KEEPING THE PROMISE

OF A "SACRED SOCIETY":

HEVRA KADISHA

AND OUR LIVES TODAY

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> Rabbi Israel Salanter, renowned thinker and the founder of the Mussar movement, died in a foreign country, away from his numerous admirers and disciples. Only a very plain and simple man, who took care of him when he was sick, was present when he passed away. Eager to learn what legacy of profound spiritual truths or philosophical ideas the great scholar had expounded in his last hours, the disciples rushed to question the attendant. "Tell us, what philosophical truths or metaphysical concepts did the master teach you in his last hours?" they asked.
>
> The simple man replied: "All evening he tried to convince me that I should not be afraid to be alone all night with the body of a dead man."
>
> Abraham Joshua Heschel, **The Earth is the Lord's** (1962)

This story is reprinted in **Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning**, edited by Rabbi Jack Riemer, with the following footnote: "The body of a dead person was never left alone until interment, but simple people were often afraid to be alone with a body all night. This episode was told to Professor Saul Lieberman by Rabbi N. N. Frankel, who heard it directly from the attendant" (1995:50).

It is ironic that fear in the presence of a dead body is here attributed to "simple people." In fact, those who are occupied, like Rabbi Salanter's disciples, with "philosophical truths or metaphysical concepts" are no less susceptible to such fear. The latter may actually be more fearful, since they (we?) are more likely to use fancy words and grandiose concepts to push away the stark physical reality of death.

The use of the past tense in referring to *sh'mirah*, the commandment to keep vigil over the body until the time of burial, is also telling in this excerpt: "The body of a dead person *was* never left alone...." Sadly, as of this writing, the bodies of the Jewish dead are left to themselves more often than not, and the basic requirements of attending to the dead as provided by Jewish law are treated as optional, at best, by Jewish funeral homes.

It was not always so. For centuries, every Jewish community maintained a *hevra kadisha*--literally, a "sacred society"--and it was the sacred responsibility of the *hevra kadisha* to

come into respectful and intimate contact with each dead body on behalf of the community. Members of the *hevra kadisha* bathed and purified the body according to established ritual, dressed the body in plain white shrouds, placed it carefully in a plain wooden coffin and kept vigil until the time of burial, all the while reciting special prayers and focusing devotional intention upon the deceased. It was considered a high honor to participate in the *hevra kadisha*, and members were not compensated for their services.

In the pre-modern era, when Jewish communities were self-contained and Jewish affiliation was largely involuntary, the responsibilities of the *hevra kadisha*--like many other religious imperatives--were matters of normative community practice, with sanctions applied for transgression. This is illustrated vividly by an account from ancient Babylon:

> [If someone] dies in a city, all the residents of the city are prohibited from doing work [until the dead is buried]. Rabbi Hamnuna [a fourth-century Babylonian sage] came to Daru-Mata. He heard the sound of the funerary bugle, and saw some people going on with their work. He said to them: "Let these people be under a ban. Is there not a dead person here?" They said to him: "There is a [sacred] society [caring] for the dead." He said, "If so, [work is] permitted."
>
> Babylonian Talmud, Moed Katan 27b

Today, however, Jewish funeral arrangements most often leave the dead to the impersonal care of mortuary professionals. Jewish families, no less than those of other faiths, often feel pressured into spending huge sums of money on funerals, sometimes even going into debt--especially if they are making all the decisions about arrangments immediately after someone has died, as is typically the case. Ironically, this contemporary dilemma mirrors the situation in ancient times, before the procedures of the *hevra kadisha* were codified:

> At first they would bring out the [deceased] rich on an ornamented couch and the [deceased] poor on a plain bier, and the poor were ashamed--it was decreed that all should be brought out on a plain bier for the honor of the poor....

> At first, burial of the dead was for their relatives more difficult than their death [because of the inordinate financial outlay], to the point at which relatives would leave their dead and flee--until Rabban Gamliel came and, disregarding his own honor, came out [to be buried] in plain linen garments. Said Rav Pappa: And now all the world is accustomed to [burial] in a plain shroud [at very low cost].
>
> Babylonian Talmud, Moed Katan 27a-b

It is mostly to the credit of our Orthodox Jewish communities--not surprisingly, since they remain the most disciplined to community norms and sanctions--that the *hevra kadisha* still operates today. Jews of more liberal denominations, as well as the unaffiliated, have tended to abdicate responsibility to their local funeral homes, which in turn are bent to the demands of the market and what Jessica Mitford identified decades ago as "the American way of death." In our fears of confronting the inevitable, we have become like the "very plain and simple man" who attended Rabbi Salanter at the time of his death. However, unlike the simple attendant, we have financial resources which we are all too willing to dispense for the purpose of distancing ourselves from the traditional imperatives of caring for the dead.

The Beginning of a Return

In the 1970s, when "the American way of death" became increasingly subject to criticism and the development of grass-roots alternatives, some non-Orthodox Jewish communities began to rediscover the legacy of the *hevra kadisha* and to organize themselves accordingly. Perhaps the best known is the Conservative congregation of Adath Jeshurun in Minneapolis, which became the subject of an influential video documentary (and accompanying book) entitled ***A Plain Pine Box: A Return to Simple Jewish Funerals and Eternal Traditions*** (1981).

In ***A Plain Pine Box***, the rabbi and members of the congregation describe their process of reclaiming the *hevra kadisha* through study and practice. One member who worked in the lumber business began, with his son, to build low-cost coffins from simple wood according to the

imperatives of Jewish tradition. Other congregants trained themselves and others as to the procedures for *sh'mirah* (vigil) and *taharah* (ritual purification of the body), and met regularly for support and troubleshooting in order to increase their effectiveness in providing care.

Most moving are the personal testimonies of those involved in the work: the rabbi who describes how he overcame his own, very human, fears and rose to the occasion as a spiritual leader; the builder who describes how the process of preparing coffins brought him closer to his son, and helped his son choose a career in psychology; the family members who participated in *sh'mirah* for their own grand/father and articulate what that experience meant for each of them. The video includes the sensitive and respectful simulation of a *taharah*, complete with ritual apologies to the deceased--by name--for any indignity he may inadvertantly suffer at the hands of the *hevra kadisha*. ***A Plain Pine Box*** does not gloss over any details or discomforts involved in caring for the dead; rather, it transcends them with honesty, sensitivity and humor.

Unfortunately, some 20 years later the thick curtain of denial seems to have fallen again upon the Jewish community, and the potentials of ***A Plain Pine Box*** remain largely unrealized in non-Orthodox Jewish circles--at least in the northern metropolitan areas of the United States, where commercial funeral homes hold sway as the determining factor. In "*Kibbud Ha'met* [Honoring the Dead]: Conservative Jews and the Hevra Kadisha," writer Judith Kuper Jaffe surveys current *hevra kadisha* efforts nationwide and reports:

> The *Hevra Kadisha* is among the least well known and [least] understood traditional Jewish institutions. Indeed, congregational Hebrew schools and day schools do little more than mention these "holy societies." Nor do casual conversations among synagogue members generally include a discussion about washing dead people....It is quite understandable that volunteers do not flock to these groups. One *Hevra Kadisha* member admitted, "It's hard for people--even other Jews--to fathom why I'd do such a thing."
>
> **United Synagogue Review** (Fall 1997:37)

It is the purpose of this project report to explore and analyze our current state of affairs, and to offer curricular and organizational strategies that can:

(1) educate Jewish adults in congregational and community settings about the history and importance of the *hevra kadisha*, and

(2) foster a supportive environment which encourages participants to take further action toward reclaiming *hevra kadisha* within their local communities.

Personal Testimonies: "Less Afraid, Somehow, of the Passage of Death"

> It is a truism that we moderns are uncomfortable dealing with death--and especially uncomfortable dealing with dead bodies. Troubled by the very idea of our own mortality, we try to avoid its reminders, among which an actual dead person is certainly the most powerful. So it is no wonder that among modern Jews, knowledge of, and interest in, the *hevra kadisha*...has declined over time....This is unfortunate, because Jewish law related to the newly dead has much to teach us, as I myself have learned from experience.
>
> Daniel E. Troy, "The Burial Society"
> (**Commentary**, November 1992:47)

Among the most compelling educational resources for promoting the work of the *hevra kadisha* are the contemporary personal testimonies of those who have participated in *taharah*, the ritual washing and dressing of a body in shrouds prior to burial. Several such personal testimonies have appeared in Jewish publications across the ideological spectrum in recent years, and these have opened a window to the *hevra kadisha* experience for others. Each account typically begins with the very natural fears, reticence and apprehension of the participant going into his or her first *taharah*. The ritual procedures involved are then described in the context of each participant's personal encounter with the holiness of the process.

> Although I was aware of some of these Jewish laws and customs concerning the body, I had never seen a dead person before. I was therefore quite fearful as I followed Ben [the team leader] and the four other members of our team down to the purification room in the funeral parlor....

> We entered the room and there was the *met* [dead person], covered in a sheet, lying on a table. Ben explained the fundamental rules. As much of the body as possible is to be kept covered at all times, even while being washed. It is particularly important that the face and genitals be shielded. At no time is it permitted to place the body face down. It is absolutely forbidden to pass anything over the body--a sign of profound disrespect, and a violation of the "personal space" of the *met*; if we had to give an item to someone on the other side of the table, we were to walk around and hand it to him.
>
> Daniel E. Troy (1992:48)

> The leader of our "team" began by uttering the only conversation I was to hear for the next hour and a half. "Sarah *bas* Avraham, please forgive us if anything we do as part of the work of the *Chevra* offends your *kavod* [honor]." She then carefully cut away Sarah's wrappings in silence....
>
> I was afraid to look at Sarah's face, but my eyes were drawn to her. I never saw her fully, as care was taken to keep her face covered with a white cloth. Later I learned that although the eyes of the dead cannot see, exposure of the face (the most revealing part of a person) is a source of great embarrassment to the *neshama* [soul]....The silence, now broken only by splashes of water as the women gently and methodically cleansed Sarah, was in deference to her *neshama*, and a tribute to the holiness of the task at hand.
>
> Andrea Sommerstein, "The *Chevra Kaddisha*"
> (**The Jewish Observer**, March 1997:35)

Over the past decade, popular Jewish women's magazines and conferences in particular have underscored *hevra kadisha* as a sphere in which traditional dictates of modesty actually mandate the full participation of women, since men may only perform *taharah* for deceased males. Accordingly, women's voices are among those which are raised most compellingly in making the case for participation in the *hevra kadisha*.

