

Graves at Congregation Agudas Achim's space at Austin Memorial Park (also pictured on the front cover).

To live and die in Austin

Local congregations, community offer burial choices

By **TONYIA CONE**
SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH OUTLOOK

When Sam Scheer and his late wife learned she was terminally ill almost five years ago, one of the last things the couple wanted to talk about was where she wanted to be buried.

"When you're healthy you don't want to talk about it, but when you're deathly sick already, that's when you definitely don't want to talk about it," said Scheer, chair of Temple Beth Shalom's cemetery committee.

Although it can be difficult to talk about death, funerals and burial, planning for the inevitable and communicating one's wishes to family members ahead of time takes a lot of pressure off surviving family members later, when they are even more emotionally charged at the time of a death.

Austin's three largest congregations — Congregation Beth Israel, Congregation Agudas Achim and Beth Shalom — each offer cemetery plots located within larger cemeteries.

The city's smaller congregations offer their congregants direction when they are planning and when they are faced with death, and a local community member is creating a cemetery that would include a Jewish section and plans to begin offering

plots for sale later this year.

CONGREGATION AGUDAS ACHIM

Agudas Achim's cemetery space is located in the Austin Memorial Park Cemetery at Hancock Drive and Bull Creek Road. The space is sectioned off from the rest of the cemetery by bushes and trees.

Of the congregation's 700 plots, 500 are available for purchase. Fifty plots are reserved for members of the Orthodox community, 48 of which are available.

The congregation, Austin's second-largest and second-oldest Jewish congregation,

also offers cemetery plots in a section specifically designed for interfaith families in Austin Memorial Park Cemetery.

Danny Fleschman, Agudas Achim's Chevra Kadisha chair, said that Leonard Hyman founded the interfaith section around 2005.

Agudas Achim's Web site states, "The synagogue has developed specific, halachically (following Jewish law) appropriate guidelines applicable in the interfaith section, which is adjacent to the CAA section of the cemetery on Hancock Drive."

Fleschman said Austin is one of few cities of its size with a Conservative congregation that offers cemetery plots for interfaith families.

One person is buried in the interfaith sec-

tion. Ninety-eight plots remain available.

Many spaces in Agudas Achim's interfaith section are available, Fleschman said, because most of the people who would be interested in those spaces are young and not yet planning for death.

While coffins buried in the large section of Agudas Achim's cemetery space are to be made of simple wood and cannot contain metal, the congregation does not require non-Jewish individuals to be buried in a pine casket, shroud or vault.

Flowers are not displayed at Jewish funeral services in Agudas Achim's cemetery space, but are permitted at burial services and at the graves of non-Jews in the interfaith section.

In Jewish tradition, tombstones or monuments are unveiled on or before 11 months from a funeral date.

Any headstones, markers or other objects in Agudas Achim's interfaith section cannot contain symbols of other religions or references to non-Jewish divine entities or deities.

Agudas Achim's clergy may approve clergy from other congregations and faiths to officiate at a burial service in its interfaith section.

Fleschman said Agudas Achim does not cremate, and cremains are not allowed to be buried in their cemetery space.

Agudas Achim's cemetery plots in the all-Jewish and interfaith sections are available to members for \$1,500, to non-mem-



One of the graves from the 1800s at Beth Israel's space at Oakwood 1.

bers who are related by blood to members for \$2,500; and to non-members for \$5,000.

Plots in the Orthodox section are available to members of an Orthodox shul for \$3,000. The cost of each plot includes perpetual care, or maintenance of the grave.

Plots can be reserved for \$500. The reservation fee is charged at the time of plot selection and deducted from the rate applicable at time of burial.

Payments for plots are non-refundable and cannot be resold, Fleschman said.

Those buried in Agudas Achim's cemetery spaces can work with any funeral home they choose.

While an *Austin American-Statesman*



Congregation Beth Israel's space at Oakwood 1.

story recently reported that an audit criticized the city for ineffective management of its cemeteries and failing to stay on top of a company hired to maintain cemetery grounds, Fleschman said, the issue has not affected Agudas Achim.

