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Testimony in opposition to Section 2 of HB 6485 An Act Concerning Natural Organic Reduction and Green Burials January 30, 2021

Senator Lopes, Rep. Gresko, and members of the Environment Committee:

Let us not be fooled by euphemisms like “natural organic reduction” and “terramation.” Section 2 of HB 6485 seeks to promote human composting—the disposal of deceased human beings as if they were garbage to be recycled into soil and fertilizer. We are dealing with a profound devaluation of human dignity when we treat the human body in this manner, even if some people willingly consent to it. It is antithetical to the dignity of green burial supported by Section 1.

I am Jewish, and come from a tradition where natural burial in the earth upon death is a mitzvah—an obligation. [Traditional Jewish funeral practices are almost entirely consistent with green burial](#), neither hastening nor interfering with the natural decomposition process. Our *halacha* does not permit environmentally damaging practices like embalming or metal caskets—only plain pine without nails, or no casket as is the custom in Israel. Cremation is even more strongly forbidden to us—something that was done to our people by the most murderous antisemitic regime in history and not something we would consider for ourselves. Reducing human bodies to soil and fertilizer through human composting reminds us of those of our martyrs whose bones were also turned into fertilizer, whose fat was turned into soap, and whose skin was flayed off and turned into lampshades.

Yael Davidowitz of the Chevra Kadisha of South Jersey as well as [Last Kindness](#) writes of alternatives to burial: <https://www.jewishvoicesnj.org/articles/you-are-not-a-banana-peel>

Let’s take a quick look at those alternatives to burial. **Cremation** incinerates the body, obliterating it to the point that even its DNA is destroyed. **Alkaline hydrolysis** uses lye to reduce the body to a goop that is simply disposed of through the sewer system. Once used solely by serial killers and drug cartels, this method is now legal in 20 states. **Human composting**, the latest “advance” in disposing of the deceased, is currently legal in just five [now six—SM] states.... A response to the oversized carbon footprint of cremation, human composting involves putting a human body into a rotating steel drum that turns it into one cubic yard of dirt in just a few weeks time. The common effect of these disparate methods is to deny the body any sense of sanctity, to obliterate it as quickly and as thoroughly as possible.

Some things are, indeed, garbage, but not everything. Both a Torah scroll and a human body are physical objects; they do not last forever. But when a Torah scroll becomes unusable, when it has fulfilled its purpose here on earth, we gently bury it in the ground.

We don't toss it into a blue recycling can, and we certainly don't burn it or flush it or use it as fertilizer for our garden.

The human body, with its spark of G-dliness, is even more precious, more holy, than a Torah scroll. And yet it has become acceptable to dispose of as if it were as ordinary as a banana peel.

In contradistinction to green burial, there is nothing “natural,” “organic,” or even gentle about human composting. After most of the flesh has decomposed, at least some bones need to be pulverized just as with cremation.

The libertarian argument will be made that human composting is merely another “end of life choice” that we should respect no matter how offensive we may personally find it to be. I am certainly loathe to tell others how to live their lives and have no intention to impose my beliefs and practices on others. Nonetheless, in this case, I believe we need to draw a line, as this practice will inevitably impinge on the rights and dignity of others.

If we allow deceased human beings to be reduced into soil and fertilizer, then there is no way to stop the co-mingling of “human compost” with other soils and fertilizers and the sale and use of “human compost” to grow food—something that is unlikely with ash from cremations. Section 2 (i)(1) of HB 6485 allows for the “retention” of the composted remains if they are not scattered or buried, and there are no criminal penalties for using “human compost” to grow food or to sell it for commercial use. Of the six states that have authorized human composting, only [Colorado](#) has a restriction on the sale of “human compost” or of its use in the food supply. In any case, I believe such a provision will prove to be entirely unenforceable, as there is no way to distinguish “human compost” from other soils, especially when they are mixed together. Will we be compelled to become unwitting existential cannibals, unable to know if we are consuming produce tainted with “human compost”? Soylent Green is no longer futuristic—it is here now.

This is also a religious liberty issue. Halacha strictly forbids deriving benefit (*issur hana'ah*) from a corpse, unless it is necessary to save a life. Will rabbis need to inspect every farm to ensure that no “human compost” is used in order to certify that the farm's produce is kosher? What are the implications for *kohanim*—Jews who are descendants of Aaron, brother of Moses—who have added restrictions in terms of having to avoid being in the same place as a corpse, save for burying an immediate family member or someone who has no one to bury them (*met mitzvah*)? Questions have already been raised on this matter ([here](#) and [here](#)). And what about other religious faiths (e.g., Islam) that may have similar objections to this involuntary benefit from “human compost”?

And finally, since radical environmentalists see human composting as better for the Earth than even green burial, we are likely to face a future where being composted upon death will not be a choice but rather a duty, and those who cling to burial will be stigmatized as enemies of the planet and pressured into being involuntarily composted. Human composting is part of “deep ecology” extremism which views humans as the enemy of the planet. It is in opposition to the mainstream perspective which views humanity as the pinnacle of Creation and commands us to guard our environment because doing so is necessary for human flourishing. We must never sacrifice human dignity on the altar of “deep ecology.”

It is deeply saddening to see our legislators raise a bill like HB 6485 for public hearing with no sense of moral outrage or of the ick factor inherent in this legislation. If you believe as I hope most people do, that human beings are not mere recyclable garbage and have inherent dignity even in death, then please remove Section 2 from HB 6485. The laudable goal of promoting green burial should not be contaminated by the radical dehumanization of human composting.