> The meticulous care with which we performed these acts, and the time we spent with this [deceased] woman, heightened our feelings of holiness. A funeral home deals with bodies; we were dealing with a person, and we felt the power of this *mitzvah* as we worked. We were calmed, humbled, hallowed. The *Shechina*--the presence of G-d--touched each one of us so that we, too, became purified, sanctified....We slowly finished dressing the holy body, covered it with a sheet, and quietly exited the room.
>
> Betsy Kaplan, "The Rituals of Death"
> (**Lilith**, Winter 1989:17)

> Religion imbues life's milestones with spiritual significance. Even after the soul departs, the body retains its sanctity just as the Torah Ark retains its holiness after the scroll is removed....While I was filled with anxiety and trepidation the night before I did my first *tahara*, I found it to be profoundly rewarding. Despite a demanding career and commitments to home and family, I rarely decline an opportunity to do a *tahara*. Participating in the egalitarian customs and ceremonies of burying the dead reaffirms my own philosophy of life.
>
> Rochel U. Berman, "Friends for a Holy Journey"
> (**Hadassah**, October 1996:41)

Although Kaplan describes the experience of performing *taharah* for an elderly woman, while Berman describes the experience of performing *taharah* for an eighteen-month-old baby, both women express the same sense of compassion and personal engagement as they share their encounters with the ritual details. Most importantly, these and other personal testimonies present the work of the *hevra kadisha* as accessible, as something that "ordinary" Jews are capable of doing--and as a source of deep personal growth and appreciation of life.

> Clearly the *hevra* experience does offer many rewards. For one thing, having esteemed members of the community care for a dead person makes an enormous difference to that person's family. For another, the *hevra* sees to it that all people, high and low, are treated equally in death....Finally, and perhaps most relevantly to our own day, the respect shown to a dead person by the *hevra* can affect profoundly the way those of us who remain alive view our own humanity. In all these regards, the laws of the *hevra kedisha* serve the dead *and* the living.
>
> Daniel E. Troy (1992:50)

> Some think that dead bodies are frightening. Some people flinch at the thought of touching or being in the presence of a dead body. I believe that the fear arises from the confrontation with our own mortality. There are those who have the same response to live bodies. The thought of closeness, the thought of touching or being touched either physically or emotionally by another human being is frightening....The fear of death and the fear of life may be one and the same....
>
> There was great comfort in knowing that for the first time in my life I could do something for someone who could not say, "Thank you." For me, this was a special gift. My life has not been the same since then. I am aware of the fact that caring for the dead is the highest mitzvah that one may perform, but...[i]f one is capable of giving to one who is dead, how much more so to those still in life.
>
> Debbie Friedman, "Bubby's Last Gift" (1994:107)

> I...felt a deep sense of privilege that would recur each time I would prepare a Jewish woman for her final journey....I felt at that moment tremendous pride and love of being Jewish, a bond with these women of the *Chevra Kaddisha*, and less afraid, somehow, of the passage of death.
>
> Andrea Sommerstein (1997:36)

Responding to the Call

It is clear from this gathering of written testimonies that *hevra kadisha* work can have a profound spiritual impact on the lives of those engaged in such work. It is also clear, even in an age when matters of "Jewish spirituality" have become extremely marketable, that Jews do not volunteer in significant numbers to participate in either ritual purification or keeping vigil for the dead. Those who take the extra step generally articulate some personal impetus for doing so; a generalized sense of community obligation is often galvanized by the example of a relative or a friend already engaged in such work:

> My wife's family...holds membership in the *hevra* in high regard. Her maternal grandfather participated in one in Germany, and her maternal grandmother was a member in Kansas City....This heritage provided the impetus I needed, and thus one day I found myself volunteering on what I told myself was purely a trial basis.
>
> Daniel E. Troy (1992:47)

> My motivations for becoming involved were a combination of the practical, personal and philosophical. There was a need for additional women to do *taharot*. Since my husband was already a member of the *hevra*, I thought I, too, would like to offer my services.
>
> Rochel U. Berman (1996:41)

> One *Shabbos* lunch, a friend spoke briefly about her role as a member of the *Chevra Kaddisha*. I was impressed and a bit in awe, finding it hard to imagine preparing *meisim*--the deceased--for their final home.
>
> I had forgotten that at that *Shabbos* lunch I'd expressed interest in observing a *tahara*, so when I got the call it was a bit of a shock. I decided, however, that since this was such an important *mitzvah*, I would explore it. From the sidelines. The friend who had originally piqued my interest about the *Chevra Kaddisha* picked me up a few hours after I'd received the invitation.
>
> Andrea Sommerstein (1997:35)

The personal experience of loss can also draw individuals to such work, although this is not always at the conscious forefront of the decision. "When we got to the Memorial Chapel, I retreated a bit into myself--my father had passed away only a few months earlier," confides Andrea Sommerstein (1997:35). "Ever since my best and oldest childhood friend died eight years ago, my interest has been piqued by the *hevra kedisha*," writes Daniel Troy (1992:47). Debbie Friedman made the decision to perform her grandmother's *taharah* with family and friends when she discovered that ritual purification in Palm Springs was not conducted in accordance with Jewish law and her grandmother's wishes. "This was not acceptable to me. Bubby was going to have a kosher *taharah* even if I had to do it myself." (1994:102)

Bringing It Home: Brooklyn, New York

My home community at Park Slope Jewish Center (PSJC), an egalitarian Conservative congregation in Brooklyn, maintains an active *G'MaH* (*Gemilut Hasadim*) Committee. *Gemilut hasadim* are deeds of lovingkindness, and it is the responsibility of *G'MaH* to mobilize the PSJC community in times of illness and bereavement. This most often involves organizing meals of consolation and/or prayer services at the homes of the bereaved, and congregants--even those with little formal Jewish background--are very forthcoming and responsive to these imperatives. In the absence of a formal *hevra kadisha*, we have also mobilized twice in recent years to provide *sh'mirah* for members who have died of cancer--drawing volunteers primarily, but not exclusively, from the ranks of those who are usually called upon to make a daily *minyan* (prayer quorum) for *shiv'ah* (the week of mourning following burial).

Congregants have been organized in pairs to sit for two-hour shifts around the clock, at both the hospital morgue and the funeral home. I personally volunteered for three such shifts, and found the experience to be profoundly moving. In the aftermath of the first PSJC

mobilization for *sh'mirah*, the video ***A Plain Pine Box*** was shown twice and discussed with some interest. However, although we are blessed with many congregants who can be called and counted upon in a crisis, our relatively young, healthy community has been reluctant to take the next pro-active steps in setting up a *hevra kadisha*. Even *sh'mirah* has not yet evolved as a normative service which is offered, like our mobilizations for *shiv'ah*, to all those facing death and bereavement. At this point, it remains a service which will be organized if requested by family members with a previous knowledge of the tradition.

I have asked some of those at PSJC who have participated in *sh'mirah* about their experiences, as well as probed their questions and concerns regarding *hevra kadisha* and the Jewish traditions of *k'vod hamet* (honoring the dead). Coming from diverse backgrounds and walks of life, their responses to the call for *sh'mirah* correspond to certain themes reflected in the written testimonies above--especially as regards a strong sense of communal responsibility and the personal experience of loss, which may well be connected. Their responses also reflect the ambivalence of community norms in transition: how far are we willing to go, individually and as a community, in "being there" for the dead and bereaved? (Out of understanding and respect for this ambivalence, I have not included the full names of these congregants.)

F.B., an engineer in corporate management, with whom I first sat *sh'mirah* in 1995 for a congregant who died after a long struggle with cancer, reflects:

> It seemed like the right thing to do. I had never done *sh'mirah* before. Actually, it's the only time I ever have done it, and--I don't know, with everything that was leading up to B.'s death, her illness and through it, with the blood donations and everything, it almost took on a life of its own--it just seemed like, right--a continuation of everything; it was a closure, if you will....
>
> I also didn't grow up in a family where that was something that was part of everyday life--well, not everyday life, but...where it was part of a tradition....It's sort of like I didn't quite know what I was supposed to be doing....

> I mean, it wasn't uncomfortable, it wasn't scary or anything like that. And it sort of felt right to be doing it, but I sort of wished I'd had...I would have liked a little orientation....It would be nice to have a little idea going in of what to expect and what it's about. And maybe if I did it again now, it would be a little easier.... I wouldn't mind doing it again...it's like a community service...[and] in general I feel pretty strongly about the community being there....
>
> I grew up not knowing anything about that tradition....I still think it would be nice to learn a little more about it, to read up on it....I mean, if there was another opportunity to go and see ***A Plain Pine Box***, I think I would be interested in that, but--would I actively go out and do independent study? Probably not.

A.F., a freelance plumber who grew up Orthodox, came to *sh'mirah* at PSJC in 1998 not only having performed this *mitzvah* for his grandfather many years previously, but with memories of his late mother's active participation in the *hevra kadisha* of their hometown:

> It's a very nice custom, you know; you don't leave the *meis* [dead person] by himself or herself. It's a very nice custom.
>
> I have to tell you a little story now. Now, the story is about tea aprons. And I'm quoting my mother; it's really my mother's story. She said that when she was a little girl, when any of the men wore out a white shirt, Grandma would take it and say, "Oh this'll be perfect for a tea apron."
>
> And [my mother] said, "I always wondered why I never saw a tea apron--until I became a member of the *hevra kadisha*. And now I know what tea aprons are for, because when someone--when a woman dies in the community, we dress the *meis* [dead person] and we put on a lovely white apron, so when *Mashiah* [Messiah] comes, [and] the *tehiyas hameisim* [the resurrection of the dead], she'll be able to get up dressed in her finery, in tea aprons."

Although A.F. is fond of this story, and recalls that his mother was a member of the *hevra kadisha* "for many, many years" after he grew up, he does not remember discussing any other particulars of this work with her. "I just knew that she used to do it and, you know--she'd be gone [in the night] and she'd come back....she'd disappear."