For more information on buying an Agudas Achim plot, call Fleschman at 345-6214.

CONGREGATION BETH ISRAEL

Beth Israel, the largest and oldest Jewish congregation in town, has cemetery space at three sites. Two are downtown at Oakwood, Austin's oldest city-owned cemetery, located at 1601 Navasota St.

Oakwood 1, the congregation's first space, is located at the southwest corner of Oakwood. It contains the remains of some of Beth Israel's founding fathers, its first president and a number of people who belonged to the congregation in the late 1800s.

When all the plots at Oakwood 1 filled up, Beth Israel bought another section. Located in the north central part of Oakwood, Oakwood 2 nearly full, with four to six plots available.

Beth Israel's other cemetery space is located at Cook-Walden/Capital Memorial Parks Cemetery off Interstate 35 North in Pflugerville.

Phil Baum, chair of Beth Israel's Cemetery Committee, said the congregation's three acres in Pflugerville should provide enough space to serve the community for at least the next 100 years.

Burial plots are available to Beth Israel members for \$700 and to non-members for \$2,000. An additional fee is charged to open and close each grave, but not by Beth Israel.

The congregation's cemetery permits

families to use any local funeral home.

Non-Jewish members of interfaith families belonging to the congregation can be buried in Beth Israel's cemetery spaces as long as their funeral service is fundamentally Jewish, Baum said.

While Judaism "discourages" cremation, Baum said, as a Reform congregation Beth Israel allows cremains to be buried in its cemetery space.

While the purchase of a plot in Beth Israel's cemetery spaces now includes perpetual care, families were expected to maintain some of the plots in Oakwood 1 and 2.

Generations later, with no one left to take care of some of the graves, the congregation is working through how to fix some of the oldest ones that have fallen into a state of disrepair, Baum said.

"We're going to have to do what needs to be done," he said, "but we're working on what does that look like as time passes."

Otherwise, while the grass is not as green as some would like it to be in Oakwood, Baum said, the city has respectfully maintained the spaces, despite recent newspaper reports about what the city audit found.

Jewish funerals, Baum said, can cost less than non-Jewish funerals, depending on the wishes of the family. Jews often choose to be buried in a pine box built without metal, rather than more expensive ornate caskets.

"The idea is the body should disintegrate as quickly as possible," Baum explained.

Flowers are also an expense not usually incurred at Jewish funerals.

"They are a symbol of life and they are temporary, whereas death is death and lasts forever," Baum said.

He recommends that families that wish to be buried together buy space in advance. Not only do spaces large enough to accom-



Graves at Beth Israel's space at Oakwood 1.

modate multiple bodies fill up, the cost increases each year, so buying burial plots before the space is needed saves money.

Beth Israel's Cemetery Committee arranges and manages perpetual care of the congregation's cemetery spaces, maintains funeral home relationships, makes burial plot ownership available to the Jewish community before or at the time-of-need can provide funeral planning information.

For general information about Beth Israel's cemeteries, contact Baum at philbaum1964@netzero.com or 917-7987. For cemetery plot information, call Jim Kruger at 327-6660.

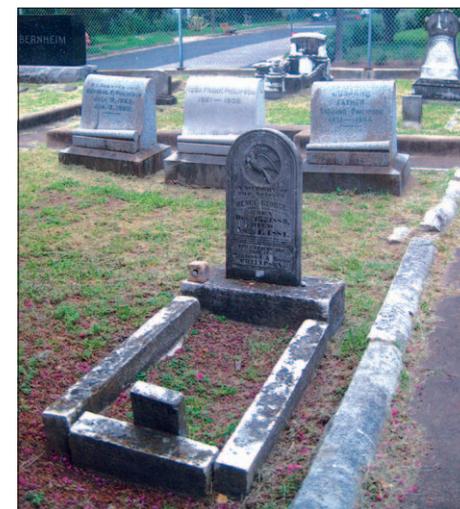
TEMPLE BETH SHALOM

Beth Shalom, Austin's third-largest Jewish congregation, maintains a Jewish cemetery space at Austin Memorial Park Cemetery on Hancock Road where burial plots are available for purchase by both members and non-members, including non-Jews who are immediate family of congregation members.

