To The Editor—

In the article, “Unlikely Radicals Take Aim At Corporate Jewish Burial Business,” (June 21 Issue), Josh Nathan-Kazis makes some significant errors that distort the work of our organization and the mitzvoth we advocate.

One central theme of the article is that Rabbi Daniel Wasserman and his attorney, Efrem Grail, represent Kavod v’Nichum (KVN) and its approach to community education. Leading with a file photo of Rabbi Wasserman is misleading. Neither Rabbi Wasserman nor Mr. Grail is a member of KVN. Neither was a “conference attendee.” Both were invited presenters, brought in to discuss the particular religious-freedom legal case behind their community’s practice of traditional, non-commercial funeral and burial practices. Other conference speakers included the very corporate cemetery owner/manager David Shipper. Others ignored by Mr. Nathan-Kazis included Blu Greenberg discussing Orthodox perspectives on organ donation, and Leonard Fein talking about how to comfort (and NOT to comfort) a bereaved parent, and many others. We advocate a vigorous discussion of issues of interest to our organization and our members.

We are not a “death care” organization. As many of us explained in personal conversations with Mr. Nathan-Kazis, we advocate a holistic Jewish approach to the spectrum of the life cycle from illness through death, bereavement, and living on after a personal loss. As much as our work is centered around death, our aim is to help Jews find meaning, communal connection, and comfort trough living Jewishly at the toughest of times.

As an organization, we work with many funeral directors and cemetery managers to promote shared Jewish values and communal interests. We would never denigrate our partners by calling them “coffin hawkers.” Mr. Nathan-Kazis quotes our executive director, David Zinner, saying as much.

Mr. Nathan-Kazis also misrepresents many aspects of the work of the chevra kadisha, the sacred society that performs Jewish ritual around illness, death and burual. It is not a “secret society.” The rituals we perform are accessible to anyone who wants to know about them. That said, we hold the specifics of any individual person’s life, death and burial in the strictest confidence. Since we do not expect thanks or earthly reward for our work, some chevra kadisha members are uncomfortable being singled out in their communities. If Mr. Nathan-Kazis misunderstood this reticence for a blanket policy on secrecy, he was mistaken.

Chevra kadisha members are not “shut in a room with a corpse.” We engage with illness and death with intention, supported in difficult work by age-old ritual and words of Tanakh.

There are serious issue raised by the cost of funerals in the US and Canada. We believe that the Jewish community needs to act as educated consumers in their decisions about death and burial, just as any educated consumer would make informed decisions about any other transaction involving thousands of dollars. When such a transaction involves religious and ethical values, those values must be part of the conversation.

Blowing one conference workshop out of proportion, misrepresenting well-meaning people, and getting the facts about Jewish ritual wrong do nothing to further an ongoing discussion about important issues.

We ask that you clarify these errors in future publications.

Sincerely,

Michael Slater, President

Stuart Kelman, Chairman

The Board of Directors of Kavod v’Nichum

David Zinner, Executive Director