

Dear Rabbi,

I have an ailing uncle who had a lot of material wealth during his lifetime, and would like to have many things buried with him. He also wants to be buried with an Orthodox burial society, since his father was Orthodox. Is he able to do both?

Dawn L.

Dear Dawn,

Orthodox custom, which is based upon traditional Jewish law, forbids the burial of a person with anything besides himself.

This past month, a Russian Jewish man passed away in Germany, with the request he be buried with a bottle of vodka, which he never parted with during his lifetime. The local rabbis were faced with a dilemma. On one hand, it is important to fulfill the last wishes of a Jew. On the other hand, it is unacceptable to bury any object together with the body of the deceased.

The question was forwarded to a representative of the Chief Rabbinate in Israel. The ruling was that the bottle may not be placed inside the coffin, or underneath it, so that no object interposes between the coffin and the earth. There is, however, no prohibition of placing the bottle near the coffin on the side. With the implementation of this ruling, the man and the bottle were laid to rest, side by side.

A few years ago, a very wealthy Jewish man passed away, leaving his family an extensive will. In addition, he left a letter which said it should not be opened and read until 30 days after his passing. As part of the extensive will, he requested he be buried wearing a pair of socks. This caused great surprise, as the man was a very observant Jew, and he should have known that Jews are not buried with their socks. Since, however, he requested this, the question was posed to the Chevra Kadisha, the Jewish burial society.

The society did not know what to do in such a situation, so the question was forwarded to a leading rabbinical authority. The rabbi was also shocked, knowing the piety of the man in question. He ruled that, although the man made this request, he must have not known this law, and certainly would not want to be buried in a way which is contrary to the very Jewish laws he lived by. He should be buried without the socks.

Thirty days later, the second letter was opened and read by the family. It said, "By now I have been buried, without my socks. This just goes to show you how transient your material possessions are: a man can't even take a pair of socks with him!"

It's important that you speak to your uncle and explain to him how material possessions are earthly possessions, and belong to the transient, physical world he now lives in. He is, one day, to enter a different sort of world, a world of holiness and connection to the Al-mighty. Everything there is eternal. Bringing material possessions with him, if he actually could, would be as out of place there as carrying a bucket of mud into a posh, exclusive diamond studio. What counts there are his eternal possessions, his mitzvos, his tzedakah. He still has a chance to use the remainder of his time here to endow many wonderful Jewish causes, Torah study and outreach. He still has time to perform Teshuva, repentance for any of his misdeeds in this world, and to use this precious time to connect to G-d in a way he never has before, with love and dedication, and to notice G-d's Hand in creation and every facet of this world. These are eternal possessions that he could truly take with him, which will bring him eternal bliss, rather than being buried "next to the bottle".