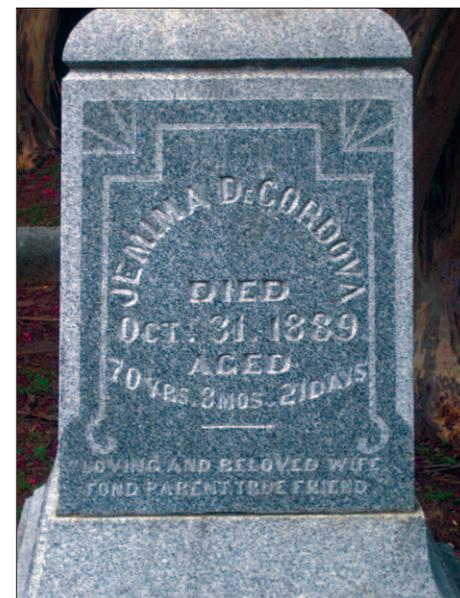
Scheer, chair of the cemetery committee, said that the congregation has an exclusivity contract with the city for cemetery space. Under the contract, the city has allocated 1.1 acres for Beth Shalom's exclusive use. Each year, the congregation buys a number of gravesites within the allocated space at the going price for that year.

Each year the city raises the rate by about 15 percent, Scheer said.

The city does not permit fences within Memorial Park Cemetery, so Beth Shalom's space is not separated from the rest of the cemetery by any physical boundaries. Scheer said it is possible to create a boundary through use of landscaping, and the



Grave at Beth Israel's space at Oakwood 1.



One of the graves from the 1800s at Beth Israel's space at Oakwood 1.

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congregation plans to set their area apart with trees eventually.

The space reserved for Beth Shalom is large enough to accommodate about 1,000 burials. Today, 21 people are buried there.

Beth Shalom members can buy plots for \$3,700 each. The rate for non-members is \$4,800. The price includes perpetual care.

The congregation has had no problems with the city's maintenance of the area, Scheer said.

There is an additional fee to have the grave opened and closed, which is not charged by Temple Beth Shalom.

Non-Jews are not buried separately from Jews in Beth Shalom's cemetery space.

"We accept them as a family, so there is no separation," Scheer said, adding that interfaith couples "deserve to be buried next to each other if that's what they wish, and we don't make a separation."

Rabbi Alan Freedman presides at all funerals that take place in Beth Shalom's cemetery. Other Jewish and non-Jewish clergy can participate if a family wishes.

Remains can be buried in Beth Shalom's cemetery space, Scheer said, but only one body or urn of remains can be buried in a single gravesite.

Families are free to work with any funeral home they wish.

Beth Shalom created a funeral request form to help congregants plan and make their wishes clear to family members and the congregation.

One problem Scheer has noticed is that as society becomes increasingly mobile, people who think they will stay in a city buy cemetery plots. Then, if they end up moving, they no longer wish to be buried there but have no way of selling the plot and getting their money back.

"When you buy a gravesite, you are signing a contract for property and services," he said. "You have to read the fine print and terms and conditions to know if there is any way of disposing of or reselling it if your life changes and you decide to move. Make sure you know exactly what's in the contract so you're not surprised later."

Those who buy a cemetery plot from Beth Shalom are only permitted to sell the plot back to the congregation, at the price they paid for it.

While Beth Shalom does not guarantee the congregation will buy plots back, Scheer said, every time the issue has come up so far, those who wanted to resell the plot had a check in their hands within about two weeks.

For more information on Beth Shalom's cemetery, contact Scheer at samscheer@aol.com or on his cell phone, 240-401-5015.

SMALLER CONGREGATIONS

While the Austin area's smaller congre-



Temple Beth Shalom's space at Austin Memorial Park cemetery.

gations do not have their own cemetery spaces, their congregants are able to plan for and deal with death by connecting to the larger community.

Most local congregations participate in Austin Shmirah, through which the congregations have come together to invite shomrim (those who keep prayerful watch over the deceased from the time the body arrives at the funeral home until the funeral) from across the community to serve the deceased from across the community.

The smaller local congregations also refer congregants to the three largest synagogues in town for cemetery plots.

Rabbi Eliezer Langer of Congregation Tiferet Israel said members of Austin's Orthodox community have in the past been buried in the Orthodox section of the cemetery space of Agudas Achim, which began as an Orthodox congregation later became Conservative.

"They've been accommodating to those in need," said Langer, who has also performed a funeral conducted in the Orthodox manner for someone who requested it in Beth Israel's cemetery space in Pflugerville.

Chabad's Rabbi Yosef Levertov explained that as an outreach congregation, Chabad does not own any cemetery space.

"When someone needs a burial I refer them to whomever they would feel comfortable with, and if they want I officiate," he said.

Levertov refers people to both local and out-of-town congregations for assistance and services.

Cantor Marie Betcher, clergy/spiritual leader of Congregation Shir Ami in Cedar

Park, said that a death had not yet occurred within her eight-year-old congregation, but that they are working on putting together a cemetery or grief committee.

The Reform congregation also has begun working with Weed-Corley-Fish Funeral Homes' Mitzi Byron Chafetz. Congregation leadership met with her, toured Weed-Corley-Fish's facility and held meetings to offer congregants information.

Some Shir Ami congregants attended a green burial seminar at Weed-Corley-Fish, and expressed interest in that, Betcher said.

"If the need arises, we will tell congregants that's who they should contact. She will take care of us," Betcher said of Chafetz.

Shir Ami leadership also is discussing the purchase of cemetery plots in the future, and Betcher said they have looked at cemeteries in Cedar Park and Georgetown.

In the meantime, Betcher can consecrate plots for Shir Ami members who do not wish to be buried in other congregations' cemetery spaces.

"Since we have a lot of interfaith couples, we could just say I could consecrate that plot for them and that is their holy ground they would be in," Betcher said.

Rabbi Monty Eliasov of Congregation Shalom Rav explained that most people in his congregation — Reconstructionist, sponsoring Jewish Renewal — are part of interfaith families or do not feel that the concept of being buried in a Jewish cemetery is important in their lives.

"I don't find out until after I am called to do a funeral service what decision they made," Eliasov said.

Eliasov said that he believes the Jewish community has made terrific advances in terms of burial options, including the availability of Jewish cemetery plots to those who are not members of area congregations and to interfaith families that want to be buried together.

Others believe in the concept of having a special burial place that is not connected to a Jewish cemetery. Shalom Rav congregants may choose to be buried in a cemetery that is not Jewish-specific because the congregation does not have a requirement regarding where they are buried.

"I have to figure out what my Halachic standards are and how to go from there," he said. "That's how I was the first rabbi to do interfaith weddings in Austin."

Eliasov has even presided at a member's cremation service.

"Was I happy? No, but only because we have not invested energy in making cremation Jewishly viable. If a congregant has chosen cremation, I will be there and will do my best to give the Jewish blessings I can even though the atmosphere is not conducive to me," he said. "I think it'll take research for me to come up with a resolution and what would be a Halachically sound cremation for me."

Eliasov said Weed-Corley-Fish's Chafetz is a great resource for Austin's Jewish community, especially people who are not connected to a congregation but want to talk to someone who is Jewishly knowledgeable and can provide amenities for a proper Jewish funeral.

