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UK Jews worried dead may be cremated due to coronavirus pandemic

Cremation is strongly prohibited by Jewish law and is extremely taboo in Jewish society.

By JEREMY SHARON MARCH 23, 2020 12:07

The Parliament of the United Kingdom

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(photo credit: REUTERS)

The Jewish community in the UK has become concerned over draft legislation that could allow state authorities to use cremation even against the express wishes of the deceased and their families.

Cremation is strongly prohibited by Jewish law and is extremely taboo in Jewish society.

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The Board of Deputies of British Jews, an umbrella organization for UK Jewry, has urged the government to provide exemptions in the legislation for religious communities which oppose cremation.

The terms of the draft UK bill are part of a larger piece of legislation aimed at tackling the public health emergency caused by the coronavirus pandemic in the country. Clauses on disposal of the dead are being laid out with the expectation that the number of deaths will increase significantly.

Under the section dealing with state authority in relation to transportation, storage and disposal of dead bodies, the legislation states that "Personal choice for body disposal will be respected as far as possible."

It states, however, that "where there is no suitable alternative (for example if safe storage limits were likely to be breached and out-of-area alternatives were not available), the power to direct may be used to direct whether a body is buried or cremated."

The bill notes that this clause would need to "disapply" a section of earlier legislation which specifically prohibits cremation against the wishes of the deceased.

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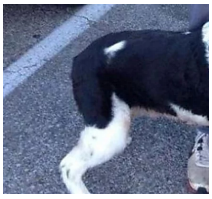

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Following publication of the draft bill, Board of Deputies President Marie van der Zyl called on the government to respect religious traditions on cremation and burial.

"For those that do succumb to this pandemic, it is important that they know that they will be laid to rest in accordance with their wishes," she said, noting that two members of the Jewish community had died over the weekend from coronavirus.

"For the overwhelming majority of UK Jews, this means that the deceased must be buried and not cremated," van der Zyl continued, adding that Muslims and some Christian groups hold similar beliefs.

"We urge the government to provide exemptions to proposed legislation to mandate local authorities to take account of the religious beliefs when releasing bodies – and not defaulting to cremation, which will only add to the sorrow of grieving families and go against fundamental freedoms of religion and belief," she said.

The board president said that MP Naz Shah and other MPs are working on an amendment to the bill to allow for such exemptions.

"It should be noted that such an exemption would not affect mortuary capacity, as Jews and Muslims seek to bury their loved ones – and so remove their bodies from the mortuary – as soon as possible," she concluded.

Shah took to her Facebook page on Sunday, to bolster support for her initiative and for the public to lobby their MPs to support it as well.

"Muslim and Jewish communities are worried that this legislation could lead to their loved ones being cremated instead of being buried… My amendment responds to that concern and gives legal protection to communities, and should there be a capacity issues, local authorities must consult next of kin, and where needed faith based organizations that can support [local] councils," said Shah.

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Shah said that 100 MPs have supported her amendment, as well as organizations such as the Muslim Council of Britain and the Board of Deputies.

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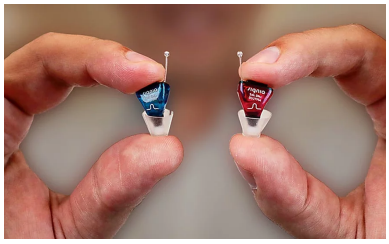

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