

Dear Community,

When one thinks about humanity's testament to the beauty of the human form and the importance of our material selves our thoughts tend to drift to musty museum halls and the sun-drenched piazzas of European cities heavy with works of stone and oil. These idealizations of the body preserve it in its vitality and beauty. A cemetery however, is viewed as a testament to human weakness and the curse of Adam. Here lies the flesh as it fades into the earth, forgotten and alone.

Why do we inflict this final indignity on the empty remains of a creature which had contained a, now gone, divine spark? This is the wrapper of what the person was, his essence now in heaven, what is left for us to preserve below?

In this week's parsha Abraham dedicates himself to finding the perfect burial ground for Sarah. Abraham's persistence and commitment to this task is striking. This body was not the woman with whom he had built his life? She was in heaven, with G-d, why pay all this money to find some earthly home for her remains?

This final act that Abraham does for his wife teaches us about how we are to perceive ourselves. In many religions the body is viewed as an evil presence which is here to prevent the spirit from accomplishing its goals. Godliness can only be perceived from one's soul. However, in Judaism we are taught that the human form was created in the image of G-d. The human form was given a special task in this world, a place where it can on some level engage in the divine process of creation. The works of our sages are replete with the study of the human form and its spiritual and mystical properties apart from the soul. Only when we understand and appreciate the power and purpose our flesh and blood can we begin to harness its power in the service of G-d. The body and the soul are partners in our mission here on this earth.

When one's time on this earth comes to an end, all the different components must return to their respective sources. The soul goes to heaven where it is reunited with the divine essence from whence it came. The body must now be returned to its source. It must return to the earth from where it came. However, the deterioration of the body is not its end. It is likened to a seed which first breaks down before it begins to sprout. At the end of days, the body will return and be reunited with its soul and be whole once again. Showing this final honor, placing the body in its resting place so it can continue on its journey enshrines in our collective consciousness its power and our responsibility to use it accordingly.

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein.