funeral directors to do is, together with the Rabi's in the community, to begin to offer learning opportunities throughout the community, for the Jewish community, in which all of these issues become very prominent. The time for doing this is pre-death, not at death. And I would hope that the funeral directors begin to study and learn a little bit about what it is that they're doing in their own practice that could be 'green', and not only Haladically, according to Jewish law, correct, but also according to what we now believe and know about the environment.

Father Morris – And getting to cemeterians as well is going to be a challenge.

Joe Sehee – I met Father Morris a couple of years ago. There was a congregant that wanted a green burial, a shroud burial, had some beautiful fabric from the Middle East that was given to her mother, and I called one Catholic cemetery that was wanting to go green. They were not comfortable with it, that shroud burial, and I reminded the manager that Jesus, I think, was buried in a shroud, maybe, (laughs) so he wouldn't be buried here. They weren't comfortable with it. They had a lot of fear. And I think it's important for the religious community, not only that make people be able to understand those connections, but to dispel some of these myths that the chemical companies and casket and burial vault companies have been perpetuating. And there's so much fear about burial vaults right now causing...we're one of two countries in the world that uses burial vaults to any significant degree. And yet, American cemeterians overall in Jewish, and Catholic and non-religious cemeteries, just can't imagine being able to have a burial without them. It's incredible.

Sherry Wolfe – Right. Well, back to Rabi Kelman's comment, in working with the council, we hear from cemeteries all the time that that is how they got started. It was either an advocate or families in their community. They hadn't thought about it before, and of course made that move and created a green burial section. But what I'd like to, I think about you sharing, are those families, those families that you have seen. You're both involved, of course, with cemeteries and have addressed the needs of families interested in green burial. Tell us a little little bit of what you've seen about those families, what they're looking for.

Father Morris – Well, what I thought of, this family had a very beautiful experience actually on two occasions, one was, as I said, this mother passed and they had, her body was in the refrigerator and we just, we happened to have, within two days we were able to purchase the grave and we had the interment. And, what was so neat about it was that the family had that awareness of that need to connect with the earth and that finality, that ritual sense. I think we all do, but maybe we're not so much in touch with that interior need that we have in our souls. She had, not only, she had a tablecloth from Damascus, which she'd converted to a shroud, and so, the members of the family and the funeral director, we put the body into the ground at that time, but then she had water from the Jordan River, which she had put on the tomb too, and all the members of the family put flowers in the grave, as well as, you know, each took turns putting dirt. I like to tell this story - I know Joe's written up on that - at that moment, when we put the body into the grave, there was a gasp and the people, we all looked up there was a hawk with a three foot raptor, three foot wing span, big ole' hawk just circling right above the grave and it just circled right into the heavens.

And so, you know, (laughs) if you're looking for signs, that was a confirmed sign. And then, what happened just over a year later, was that we were able to get, you know, her, her son died, the woman's son, he had cerebral palsy. So, he was put in the same grave as his mother, and because there was no, you know, it was just a shroud, the fact that that so much of the body had gone back to the earth, that we were able to go down, originally it was the six foot level, this was the four foot level. And what they did, there was no collapsing, because they dig, you know they start the first ditch with a backhoe,

but everything else was dug with hands so it was tender and it was right there, and that wasn't an issue. And it saved them a lot of money too, I mean, in one sense, because you have two people in one grave, you know, you have the purchase of a grave, you have no vault cost, no embalming cost, you know, the shroud was made themselves. I found it one of the most soulful experiences I've ever had.

Rabi Kelman – My reaction is, um, we never had the hawk (laughs).

Joe Sehee – You don't want to get too close to the grave.

Rabi Kelman – Right. (laughs) But our cemetery, our cemetery is on a little hill, at the bottom of which is a public school. So, to hear the voices of children in the play yard when you're doing a funeral - it just adds to the nature of death not being final. And, our cemetery is part of the Golden Gate National Reserve, which means that there are hiking trails. People are constantly hiking through the area. And since our practice is really ground burial, even with the use of a casket, that first sound of dirt hitting the casket is probably the most awful sound in the world. But the metaphor that I like to use when I ask people – and our custom is to have everyone join in putting the dirt on top – the metaphor I like to use is one of a triumph. And one's parent, at night, when you were young, tucked you in by putting a blanket on you, and that's what we're doing, we're putting a blanket.

Joe Sehee – That's beautiful. I always thought too, about one of the cooler things about green burial is the fact that there is um...and it's very consistent, both with the Jewish tradition and the Catholic tradition, the use of the palls, this idea that we sort of come in to the world the same way and we go out the same way, and, um everyone can have a decent burial and everyone, sort of, there's not one person that has a more elaborate funeral or the need to display, that's a big part of the Jewish tradition isn't it?

Rabi Kelman – That's part of...we have an institute called the Gamliel Institute, named after Rabban Gamliel, an early Sage from the Babylonian period, who himself got so disturbed, the story goes, it's in the Talmud, the story goes that he, that people in his community were leaving bodies in the street because families could not afford funerals. He said, when I die, I want to be buried in flaxen shrouds and I want to be buried in the earth, very simply, and in death, everyone needs to be equal. So it seemed that to name an Institute to teach about all of the laws and practices and customs of death and dying in the Jewish tradition, to name it after Rabban Gamliel seemed to be an appropriate use of his name. I'm not sure that he would have approved of a lot of the practices that we currently engage in, but trying to get back to the original principles that he started is our attempt, to take back these original commandments and make them part of our living tradition right now.