The responses of these and other congregants highlight the importance of education and sharing of experiences as community norms evolve. Although F.B. had never been exposed to the traditions of the *hevra kadisha* and A.F. grew up in the midst of such traditions, they both

struggle to reconcile their sense of "the right thing to do" with their natural reticence to take on a responsibility of such intensity, especially on a regular basis. A.F. concedes:

> It has to be done, by our laws and customs; you can't leave a *meis* alone....I guess I could do it [*taharah*]. It doesn't particularly frighten me, but...it doesn't [particularly attract me, either]. I never thought about it. I'd have to give it some thought. I'm just thinking of it as the concept of a *mitzvah*, of *tzedakah*....

F.B. is not sure if she would want to do *taharah*, but she is willing to learn more and put herself "on call" for what might be needed:

> If someone said "We're trying to organize a *hevra kadisha*" and what it would entail--a couple of times, you know, once or twice a year you might get called to do *sh'mirah*, or whatever--then I would say, "Put me on the list"--but if somebody came to me and said, "Would you help organize this and co-chair it?" then I would say "No" [laughter, with acknowledgement of her recent tenure as a synagogue officer]....and I practice every day saying "No."
>
> But certainly if someone asked me if I would be on a list of people they could call, to be called upon to do something, I would say "Yes"--the same way I feel about *G'MaH* --I've said, "Call me if you need someone for a *shiv'ah minyan*, or call me if you need someone to make a visit or go shopping."

It is this willingness to be called upon which, when combined with the proper education and support, can form the basis of a "sacred society." However, there must be an evolution of group norms concurrent with outreach to individual congregants, and this ultimately goes beyond the norms of any one congregation.

Enlarging the Circle: New York City

As of this writing, I am aware of only three non-Orthodox congregations in New York City which maintain their own *hevra kadisha* services. All three congregations (Ansche Chesed, B'nai Jeshurun and Or Zarua) are located in Manhattan and have ties to the Conservative movement. I have conducted interviews with members of the Hevra Kadisha of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun (BJ), a large liberal Conservative congregation of 1,400 families, to learn from

their experiences of caring for the dead. It should be noted that B'nai Jeshurun, which draws members from throughout the greater New York area, faces a unique difficulty in terms of the geographical location of its services to congregants in need. At this point, *hevra kadisha* services can only be offered to congregants within Manhattan for the most part.

According to BJ Hevra Kadisha co-chair Elga Stulman, many of the functions of the group correspond to what has been considered the province of *G'MaH* at Park Slope Jewish Center: notifications at the time of death, support and information for family members, and mobilizations for the week of mourning (*shiv'ah*). She traces the original impetus for the group's formation in 1991 to the charisma of the late Rabbi Marshall Meyer, who gave a series of lectures at that time about Jewish traditions of death and mourning. When Meyer himself died, many BJ congregants mobilized to perform the *mitzvah* of *sh'mirah* over his body, although Stulman and others report that *sh'mirah* poses an ongoing recruitment challenge.

It is also only in the past 3-6 years that BJ congregants have organized to perform *taharah*, originally by women volunteers for women, and now by men volunteers for men as well. Myriam Abramowicz, the driving force behind this development, recalls:

> Even though it is...historically a well-established *hevra*, in this case it sort of became organic...in that, while we were having a Torah study...group on *Shabbat* after services, someone around the table died at the table as we were studying. In fact, it was the *parashah* that has the *Sh'ma* in it...And we called *Hatzolah* [the Jewish volunteer ambulance service], and several of us accompanied this gentleman to the hospital and stayed with him...and as two of us were sitting in the hallway and then inside...the room, the young man I was with and I were talking and saying "This is like the old days, you used to sit with the body and make sure it wouldn't get stolen...."
>
> In any case...I waited until *Shabbat* was over and I called [Rabbi] Roly [Matalon] and told him what happened....and...a few days into the week...we talked and we got together about this...and I said, "Well, what do we do when this happens? ...You mean, we don't have a *hevra kadisha*; that's what you're saying." And he said, "Yeah, we don't." And I said, "So now we can...." Anyway, fast forward....

Abramowicz and Matalon placed an announcement in the weekly BJ newsletter, calling a meeting of interested congregants to discuss the organization of a "holy society" that would provide both *taharah* and *sh'mirah*, so that BJ members could begin to take care of each other throughout the life cycle and not just during celebrations. There was quite a large turnout for the first meeting, at which names were taken and all participants called to a subsequent meeting a month later. "So the second blurb [in the newsletter] was: 'We now **have** a Hevra Kadisha committee; we're having a meeting for those who are interested to explore...." In the process, the synagogue also began to institute a daily morning *minyan* so that bereaved members would not have to go elsewhere to say *kaddish*--but it was recognized that the "on-call" nature of *taharah* and *sh'mirah* required a different kind of organization.

As the Hevra Kadisha organizers began to compile lists of volunteers, there were predictably many more names for *shiv'ah / minyan* and *sh'mirah* functions than for ritual purification. "The reason that I became so primarily involved with the *taharah* was that I knew that it would be the least popular of all of those [functions] and...I knew that it was just something that had to be done," says Abramowicz. "And it interested me because I found so much wisdom within the whole structure of how our tradition deals with death....and I began to really struggle with the idea, to try to bring people in to do *taharah*."

A cooperative arrangement was established with nearby Plaza Memorial Chapel, and training possibilities were explored. Abramowicz is sensitive to the fact that *taharah* at Plaza is generally performed by Russian immigrants, for whom this constitutes their livelihood, and she tries to balance their needs with the needs of her congregation to be taken care of by its own volunteer members at the time of death. This means that training is generally limited to the in-service initiation of new BJ members at the time of a BJ-related *taharah*, by those who have

performed *taharah* before, although Abramowicz has also done training with a mannequin twice a year. Over time, a core group has developed of 10-15 "very secure" women on call, from which a minimum 4-5 can be drawn as needed for *taharah*--"so that now [we] can send four who haven't been trained with two who have." In addition to Abramowicz' successor, a male team coordinator is now in place, and 4-5 men have been trained to do *taharah* within recent months.

Much of the recruitment has been one-to-one. "I know that the tradition is that in the old days...people were approached to join the *hevra kadisha*, it wasn't like a voluntary [initiative]. Here, unfortunately or fortunately, we have a very, very large *hevrah*" [*hevrah* here apparently refers to the sizeable BJ community to be cared for]. Abramowicz has approached certain people whom she felt would be appropriate for the task, and tries to avoid asking people who have small children or other commitments that would keep them from what is generally late evening work. Increasingly, experience has shown that volunteer medical personnel are critical, since today's *hevra kadisha* must deal with tracheal tubes, stomach bags and other complications of medical technology which often involve additional bleeding at the time of *taharah*. Abramowicz reflects:

> What I like is that we treat the [dead] person as if they were still alive. The water is lukewarm; there's no other [extraneous] discussion....There's just...a lot of reverence also...that elevates us in what we're doing....I'm very glad that I had persevered for that, because it has changed a lot of people's lives who have been helping us, including these [volunteer] nurses and doctors who usually deal with the dead on another level.

Dr. Leonard Sharzer, a plastic surgeon and rabbinical student at the Academy for Jewish Religion, is one of those medical volunteers who recently joined the BJ men's *taharah* group. At the time I interviewed him, he had just participated in his first *taharah* two weeks previously. "I heard the group was being formed," says Sharzer, "and it interested me, I would say, for two reasons. One, when my father *olov hasholem* [may he be at peace] passed away, it was very

comforting to have a *hevra kadisha* involved with him--and secondly, because of my medical background, and not feeling squeamish being around dead bodies, I thought I could offer something to the committee." He found the *taharah* to be "a very moving experience."

> The thing that impressed me most about it was how everything was being done with great respect for the person....The physical parts of it, the washing, the dressing in the shrouds and so forth, could be done by anybody, but I think if it were being done by somebody for whom it was just a job, it wouldn't have...been done with the same deliberateness and the same respect. Because it was not the end-point that was really important; it wasn't having the person washed and dressed and draped and put in the coffin, but it was the process.

Sharzer noted the assistance of an older Jewish man from the funeral home who "was there, guiding, helping, answering questions--so it was a big help to us, since he had certainly a lot more experience than everybody else." There was also an informal "debriefing" meeting afterward, when most of the BJ team members went out for coffee and, "because it was so new to us," discussed various concerns--mostly of a troubleshooting, technical nature--that might make the next time easier for them. Sharzer further relates that he was scheduled to lead the evening *minyan* for *shiv'ah* after the funeral, at the home of the daughter of the man in whose *taharah* he had just participated the night before.

> It gave even more of a connection, because she was not somebody that I knew--the father was quite elderly and had been in a nursing home, and she was a member of the congregation but not somebody that I knew. One, it gave a connection for me, and I think for her, also, having somebody who had been involved in the *taharah* at [her] home for *shiv'ah*--I think it was helpful to her.

The poignancy was increased by the daughter having been notified, an hour and half before the *minyan* at her home, that her mother had just died as well.

> So...her father died on a Sunday, the funeral was on a Wednesday morning, we did the *taharah* Tuesday night; Wednesday afternoon the mother passed away. So it was a really very heavy situation. And I think knowing that the women's group from B'nai Jeshurun would be involved in the *taharah* of her mother was also very, very comforting to her.

Sharzer recalls that when his own father died at home on *Shabbat*, the two members of the Orthodox *hevra kadisha*--who responded to the call after *Shabbat*--would not let the non-Jewish driver sent by the funeral home have any contact with his father's body. He, as the Jewish son, was asked to help cover his father with a sheet and lay him on the stretcher, after which the *hevra kadisha* took full responsibility for *sh'mirah* as well as *taharah*.

Like Stulman and Abramowicz, Sharzer acknowledges the difficulties encountered by the BJ group in mobilizing for *sh'mirah*. He points out that at times this service is not even requested by the family, but at other times the logistical challenges of mobilizing around the clock for up to 72 hours--given the more liberal tradition of delaying the burial so that family members can come from far away--prove too formidable. In response to the suggestion, based on the experience of Park Slope Jewish Center, that *sh'mirah* might be a less threatening way for volunteers to connect initially with the *hevra kadisha*, Sharzer reflects:

> I guess it depends on the individual. I think for some people, say, for me and...some of the others who are involved in it, I think the **doing** of something makes it more organic. So I think the action, the fact that there's physicality to it...I don't know if it lowers the anxiety, but it brings it to a different level, and one that I think...at least for me, is easier to absorb. That's why I think there's so much of what we do [in Judaism] that involves physical action--whether it's shaking a *lulav* to make it rain, or whatever.

"I think that this is something that is evolving," says Sharzer, "and it's interesting that it...started out with a group of women at B'nai Jeshurun doing it....I think it's several years already that women have been involved, but the men have just started doing this." He describes a process in which "the more people know about it, the more they want it"--and, as the traditional services of a *hevra kadisha* are more universally offered, and as community norms and expectations evolve to the point at which these services are more universally requested, more people are likely to step forward to volunteer in response to this need.

From *Midrash* (Teaching) to *Ma'aseh* (Practical Action)

It is clear that any educational program concerning *hevra kadisha* must be part of a larger program of Jewish death education, which aims to draw upon the wisdom and richness of Jewish tradition to help us approach issues of illness and death--and to support each other through them--as part of our Jewish affirmation of life. This larger curricular framework must incorporate such issues as *bikkur holim* (visiting the sick), *nihum avelim* (comforting mourners), living wills and advanced directives, and the role of hospice in the Jewish community, with the understanding that there is great congregational diversity in awareness of these issues. Many congregations have yet to understand and embrace even the basics of *bikkur holim* and *nihum avelim*, while others--like Park Slope Jewish Center--have already developed what might be termed "proto-*hevra kadisha*" services.

For purposes of a specific focus on *hevra kadisha*, the most pertinent related issues of Jewish death education would seem to be the tradition of ethical wills, on one hand, and views of the afterlife, on the other. The Talmudic example of Rabban Gamliel, as described above in Moed Katan 27a-b, is part of the ancient tradition of Jewish ethical wills which includes important teachings about how Jews should be buried. Similarly, the account of Rabbi Israel Salanter's last evening, with which this paper opened, constitutes an "ethical will" of sorts.

BJ Hevra Kadisha member Dr. Leonard Sharzer was not familiar with the term "ethical will" at the time of our interview. However, he subsequently shared with me a copy of a letter, handwritten by his father Edward in the year before Edward's death, which begins: "It is a venerable Jewish tradition for a person to leave specific and detailed instructions for his family regarding all aspects of his funeral and burial." The simple, dignified and moving four-page directive, which includes Edward Sharzer's final messages to his rebbes and friends as well as

specific instructions and blessings for his children, bears all the markings of a classic Jewish ethical will (E. Sharzer, 9/14/95). **So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills And How To Prepare Them**, by Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer (1991), is a key educational resource for promoting this tradition of Jewish ethical wills among wider circles of contemporary Jews.

Jewish views of the afterlife also have a bearing on how the body is perceived and handled at the time of death, as reflected above in A.F.'s story of how his mother discovered "what tea aprons are for." While there are those who believe in bodily resurrection, others maintain a belief--most clearly articulated through the mystical tradition--in *gilgul neshamot*, the transmigration of souls from one body to another. For centuries, the standard manual for *hevra kadisha* members throughout southern, central and eastern Europe--in both Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities--was a fifteenth century Italian text entitled ***Ma'avar Yabok*** ("Crossing the River Yabok," a reference to Jacob's wrestling with his mysterious counterpart in Genesis 32). ***Ma'avar Yabok*** is a philosophical compilation of writings on dying, death and the afterlife, based on the Jewish mystical tradition--a veritable "Book of the Dead" (Raphael 1992:349).

Whatever one's particular views of the afterlife, it is clear from *hevra kadisha* practices that the body is to be honored as the holy vessel which contained the soul in this life. BJ member Myriam Abramowicz brought many prior years of studying *kabbalah*, the Jewish mystical tradition, to her *hevra kadisha* organizing, and notes that Jewish views of the afterlife were among the issues addressed in the educational programs leading to the formation of the BJ Hevra Kadisha. Accordingly, her own approach to this work has been both practical and philosophical, as well as deeply personal:

> I remember sitting here [before my first *taharah*]...and I was saying [to myself], "In a few minutes I'm going to go down there. I've never done it....When I come back here, in an hour or two...I will not be the same person that I am, sitting here

> right now, on my way." And I knew that; I knew instinctively that somehow--it doesn't happen anymore [in the same way]. It happened that one time, and I knew it, and I was going to be fully there for it....I had never seen how it was going to be done, and I knew that that was going to affect something in the way I would be, and it's true--I realized that I was not exactly the same person that I was, hours before....It really swung open a tremendous gate--extraordinarily wonderful....
>
> It's a way of understanding something about being recycled...that *HaShem* takes us back, or takes us wherever...It's like a big chessboard; we're moved on certain squares for certain reasons....Not everybody...can really receive it like that, but for me it works. And it works with this [*taharah*], together, that when I'm in the presence of a *met* [dead person]--that's what happens to us. That's what happens to us. And so it's really...the in-between, in that corridor...from the time of birth to that time that we have to look at...and cry over, not when somebody's dead.

The Organizing Process

In her survey of *hevra kadisha* practices among Conservative congregations nationwide, Judith Kuper Jaffe writes:

> The fact that almost every Conservative congregation in the southwest region of the United States has a society which fulfills all the traditional functions, except gravedigging, may well be attributable to the fact that the areas in question have no Jewish funeral homes. In more populous Jewish areas--for example, in Northern New Jersey--it would appear that there are no *Hevra Kadisha* societies in any of the area's Conservative congregations. Conservative Jews there who desire the services of such a group rely on *Hevra Kadisha* societies from outside their own communities.

Jaffe adds: "Whether or not a community is able to maintain such a group depends on several factors. First, it would appear that a well-informed and educated existing group is needed both to teach and to sensitize the community to the *mitzvah* of *kibbud ha'met*" (1997:38).

Even the pioneering Minneapolis congregation of Adath Jeshurun, whose *hevra kadisha* was the subject of ***A Plain Pine Box***, has found it necessary to revitalize its education and outreach efforts over time. To celebrate the 20th anniversary of this *hevra kadisha*--known as Chevra Kavod Hamet, "The Respect for the Dead Society"--members created a new brochure and organized a special forum "reintroducing the congregation to the history of the society in an

effort to set the stage for the future." Attended by over 90 people, this event resulted in the recruitment of 50 new volunteers (Jaffe 1997:38, 40).

Philadelphia area Reconstructionist congregations began organizing, along with the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, to provide *hevra kadisha* services in the early years of the AIDS epidemic. They discovered that the Orthodox *hevra kadisha* in Philadelphia had received a rabbinic ruling (*teshuvah*) from New York which held that the principle of *pikuah nefesh* (preserving life) justified a refusal to perform *taharah* for any Jew who died of AIDS.

However, while the moral outrage was immediate, the emotional and practical considerations of reclaiming an ancient tradition for Reconstructionist Jews necessitated a long process of study, dialogue and consensus-building. It is only in the past five years that the Philadelphia area Reconstructionist *hevra kadisha* has been fully functioning, with 40 trained volunteers who are called upon to serve the community 10-12 times per year. Cy Swartz, a founding member of Congregation Mishkan Shalom and an early leader in this effort, recalls:

> Fifteen of us met for over a year and a half to discuss the issues that surround death: from hospice to assisted suicide to all the traditional Jewish practicies. These sessions were rich in personal sharing about our experiences with death, and gave each group member an opportunity to process feelings and work toward a personal understanding of how he or she wanted to relate to the Jewish tradition's rituals around this life-cycle event.
>
> We met with a local funeral director, investigated the purchase of communal cemetery space, and made some strong commitments to be available for each other in the event of death in our group. Our committee also sponsored an adult education seminar for three weeks, to share the results of our work with other interested members of our congregation. The video, [*A*] *Plain* [*Pine*] *Box*...was part of our exploration....
>
> We met for four months to develop operating principles and parameters for establishing a liberal *hevra kadisha*....Our members were spread along a broad continuum on [cremation] and several other issues: dressing a corpse in regular clothing; participation of mixed-gender groups in the preparation of a body; including non-traditional items in a coffin; using a non-traditional coffin....

> At times, we have supported non-traditional practices. Our most active operating principle is that we will perform no practice that is an active denial of death.
>
> Cy Swartz, "A Reconstructionist *Hevra Kadisha*"
> **Reconstructionism Today** (Summer 1997:4-5)

The Next Steps: "If Not Now, When?"

This study suggests that contemporary *hevra kadisha* organizing in non-Orthodox Jewish communities has been spurred by a combination of factors. These include individual family traditions, personal experiences of loss, educational initiatives by congregational leaders, and dramatic events that galvanize the community as a whole: a congregant dies suddenly at the table during *Shabbat* afternoon study; a family requests *sh'mirah* for a congregant who has died--or is expected to die--after a long struggle with cancer.

Perhaps the most ambitious organizing around *hevra kadisha* issues to date has been the work of the Jewish Funeral Practices Committee of Greater Washington (JFPCGW), established in 1976. According to official JFPCGW materials ("About the Committee," n.d.),

> The committee now includes some 30 member congregations, *chavurot*, and societies, including the entire spectrum of religious Jewry. It promotes funeral practices which are considered Jewish law for Conservative and Orthodox Jews, and which reflect Jewish values regardless of denomination, for Reform, Reconstructionist, and independent communities. The committee also helps congregations protect the bereaved from commercial exploitation....
>
> The JFPCGW has a contract with a local funeral home to provide the professional services for a complete funeral for $895, including the casket and, if desired, its funeral chapels. (Many congregations use their own sanctuaries.) The company has facilities in Takoma Park in DC and in Arlington and Falls Church in Virginia. In 1996 they handled over 250 funerals under the terms of our contract.

David Zinner, the grandson of *hevra kadisha* members, past president of the Columbia Jewish Congregation in Maryland, and vice president of the JFPCGW, reports: "The committee remains very active, meeting about 4-5 times per year. Membership is slowly increasing. Cooperation between the reps is very high. I should note here that the synagogue members

include all branches of Judaism, but that the founders and driving force, are the Conservative synagogues." Zinner also reports that two large funeral corporations, Loewen and SCI, were both bidding on the JFPCGW contract during the spring 1998 contract renewal. "We were afraid that just the opposite would have happened - that only one would be interested and they would try to push the price up" (Personal communication dated 4/2/99).