He also has connected with Ellen Mac-

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donald, a Jewish Austinite who later this year plans to begin selling plots at Eloise Woods Community Natural Burial Park, a green cemetery at 115 Northside Lane in Cedar Creek — halfway between Austin and Bastrop, 15 miles from Austin-Bergstrom International Airport.

The cemetery will include a Jewish section.

Eliasov said Macdonald has worked hard to create cemetery space in an area with rich soil and without water table issues, which many conventional cemeteries in Texas struggle with.

“She is returning to a more primal and spiritual type of burial, which is what we’re teaching at Shalom Rav,” Eliasov said.

Macdonald would not allow embalmed bodies or coffins with metal or plastic to be buried at the site. Nor would she cover coffins with cement, as most conventional cemeteries do for aesthetic and maintenance reasons.

For aesthetics, no upright headstones would be permitted at Eloise Woods, but flat stones could be engraved or marked.

Macdonald said, “The green cemetery is a simple, natural Earth-friendly and affordable way to be buried.”

While conventional cemeteries offer smaller plots laid out in a grid, the plots at Eloise Woods would be 10 feet by 10 feet and laid out around trees, brush and roots throughout the wooded area.

One or two graves would be able to fit in each space, which would cost \$1,500. In the non-Jewish areas, people could be buried with cremains or with the remains of a pet.

Since maintenance of Eloise Woods would include such tasks as taking care of trails and trees and removing garbage rather than mowing lawns and taking care of gravestones, the cost of a plot would not include conventional perpetual care.

Eloise Woods plans to offer shrouds and other biodegradable containers made from such materials as cardboard, wicker, bamboo and simple wood.

These types of containers, Macdonald said, are available at a fraction of the cost of conventional caskets, are better for the environment and allow bodies to go back to the Earth as quickly as possible.

Macdonald, who has a Ph.D. in neuroscience and is a member of Austin Shmirah, said she carefully selected the location of Eloise Woods.

Any newly constructed cemeteries must be five miles from Austin’s extraterritorial jurisdiction, so Eloise Woods is about as close to the city as any new cemetery is legally allowed to be.

Macdonald said she chose an area with good drainage and the soil in the farming country east of Austin is easier to dig than the limestone and clay found in other parts

of Central Texas.

She wants loved ones to be able to participate in the burial process as much or as little as they wish, and because the soil is easy to dig, people could dig all or part of their loved one’s grave.

People also could choose to pay to have graves opened and closed, which would be hand-dug by people hired from the Austin Day Labor Center.

To give people the most control over the burial and the most opportunities to control their costs, such services would be offered on an a-la-carte basis.

When it opens Eloise Woods will be situated on 9.4 wooded acres. Macdonald worked with a group of master naturalists, she said, to identify trees native to the area that should be encouraged to grow and invasive plants that needed to be removed, as well as to learn about the animals, bugs and



Ian Macdonald, 15-year-old son of Ellen, digs a grave for a future burial at Eloise Woods Community Natural Burial Park.

birds that live there.

“I want to sustain the habitat, flora and fauna that exists there,” she said. “I want people to be able to enjoy the area.”

Macdonald, who closed on Eloise Woods’ land Memorial Day Weekend, plans to call the cemetery’s Jewish section Teva (Earth) Gardens.

She is studying Jewish law regarding cemeteries and has interviewed several rabbis in Austin, she said, and hopes to begin selling plots by the end of the summer.

“It’s just a beautiful, peaceful, happy place,” Macdonald said of the cemetery. “It’s a lovely, spiritual place. It doesn’t have to be a frightening place to be.”

For more information on Eloise Woods Community Natural Burial Park, contact Macdonald at emac@austin.rr.com or go online to www.eloisewoods.com

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What are families saying about Austin’s Jewish funeral director?

“I have planned several funerals and would have loved to have had you by my side for all of them.”

- Amy Pennington

“There is no one who could have done a better job of helping us through this tragic time.”

- Marianna Sidoryanskaya-Gluzman

“You are a mensch and a b’rucha to the Jewish community of Austin.”

- David and Vivian Picow



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