Joe Sehee – It seems to me too, we have to figure out a way to transform this sales model, you know. People in this field are all there to help people honor the dead and heal the living and invite in the divine. But they have to contend with this model that exists, and I learned very recent that there is actually a push to get funeral directors something akin to an MSW, up until the 1930's even, to give them some psychosocial, even spiritual training that hospice workers have gotten for example. And it's been pushed back by entrenched interests that wanted to uphold the status quo. That's where I see the religious community being able to make a huge difference. We need to figure something out to be able to bring forth a new model and a new ethic.

Rabi Kelman – Yeah, one of the things we're trying to do with this Institute is to train people who are around North America, who are actually going to go out, teach, learn, study, and transform the nature of the Jewish community with these practices. This is a challenge, a big one, but at the moment there are forth or fifty people involved in this institute, and that's where about where you want to take back these, um... It's hope. It's a big part of our tradition.

Joe Sehee – That's great. Well, we're glad to know there are people like you in the religious community that are doing this tough work.

Father Morris – I just want to have that, I notice that on the one hand there's variation from funeral home to funeral home. Some have the grief councilors on site, they have all kinds of extras, while others didn't quite get that. But, on the other hand, I notice that being part of green burial movement, it's been wonderful because, not only since there's like a new sensitivity and some of the directors I talk to are really excited about this. They're coming on board. The other part is that, I've had an opportunity to share that with other directors, even those that haven't been part of the green, you know, a part of this association yet, but they're thinking, hmmm, and I notice that they'll see one funeral and maybe several months later another and then go up the the cemetery and you have a conversation in the car that there's been, kind of, a shift. You maybe want to think about that or not necessarily say that, but you get the sense that there's a new-felt sensitivity to those deeper issues, things that maybe you didn't learn in mortuary school.

Shari Wolf – Right, well it promotes family involvement, and that's where the difference is.

Father Morris – Right, right.

Shari Wolf - The family becomes involved and then the funeral director takes a little different roll. They facilitate for the family.

Father Morris – And then they experience the same satisfaction and spiritual wisdom.

Shari Wolf – Absolutely.

Joe Sehee – Which all what good ritual requires. It's not a spectator sport, for the most part, you know. And green burial has people in the industry back on their heels. And you get these reports, I hear from funeral directors all over the place, it was the most moving service we've ever seen. I ask them to explain what happened, and sometimes it was dirt being shoveled on the grave, but it was something that allowed people to take over.

Shari Wolf – Something you see within that family, that they hold on to.

Joe Sehee – Yep.

Shari Wolf – Absolutely.

Rabi Kelman – Yeah, I just want to thank Father Morris for the comment, in that there are generalizations about all funeral homes are really not accurate. There are some who are really trying to make an effort, at least in the Jewish community, to do a lot of the things that they do. And since we bury as close to death as we can, a lot of that is very much a part of when people are part of the religious community. In which case they're taken care of by that community. People who are not part of the religious community usually that's more of a problem for us, and for them frankly, because they don't actually know what to do, or what would happen and they're left alone, which for us is not really an acceptable position and a terrible dilemma. That's really a problem for us.

Joe Sehee – It requires such light hands, you know to, and I always tell that to funeral directors and use the metaphor of the midwife, um, but my, every situation is different and the grieving process is so complex. My wife does some home funeral work as a hospice volunteer and she was asked to officiate or help facilitate a green Jewish home funeral a couple years ago. And the family, they were just in such a state. They wanted a shroud burial, and she got some muslin from the local fabric store, and had her husband and her sister, the decedents husband and sister were so grief struck, they didn't even want to be in the room to prepare the body, to anoint it, bathe it, or shroud it, which was really, um, it flew in the face of a lot of my wife's training.

And they wanted her to help lead this and within a couple of days, by the time the burial, they had come around and they were so glad that someone was there to help them. But I think what we've done, we've been overly prescriptive, not only with ritual in general, I think, but when it comes to end-of-life rituals about how things are supposed to go and we take people away from what they need to do and give them time and space to work on their own terms. It does require, I think, it's gonna require some new training, and I think that's another thing that conferences like this one help to do. Is these folks aren't trained in facilitating ritual, and they need to be, I think, to some degree.

Rabi Kelman – This is the first time this conference, this the tenth annual conference, which means that before, prior to ten years ago, there was no, there was never, ever, in Jewish history, a time when people involved in this work got together, to talk, to learn. And this Institute, this Gamliel Institute, is the first time also in Jewish history that there is a learning opportunity. That's where we are. (laughs) Um, but this is the first time ever in Jewish history that there has been an opportunity to learn this stuff on a serious, maters degree level mode. So for us this is, this is the start of something, we hope that will really impact the Jewish community at least, and hopefully farther than that.

Joe Sehee – Well, we know you both have to get back to the conference. Thank you for making the time to be with us today, and congratulations again on your awards.

Father Morris – Thank you.

Rabi Kelman – Thank you for being here and doing this with us.

Father Morris – Yes, thank you Joe.

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