However, upholding the range of traditional Jewish community practices at the time of death continues to pose challenges for JFPCGW participating synagogues. In an earlier article written for **Reconstructionism Today**, Zinner describes some of their struggles:

> At the Columbia Jewish Congregation, we find *shiva* (the mourning period during the week after burial) to be a challenge. We explain to mourners that *shiva* is not entertaining your friends. It does not mean cooking and cleaning. *Shiva* is when you give the community the opportunity to comfort you. *Shiva* is when you let go, give up control, and let someone else give to you....
>
> We have a long way to go. We educate and encourage our members to do *keriah* (ripping the garment), but the practice of simply wearing a black ribbon is still prevalent. We encourage our members to say *kaddish*, but we don't have a daily *minyan* (prayer quorum) for them. We tell mourners about "getting up from mourning" on the last day of *shiva*, but walking around the block doesn't have the same feeling if you don't see your neighbors.

He concludes: "Our immediate challenge is to continue to educate our community about Jewish funeral practices. But I believe we need a longer-range vision through which we can reintegrate death into its rightful place as a Jewish lifecycle event" (1997:7-8).

Through my conversations with the various individuals whose experiences and perspectives are recorded here, I have been inspired to develop a more ambitious educational and organizing strategy for promoting *hevra kadisha*--one which I hope to implement during the coming year. The planning of programs on *hevra kadisha* should highlight the 7th of Adar (after sundown in the evening, or during the day if on a Sunday). It has long been the custom for the

local *hevra kadisha* to hold a special study session and festive meal on the 7th of Adar, which is the date traditionally identified with the birth and death of Moses. The BJ Hevra Kadisha has been holding 7th of Adar dinners for the past several years, most recently with guest speakers. In the absence of a functioning *hevra kadisha*, the 7th of Adar can be an opportunity to draw attention to the history and importance of such a "sacred society" in the Jewish community.

My plan (*im yirtzeh haShem* / God willing) is to mobilize local congregations for a regional **7th of Adar conference** in New York City next year--at which the featured speakers and workshop leaders will be such experienced *hevra kadisha* activists from New York, Washington and Philadelphia as are quoted in these pages, as well as others with whom I have not yet had the opportunity to become acquainted.

Conference participants will be given the opportunity to view and discuss ***A Plain Pine Box*** (perhaps a representative from Chevra Kavod Hamet in Minneapolis can be flown in!), to learn about the work of the Jewish Funeral Practices Committee of Greater Washington in dealing with local funeral homes, and to grapple with such issues of pluralism in practice as have been raised by the Philadelphia area Reconstructionist *hevra kadisha*. Materials given to participants will include the personal testimonies of those who have participated in *taharah*, which can be read and digested after the conference is over.

Such a conference can reduce the isolation and increase the effectiveness of current *hevra kadisha* activists, on one hand, and--if it is properly publicized--begin to make their work part of the normative Jewish community discourse and agenda, on the other. Most importantly, this type of event can serve to inspire and recruit new volunteers, from across the spectrum of Jewish belief and practice, to the ranks of existing *hevra kadisha* groups, as well as provide the impetus for the formation of new "sacred societies."

Many of the new volunteers, from traditional backgrounds or otherwise more traditionally oriented, may be most responsive to the practical *menschlichkeit* of traditional norms, as can be found in such classic *hevra kadisha* manuals as ***Sefer HaHayim*** **(The Book of Life)**:

> Rabbi Meir used to say: "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of celebration, for this is the end of every person, and the living should take to heart" [Ecclesiastes 7:2]. What is [it that] "...the living should take to heart"? Matters of death. That as he mourns [others], so will he be mourned. And as he buries [others], so will he be buried. And as he carries [others to their burial], so will he be carried. And as he accompanies [others to their burial], so will he be accompanied....For [these are] the measures of the Blessed Holy One, measure for measure: he who goes to console mourners, [none other than] the Blessed Holy One will console him. Therefore should a person go and fulfill this great commandment: to console the mourners [afflicted] with anguish and sighing, and to speak to their hearts with words of consolation. And in this he will dispense kindness, and fulfill the measure of the Holy Blessed One....and in this he relieves the spirit of the living and the dead.
>
> Unspecified Talmudic text translated by the author of this essay
> from the Vidaver edition of **The Book of Life** (1884:95-97)

Other *hevra kadisha* volunteers are likely to be drawn from the growing ranks of Jewish spiritual seekers, many of whom are returning to Judaism from their explorations of other religious traditions. Simcha Paull Raphael, who has written extensively on Jewish views of the afterlife, offers the following challenge to and on behalf of the latter group:

> The Tibetan *Book of the Dead* may well be sufficient for Tibetan monks. But now there is a need to develop a Jewish *Book of the Dead* that will be a guide and a manual for dying grandparents and their children and grandchildren. Now we need to bring to life Jewish wisdom on the mysteries of death and the immortal soul, so that the next generation of Jewish life will be lived with greater fullness and with a profound sense of the spiritual significance of life and death.
>
> "Is There Afterlife After Auschwitz?
> Reflections on Life After Death in the 20th Century" (1992:360)

I have now put myself on the list for the BJ women's *taharah* group, and am waiting to be called. I am grateful to all of those who have given so generously of their time to speak to me

about these issues, as well as to so many of those involved in this holy work with whom I have not yet had the privilege of speaking. It is taught that the practices of burying the dead and comforting mourners are among those most central to *darkhei shalom* (paths of peace). I hope, as I continue after my ordination to pursue a rabbinate committed to *darkhei shalom*, that I will prove worthy of the efforts of all those who walk before me and with me on these paths.

May we all go from strength to strength.

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APPENDICES / PERSONAL TESTIMONIES

(I have transcribed in their entirety
my interviews with F.B. and A.F.,
since I believe that a greater understanding of,
and sensitivity to, the ambivalence
with which the "not yet entirely committed"
approach these issues
in a "proto-*hevra kadisha*" context
are key to the educational efforts
that will encourage greater numbers
of otherwise committed Jews
to become involved in this holy work.)

F.B. is a 40-year-old engineer in corporate management who has been active at Park Slope Jewish Center for more than a decade. Her father died when she was in her early 20's, and her brother-in-law also died suddenly. She was one of the first PSJC congregants who mobilized to sit *sh'mirah*, for a congregant who died after a long struggle with cancer at the end of 1995.

RS-P: The first time I ever sat *sh'mirah*, I sat *sh'mirah* with you. It was in the morgue at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. Why did you do it? Why did you agree to come in the wee hours of the morning to sit in a hospital morgue?

FB: Well, that's a good question [laughter]. It seemed like the right thing to do. I had never done *sh'mirah* before. Actually, it's the only time I ever have done it, and--I don't know, with everything that was leading up to B's death, her illness and through it, with the blood donations and everything, it almost took on a life of its own--it just seemed like, right--a continuation of everything; it was a closure, if you will.

RS-P: How did it feel while you were doing it?

FB: Weird! It was just sort of, you know, unknown territory for me....I also didn't grow up in a family where that was something that was part of everyday life--well, not everyday life, but...where it was part of a tradition....It's sort of like I didn't quite know what I was supposed to be doing, what the right thing to do was....

I mean, it wasn't uncomfortable, it wasn't scary or anything like that. And it sort of felt right to be doing it, but I sort of wished I'd had...I would have liked a little orientation....It would be nice to have a little idea going in of what to expect and what it's about. And maybe if I did it again now, it would be a little easier.

RS-P: Do you think you'd want to do it again?

FB: I wouldn't mind doing it again. I don't know if it would be easier or harder if...it's not that B [the woman who died] was a very close friend. But I think it might be a little different if it was someone that I had been close with; harder, actually. There was...a little bit of a distance in some sense....I think it's actually easier, really, if you don't know the person really well....then it's like a community service, that you kind of feel good about....

RS-P: I know you as someone who can always be counted on to show up at a *shiv'ah minyan.* I was wondering if this was a connection that you see [as a community service]....or does that feel like a totally different kind of experience?

FB: No, no, I do see it as kind of--yeah, there's something....well, in general, I feel pretty strongly about the community being there. So--yeah, I think it's definitely something that the community can provide, that kind of service, and that it's a good thing for the community to do. In our community it just hasn't seemed that there's been a lot of--well, the good news is that there hasn't been that much opportunity for this, but I think that...it's not sort of thing that everyone seems to want.... [Some discussion of the diversity of backgrounds at PSJC, and the extent to which demand for such services is conditioned by knowledge of the tradition] It's not universally known...I grew up not knowing anything about that tradition....I think it's something

very common in the Orthodox community, but not so much outside that community. So the folks [in our community] who grew up *yeshiva bochers* [with an Orthodox education] know about it, but--you know, I walked in there not knowing what the traditions were....

It could be [that a community norm might evolve on this issue, as with *shiv'ah*]--I don't think it is [a norm] right now, but I think it could be....I think that there have been one or two opportunities since then in our community, but not really a lot. I think [that] with B, it was because of [her husband's] family and [his] background, even though, as I said, as closure [for the community] it did kind of take on the form of a mission.

It's the sort of thing that I'd be interested in, but it's not something that I've gone out to [pursue]--it's like, if the opportunity is there for me [to learn about it] I'm interested in it, but it's not something that I've made a personal quest--

RS-P: Right. You wouldn't seek it out.

FB: Exactly. Thank you.

RS-P: What if somebody in the community came up to you and said, "F., we're trying to organize a *hevra kadisha*"?

FB: If someone said "We're trying to organize a *hevra kadisha*" and what it would entail--a couple of times, you know, once or twice a year you might get called to do *sh'mirah*, or whatever--then I would say, "Put me on the list"--but if somebody came to me and said, "Would you help organize this and co-chair it?" then I would say "No" [laughter, with acknowledgement of her recent tenure as a synagogue officer]....and I practice every day saying "No." But certainly if someone asked me if I would be on a list of people they could call, to be called upon to do something, I would say "Yes"--the same way I feel about *G'MaH* [the PSJC *Gemilut Hasadim* Committee, which mobilizes in times of illness and bereavement, especially around *shiv'ah*]--I've said, "Call me if you need someone for a *shiv'ah minyan*, or call me if you need someone to make a visit or go shopping."

RS-P: This extended to actually organizing for *taharah--taharah* is the actual purification of the body and dressing it in shrouds prior to burial--would you be willing to be called for something like that, or would you say, "Just keep me on *sh'mirah*"?

FB: I'd say, "Just keep me on *sh'mirah*."

RS-P: And I guess I should clarify: this would be assuming that, unlike [your first] *sh'mirah* experience--

FB: That I actually got some training [laughter]....Right. I don't know. That's the answer; I don't know. I'd be interested in...learning about it, but I'm not sure. You said you wanted honesty [laughter]....I still think it would be nice to learn a little more about it, to read up on it....I mean, if there was another opportunity to go and see ***A Plain Pine Box***, I think that I would be interested in that, but--would I actively go out and do independent study? Probably not.

A.F. is a 56-year-old plumber and "motorcycle cowboy," the oldest of six children who grew up Orthodox on a chicken farm in Scranton, PA. A. kept his distance from the synagogue for many years after he left Orthodoxy, until he began coming to Park Slope Jewish Center to say *kaddish* for his mother, about whom he tells many inspiring and heartwarming stories. He has now served as a member of the board of PSJC, and was one of some two dozen congregants who mobilized to sit *sh'mirah* for a member of the congregation who died of cancer in early 1998.

AF: [On his first experience of sitting *sh'mirah*] I believe that was [for] my grandfather, and my grandfather passed away quite awhile ago. I got the job of sitting with my cousin. We armed ourselves with some sort of books that seemed appropriate....I don't know that it was *Tehillim*...We had a shift of a couple of hours, probably two hours....It's a very nice custom, you know; you don't leave the *meis* [dead person] by himself or herself. It's a very nice custom.

I have to tell you a little story now. Now, the story is about tea aprons. And I'm quoting my mother; it's really my mother's story. She said that when she was a little girl, when any of the men wore out a white shirt, Grandma would take it and say, "Oh this'll be perfect for a tea apron." And [my mother] said, "I always wondered why I never saw a tea apron--until I became a member of the *hevra kadisha*. And now I know what tea aprons are for because, when someone--when a woman dies in the community, we dress the *meis* and we put on a lovely white apron, so when *Mashiah* [Messiah] comes, [and] the *tehiyas hameisim* [the resurrection of the dead], she'll be able to get up dressed in her finery, in tea aprons" [responding to a sarcastic comment from his wife]--yes, and prepare the *Shabbat* meal for the men, of course [laughter].

RS-P: Your mom was a member of the *hevra kadisha*.

AF: For many, many years.

RS-P: Many, many years. Did she ever talk about it?

AF: Not really. I just knew that she used to do it and, you know--she'd be gone [in the night], and she'd come back...she'd disappear....

RS-P: Did you ever wonder what she was doing?

AF: When I was a little kid, I don't think she did it. It was more when I was grown and didn't live at home--which is some thirty, forty years now....

It has to be done, by our laws and customs; you can't leave a *meis* alone. Sometimes I think, "Well, the *meis* doesn't really care what I read"--but I read *Tehillim* anyway....Thankfully, the Jews don't do this open coffin bit...[describes his recent experience of a Catholic wake].

I guess I could do it [*taharah*]. It doesn't particularly frighten me, but....

RS-P: It doesn't particularly attract you, either.

AF: No, it doesn't. I never thought about it. I'd have to give it some thought. I'm just thinking of it as the concept of a *mitzvah*, of *tzedakah*....[after a slight digression, involving an unrelated *tzedakah* story and some joking] Yeah, let's take a break. (3/18/99)

The Rituals of Death

by Betsy Kaplan

From time immemorial, it has been a Jewish duty to bury our dead properly. Jewish law requires that we show proper respect for a corpse, protect it from desecration, and ritually cleanse and dress the body for burial. A *chevra kaddisha* (burial society) is a loosely-structured group of Jewish men and women who see to it that the bodies of Jews are prepared for burial according to these rules.

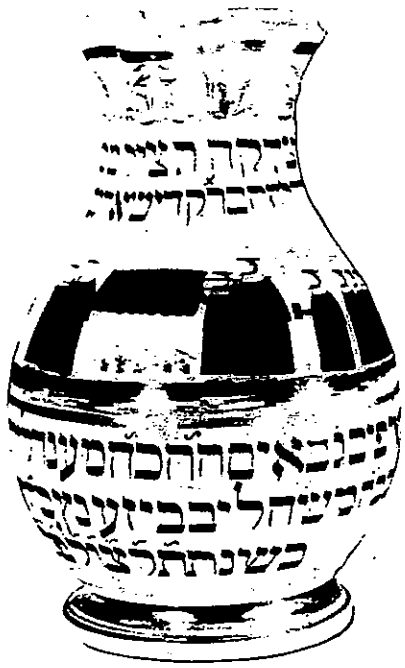
Some time ago, a friend asked me if I would like to become a member of the *chevra kaddisha* being formed in Atlanta. Until then, this work was being done by an older couple about to move to Israel. The growing, committed Jewish community in our city also made the need for a *chevra kaddisha* more urgent. I immediately answered yes. I did not think too many people would respond to this call; I also thought my background as a surgeon's assistant would eliminate the squeamishness that others might feel.

At the first meeting – to everyone's surprise – there was a tremendous turnout. Rabbi David Epstein outlined the requirements and pointed out that two different groups would be needed: *shmira*, watching the body for protection against desecration; and *tahara*, the ritual purification of the body. Not surprisingly, more people volunteered for *shmira* – a far easier task – but we had enough people for both groups.

Soon after that meeting, we were called to perform this *mitzvah* for the first time. There were nine women that evening: all of us novices; all of us getting in one another's way. On the way to the funeral home, we had disguised our fears about what would transpire with lively chatter.

However, once we entered the room where the body lay, we were silent. There was death lying on the table – that mysterious, deepest fear of the unknown that reduces us all to a common humanity. The trepidation all of us felt upon entering the room where the body lay, and the complete physicality of the preparations for *tahara*, served as a remarkable contrast to the spirituality of the occasion and the emotions of everyone present.

We formed a silent circle around the covered body and our preconceived feelings of dread overcame us. Many of us were shaking, some turned white. Still there was an unmistakable peace here, in this room.



Stoneware jug used by Jewish burial societies, Moravia 1936, in collection of State Jewish Museum, Prague.

Following the training given by Rabbi Epstein and utilizing a book he had prepared, we ritually washed our hands three times, and recited the prayer of *Rachamim*, requesting kindness for the body. Some women stood on the right of the body, some on the left. Carefully, we began washing the body on the right side first through a sheet wetted down by a hose. We uncovered only the part of the body we were washing and cleansed it lovingly. We cleaned and filed the nails, removed visible dirt, bandages and other foreign matter. The body must be cleansed of anything that might come between the purifying water and the body itself.

There is a strict order to this cleaning. We started at the head: the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and continued down the right side, then the left. When we saw the woman's face, much of our tension lightened. This elderly woman looked so peaceful, so relaxed. She seemed to have found an inner quiet which oddly calmed us.

Now she was ready for *tahara*, the actual purification by water. We cranked the table on which the body was strapped so that it was perpendicular to the floor, and placed a pan underneath. Then we poured three large pails of water over the body in immediate succession, taking care that the flow was continuous. The physical side of this procedure was almost comic – we were thoroughly soaked.

Afterwards, we lowered the table to its horizontal position and dried the body with a sheet. With a peculiar maternalism, we clothed the body in pure-white garments, each specially tied. On this table, all wear the same clothing and all are equal: male and female, rich and poor.

The meticulous care with which we performed these acts, and the time we spent with this woman, heightened our feelings of holiness. A funeral home deals with bodies; we were dealing with a person, and we felt the power of this *mitzvah* as we worked. We were calmed, humbled, hallowed. The *Shechina* – the Presence of G-d – touched each one of us so that we, too, became purified, sanctified. Was it because the *Shechina* had descended upon us? Or had we transcended our physicality to meet it? We slowly finished dressing the holy body, covered it with a sheet, and quietly exited the room.

Since that time, the *chevra kaddisha* has performed this *mitzvah* many times. If the person is known to us – and in a small community, that is often the case – we begin our work by talking about her – and – then concentrate on the actual task at hand. I helped in the *tahara* of two women who were friends of my mother, who had died many years before. Since I knew them both in life and death, I felt even more devoted to this *avodah* – a word meaning both "work and service to G-d."

Being part of a *chevra kaddisha* means performing a *mitzvah* for another Jewish woman who can never thank you: this is the greatest *mitzvah* of all. It has also given me the ultimate awareness of the link between the human and the Divine. We are sending this daughter of G-d off on her journey, from earth to her heavenly home.

***Betsy Kaplan** has lived most of her life in Atlanta, where she raised four children. She is a classical pianist and a real estate agent who is about to make* aliyah.

On our way to the funeral home we disguised our fears about what would transpire.

The Burial Society

Daniel E. Troy

It is a truism that we moderns are uncomfortable dealing with death—and especially uncomfortable dealing with dead bodies. Troubled by the very idea of our own mortality, we try to avoid its reminders, among which an actual dead person is certainly the most powerful. So it is no wonder that among modern Jews, knowledge of, and interest in, the *hevra kedisha* (literally, holy society)—the group of lay volunteers who prepare a Jewish body for burial—has declined over time, or that membership in such a society, although considered by Jewish religious law to be among the most laudable of activities, is now often thought to be exclusively the province of the black-garbed ultra-Orthodox.

This is unfortunate, because Jewish law relating to the newly dead has much to teach us, as I myself have learned from experience. Ever since my best and oldest childhood friend died suddenly eight years ago, my interest had been piqued by the *hevra kedisha*. Until I married, however, my inclination to join such a group was dampened by my general squeamishness concerning medical matters, as well as by my uncertainty about the level of religious observance required for membership. (Although I attend an Orthodox synagogue, keep kosher, and observe the Sabbath, I do not adhere to every jot and tittle of Jewish law.)

My wife's family, however, holds membership in the *hevra* in high regard. Her maternal grandfather participated in one in Germany, and her maternal grandmother was a member in Kansas City. (Men are allowed to attend only to dead men. Women technically are permitted to prepare both men and women for burial but, as a practical matter, women attend to women exclusively.) This heritage provided the impetus I needed, and thus one day I found myself volunteering on what I told myself was purely a trial basis. The rabbi assured me that one need not be a *tzaddik*—an especially righteous person—to join, only a committed Jew willing to do one's best.

This tolerant approach may reflect the relatively late development of the *hevra kedisha* as an organized institution. The earliest mention is in the Talmud, which reports that Rav Hamnuna (ca. 290-320 C.E.), arriving in a city where someone had recently died, observed the inhabitants going about their business. Irate, he threatened to excommunicate them for violating the injunction that burial of the dead takes precedence over all else. But then, upon hearing that burial societies existed in the town, Rav Hamnuna concluded that ordinary citizens were indeed permitted to continue work. Rav Hamnuna's ruling made the establishment of a *hevra kedisha* a top priority in most European communities. When Jews came to the United States, this was among the first institutions they established.

In Washington, where I live, many synagogues have their own *hevra*, contacted when a member of the community dies. Thus, a few weeks after my conversation with the rabbi, I was called upon to assist in my first *tahara*, or purification. When I arrived at the funeral parlor, I was told that the sixtyish man we were to prepare for burial weighed over 350 pounds, and had died of "chronic obesity." I guiltily squelched an adolescent urge to grin, and was doubly chastened as I watched Ben, our team leader, a physician in his early thirties, call around asking for a few more volunteers to help us deal with the difficulties created by the weight of the *met* (dead person). His tone in discussing the *met* was intensely respectful, and this set the stage for what I was to learn was the paramount directive in this experience: to show reverence for the person who has departed.

Judaism has always considered burying deceased loved ones to be a *mitzvah*, a religious duty and good deed, of supreme importance. Traditionally this view is based on Abraham's actions upon the death of his wife Sarah, when he turned to the neighboring sons of Heth and said, "A stranger and a sojourner am I with you; give me the possession of a burying place with you, that I may bury my dead from before me." This verse, the rabbis held, placed the responsibility for interment first on the family, and from there on the community as a whole. By the period of the Second Temple (ca. 465 B.C.E.-70 C.E.), according to

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the testimony of Josephus, to "let anyone lie unburied" was considered inhumane under Jewish law.

Jews try to bury their dead immediately, as befits a people whose origins were in the desert, where bodies decompose rapidly. The rabbinic teaching is that, unless necessary for the honor of the dead, "no corpse is to remain unburied overnight." Today, in most cases, a Jew is buried within a day after having died. This custom allows the family to begin coming to terms with the loss as soon as possible. Anyone who has experienced the death of a loved one knows that the time before burial is essentially a period of "limbo" (in Jewish tradition this condition is called *aninut*), and that only after the funeral can a family proceed with the difficult task of mourning.

As we walked to the room in the basement of the funeral parlor where we were to perform the *tahara*, we passed the *shomer*, or watcher, a man who stays with the recently deceased at all times. There are both practical and religious explanations for the constant presence of a *shomer*—as there are, incidentally, for most of the *hevra*'s ancient procedures. Practically, the *shomer* was originally needed to ward off mice and other animals that might inflict indignities on the corpse. He also may have helped guard against thieves who trafficked in dead bodies.

Today, when such considerations are less pressing, the *shomer* continues to serve a vital function. In the interval right after death and before burial, the deceased is especially vulnerable, having not yet reached a permanent "resting place" either in body or, so far as we know, in soul. (I well recall that when my friend died, his mother begged me to ensure that he was "not alone"; she did not want any further harm to befall his mortal remains.) The *hevra* has thus traditionally served to reassure the family that their loved one is being protected and cared for, a function reinforced by the custom of having the *shomer* be a respected and, presumably, well-known member of the community.

But this concern about the "address" of the newly dead is not solely for the sake of the surviving family. (Nor is it exclusively Jewish, as we can see in the proliferation of lawsuits against funeral parlors which confuse or switch bodies.) Judaism's regard for the body itself lies behind the determination to ensure that it, in its wholeness, be accorded a place after death. This is but one of the many reasons why Jewish law prohibits cremation. Aside from manifesting a disregard for God's handiwork, incinerating a body leaves it without any definable, knowable location in the world.

Although I was aware of some of these Jewish laws and customs concerning the body, I had never seen a dead person before. I was therefore quite fearful as I followed Ben and the four other members of our team down to the purification room in the funeral parlor. The room in which the *tahara* took place was in the basement, immediately adjacent to the embalming room. It was stark and relatively small, with two sinks, a cabinet, a drain in the middle of the floor, and a steel table that tilted for drainage purposes. Ben noticed my trepidation and reassured me: nothing was expected of a beginner other than to watch. I was free to do only what I felt comfortable doing and to leave any time I wanted. Ben warned us that smoking, eating, drinking, unnecessary talking, and praying near the body were all forbidden. Nothing was to distract us from the primary task at hand—preparing the *met* for eternal rest.

We entered the room, and there was the *met*, covered in a sheet, lying on a table. Ben explained the fundamental rules. As much of the body as possible is to be kept covered at all times, even while being washed. It is particularly important that the face and the genitals be shielded. At no time is it permitted to place the body face down. It is absolutely forbidden to pass anything over the body—a sign of profound disrespect, and a violation of the "personal space" of the *met*; if we had to give an item to someone on the other side of the table, we were to walk around and hand it to him.

The prohibition against passing objects over the *met* affirms the humanity of the person whose body is lying before us; it seeks to ensure that the members of the *hevra* continue to accord a dead person the respect normally given to those still alive. This consideration is by no means peculiar to Jews: for essentially the same reasons, people visiting a cemetery are reluctant to step directly on the spot where someone is buried. But in Jewish tradition the space above a *met* is reserved for him not only in the immediate vicinity but all the way "up to the heavens," so that his path to the divine will not be impeded. This suggests that we should respect a dead person even more than we do a living one, precisely because, in death, the *met* is thought to come face to face with his Maker and Judge.

After Ben's explanation of the procedures, we began by reciting the *hamol* ("forgiveness") prayer, which asks God to take mercy on the *met*, pardon his transgressions, and allow him to rest with our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as the other righteous of Israel. Jewish prayers often characterize God as the reviver of the dead (in the time of the messiah); unusually, the *hamol* prayer adds that it is God Who causes the living to die.

Stealing glances during the prayer, I was surprised to observe that the *met* had a large tattoo. Since Jews are expressly forbidden by the Torah to tattoo their bodies, it seemed that this man had been far removed from Judaism in his life. And the distance became even more palpable

when I heard his name—Yehudah *ben* (son of) Herman.* In other words, Yehudah's family did not even know his father's Hebrew name. Yet here he was, tattoo and all, being prepared for burial just as his ancestors had been for millennia. The stark contrast between Yehudah's apparently irreligious life and his choice to be buried in the ancient Jewish manner, in a shroud and in a closed, plain pine box, moved and confused me.

Ben assigned me the simple task of filling buckets with lukewarm water. The requirement that the water be set at the temperature at which most people feel comfortable taking a bath seemed yet another reminder that the *met* should be treated as sensitively as possible. Ben explained that the goal in a *tahara* is to replicate the immersion of the body in a *mikvah* (ritual bath). There are, again, at least two reasons for this ceremony. The first is ritual: to remove symbolically any impurity which the *met* might have brought upon himself during his lifetime. Humans can assist in eliminating this type of pollution, because it has arisen at the hand of man—i.e., the deceased. (The inherent impurity that comes from being a dead body, however, can be removed only by God.) The other reason is related to the vulnerability of the newly dead and the role of the *shomer.* Death completes the cycle of life. Practically the first experience of a baby is being washed and wrapped in swaddling clothes. It is fitting that this experience be mirrored in death.

Performing the *tahara* is uncomplicated. First, the entire body is fully washed, from head to toe, with water poured from a ladle back-handed, to indicate the sadness of the situation and that things are not "normal." Even the fingernails and toenails of the *met* are cleaned. Then, to ensure that as much as possible of the person be covered with water at one time, washed-down white wooden planks are placed under the body to lift it off the table. The *met* is next doused with at least three buckets of water simultaneously. This is the actual *tahara.*

Turning the *met* first on one side, then the other, we washed the body according to the specified protocol: first the head, then the right side of the body starting with the hand, up the arm; then the left side, also starting with the hand; then the right side of the back, followed by the left side of the back.

I was struck by the common sense of the order. We are, first and foremost, identified with and by our face and head. Inside our head resides our brain, seat of our conscious mind and therefore also of our "personality" (that which makes each of us unique), while our face is what we present to the world, often expressing outwardly our innermost being. By the time we reach our thirties, our faces have started permanently to assume a shape that is determined by the expressions we have employed throughout our lives. Often more than our eyes, our lines and wrinkles are windows to our souls.

After the head and face, the second most important part of ourselves seen by the world is our hands. These, almost as much as our face, embody who we are. The laborer's hands are calloused, the scholar's soft. And moving from the face directly to the hands also stresses the connection between the spiritual and the physical. The hands make real the soul's wishes. With our hands, we make love, hold our children, write, and mold the physical world in accordance with the dictates of our mind. It is therefore appropriate that we wash the head and hands for the last time in tandem.

While the others washed, I was given the task of cutting off every part of the covering sheet which contained any blood, so that it could be put in the coffin and buried with the *met,* as required by law. This rule is an extension of the strict prohibition against autopsies. Every part of a person—even a few spots of his blood on a sheet—is to be treated with equal respect and interred with him. Although the rule making the dead body inviolable has the effect of transforming every organ transplant into a difficult moral and legal question, it also establishes a very clear line, permitting transplants only under narrowly circumscribed conditions where there is an identifiable beneficiary.

In this case, the *met* had undergone a tracheotomy before death, and the endotracheal tube had to be removed before burial. (The tube was also placed in the coffin.) This proved somewhat bloody, and I quickly understood why my synagogue has a policy of having a doctor present at each *tahara.*

Although shifting the *met* onto the reclining table had not been difficult, placing the white boards under him and trying to establish a sufficient distance between him and the table to enable water to engulf him completely was somewhat trickier. Gently rolling the boards once we had placed them under the *met,* we were able to elevate him off the table.

We then performed the actual "immersion"—throwing the pails of water on the *met* while reciting a prayer that recalls Rabbi Akiva, one of the best-loved figures in rabbinic Judaism. It was Rabbi Akiva who opined that the Lord in heaven will cleanse those in need of purification. After the water was poured in a continuous stream over the departed, we recited in unison: "*Tahor hu; tahor hu; tahor hu*" ("He is purified; he is purified; he is purified").

We next proceeded to dress the *met* in white linen garments, covered his head in a hood, and draped a *tallit* (fringed garment worn in prayer)

* I have changed the actual name but preserved its flavor.

around his shoulders. Judaism considers all people equal in death, and requires that everyone be treated alike. Ornate clothing, and fancy coffins, are expressly prohibited. This custom originated with Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel II (in the first half of the 2nd century C.E.) who, alarmed at the extravagance and expense of funerals, ordered that his own funeral be extremely simple.

We slipped the *met* in his white linen shrouds into the *aron*, or ark (a much nicer word than coffin, especially since it recalls the place where the Torah scroll is kept in the synagogue). Spread on the bottom of the *aron* was dirt from the Mount of Olives outside of Jerusalem, where Jews have been laid to rest since the time of the Temple. This custom is based on the statement in Deuteronomy that "the earth shall atone for His people": the only earth believed capable of expiating the sins of the dead is that of the land of Israel.

Once the *met* was in the *aron*, we deposited pottery inside the head-covering, over his eyes. This is to address the mystics' concern that as long as the eyes of the *met* look upon this world, he cannot properly focus on the world-to-come. We also sprinkled dirt on his head, heart, and sex organ. The dirt, like the clay pottery, reaffirms the scriptural injunction, "Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return."

We next placed the cover on the *aron*, bringing the *tahara* effectively to an end. The law strictly forbids reopening the *aron* for any reason. One of the many explanations for Judaism's insistence on a closed coffin is the lack of reciprocity inherent in the relationship between the *met* and those who remain alive. We may look at him, but he cannot see us. In this necessarily one-sided relation, we are voyeurs trafficking in the "disgrace" of his exposure. To prevent the dead person from being, as it were, embarrassed by his state, the coffin is closed.

The demand for a closed coffin is also another step in affirming the finality of death. It forces family members to begin thinking about the person as they will for the rest of their lives—as a memory; and it begins the separation process. It may also palliate the intensity of a family's grief. Finally, the prohibition on an open coffin avoids any temptation to cosmeticize the dead, or to visit upon him indignities of the type prevalent in modern American funeral homes and practices.

After the coffin is closed, but before leaving, each person in the *hevra* is instructed to beg silent forgiveness of the *met*. This apology is made in case anyone has inadvertently performed a part of the *tahara* in a manner not in accordance with the personal customs of the *met*. Jewish law also requires that each person speak aloud the name of the *met*.

At first this requirement seemed a little silly to me. Were we to pretend that Yehudah ben Herman had his own "customs" with respect to the *hevra kedisha*—or that he had ever given a moment's thought to ritual purification? The notion of us standing around a dead body uttering aloud his slightly ridiculous Jewish name made me uncomfortable, to say the least.

I was wrong. To accomplish any *tahara* requires a degree of distance from the *met*. That depersonalization ended the moment we spoke Yehudah ben Herman's name. We were reminded that a man, like us, lay before us in the *aron*: a man with a wife, children, co-workers, friends, and loved ones who were affected by his death. The little custom of speaking Yehudah's name drove home to me the genius of those who had formulated the rules. Just as the practices of the *hevra* reinforce the Jewish prohibition against autopsies or any other purely utilitarian use of the body, they guard against what Leon Kass of the University of Chicago has called the "commodification of human flesh." The Jewish approach takes account of the powerful sense residing in every human being that the body should be respected, even after the person who inhabited it has left.

THE rabbis describe participation in a *hevra kedisha* as a *hesed shel emet* (a true act of kindness), since no reward can be expected from the dead for whom the service is performed. Although the prospect of meriting such high praise may have been thought necessary in order to motivate people to join a *hevra* (or to ensure that only sincere people join), in my view the rabbis were being deliberately hyperbolic. Clearly the *hevra* experience does offer many rewards. For one thing, having esteemed members of the community care for a dead person makes an enormous difference to that person's family. For another, the *hevra* sees to it that all people, high and low, are treated equally in death, and that their funerals and burial garments do not become a cause for ostentation. Finally, and perhaps most relevantly to our own day, the respect shown to a dead person by the *hevra* can affect profoundly the way those of us who remain alive view our own humanity. In all these regards, the laws of the *hevra kedisha* serve the dead *and* the living.

By Rochel U. Berman

Friends for a Holy Journey

As I pull back the baby's pink-and-white blanket, I see she is scantily dressed in a short-sleeved white undershirt, a disposable diaper and bright pink socks. She looks cool and comfortable on this hot summer day. Her head is covered with a slight fuzz of hair, a telltale sign of recent chemotherapy. The treatment, which prolongs life, was not successful in this instance. The baby, 18 months old, is dead.

How do I, a stranger, happen to be in such intimate contact with this deceased child? I am a member of my community's *hevra kadisha*, the Jewish burial society. We are a disparate group, men and women, young and old, who in our everyday lives are doctors, lawyers, teachers, students, business people and homemakers. Our common bond is the volunteer work we do in preparing the dead for their final journey in accordance with Jewish law.

The myths and misconceptions surrounding the work of the *hevra kadisha* are rampant. A friend of mine who grew up in Israel told me that as a child she recalled being warned by older playmates who wanted to frighten her that "the *hevra kadisha* will get you!" as though they were the incarnation of the bogeyman.

Prior to becoming involved in the *hevra kadisha*, like most people I had little knowledge about *tahara* procedures—the washing and ritual purification. My first experience with death occurred when my father passed from this life at the age of 95. Following his demise, he was whisked away and within 12 hours I was standing at his graveside staring at his casket asking myself, "I wonder what happened to his body from the time he died to the interment?" The images I conjured up were vague and obscure. My uninformed vision of the *hevra kadisha* was a group of little hobgoblins, asocial, asexual, who worked in the dark and never appeared in the light of day.

Thinking about them at that moment was chilling and only intensified my grief. How different I felt several years later when my mother-in-law died and was prepared for burial by *hevra* members with whom I serve. While I was still defenseless to death's intrusion, the hobgoblins of the past were replaced by whole people—individuals who shared my grief and for whom I knew it was a privilege to perform this time-honored task.

"The Making of the Shroud"/Quicksilver Photographers/the Jewish Museum in Prague

Jewish law prescribes that a town or village is under strict obligation to bury its inhabitants, as well as anyone who died near its borders. Our tradition speaks forcefully to the importance of a community-based *hevra*. In the Middle Ages, European Jewish communities established a separate *tahara* house at their cemeteries where the deceased were washed and dressed. The first *hevra* in America, called Hesed V'Emet (Charity and Truth), was formed in New York in 1802.

From birth to death, religion imbues milestones in the life cycle with spiritual significance. Even after the

soul departs, the body retains its sanctity just as the Torah Ark retains its holiness after the scroll is removed. Protecting the dignity of the deceased is a principal concern of the members of the burial society.

The three of us who have volunteered to perform this final act of kindness have been members of the burial society for several years. Yet the responsibility before us on this bright summer morning is more awesome than most. The death of a child so young invades the reasonable order of things. I fantasize that this little girl is only momentarily in repose and will soon awake to cry, to laugh, to be comforted.

The illness has left her thin and frail and I approach the preparation table with hesitation as I carefully place a fresh sheet over the body. In accordance with Job 1:21, "Naked I come out of my mother's womb and naked I shall return," we remove the clothing prior to the *tahara*.

My brief struggle with the adhesive tabs of the disposable diaper is made more difficult by the memory of recently performing this duty for my young grandson. The attention usually makes him gurgle and sends his chubby legs into perpetual motion. The contrasting stillness and silence is striking. It makes me feel vulnerable. Two of us delicately wash and dry the child while the third person solemnly recites biblical passages which assure respect for the human body even in death. The prayers serve still another purpose. They create a sanctuary in which to perform this commandment and give us the strength and courage to proceed with this difficult mission.

The final purification requires us to pour a continuous stream of water over the deceased. After the body is dried, and in keeping with the medieval Jewish custom, we spread a mixture of egg white and vinegar over her forehead. The hand-sewn, child-size shrouds in which we dress her are too large. I meticulously tuck and fold the shrouds so that the excess fabric will not obliterate the definition of her tiny frame. While the lightness of her body eases the physical task, it intensifies the emotional burden.

As I cradle the body in my arms and gently lower it into the casket, I am reminded of the million-and-a-half Jewish children, some younger than this one, some not much older, who perished in the Holocaust and were buried in mass graves without the benefit of this act of loving-kindness. I mourn their tragic end along with the numbered days of this small child.

Prior to placing the lid on the casket, we cover her eyes and mouth with pieces of broken earthenware, a symbolic reminder of human frailty. We sprinkle earth from Israel over the shrouded body, a concrete connection with the land of our ancestors. Finally each of us offers a silent personal prayer in which we ask forgiveness of the deceased for any sins of commission or omission which may have violated the commandment to respect the dead.

Tucked away in the corner of the room, I notice a large shopping bag filled with toys—the child's personal effects that accompanied her from the hospital to the funeral home. Perched on top is a robust teddy bear whose bulk is straining the sides of the bag. Did this fuzzy stuffed animal brighten her final days? Will it be a painful reminder to the bereaved family or will it help them to remember, to mourn and eventually to heal? I desperately want to tell the parents of the care we took with their cherished child, but decide that this would be an invasion of their private grief. Instead, I hope that the personal letter of condolence customarily sent by our *hevra* will assure them that their baby was prepared for burial with the utmost reverence, in accordance with the Jewish tradition.

Because most people have a need to distance themselves from death, I am frequently asked "Why do you do this?" "Isn't it depressing?" "How did you get started?"

My motivations for becoming involved were a combination of the practical, personal and philosophical. There was a need for additional women to do *taharot*. Since my husband was already a member of the *hevra*, I thought I, too, would like to offer my services. While I was filled with anxiety and trepidation the night before I did my first *tahara*, I found it to be profoundly rewarding. Despite a demanding career and commitments to home and family, I rarely decline an opportunity to do a *tahara*. Participating in the egalitarian customs and ceremonies of burying the dead reaffirms my own philosophy of life.

Religion imbues life's milestones with spiritual significance. Even after the soul departs, the body retains its sanctity just as the Torah Ark retains its holiness after the scroll is removed.

When the technology is turned off and the technicians can do no more, when death comes, what remains is a sense of incompleteness—a need for spiritual closure. It is uplifting to know that at this venerable moment I was able to perform the final act of love.

The dazzling sunlight that greets us as we leave the funeral home is in sharp contrast to the somber task we have just completed. Sharing this trying experience has created a profound sense of sisterhood among the three of us. We are deeply saddened, yet we are comforted by the knowledge that this child, whose time on earth was so preciously short, departed gently.

Outdoors, we ritually wash our hands as a sign of separation from the dead and head back to resume our lives among the living. **H**

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The *Chevra Kaddisha*

Preparing Sarah *bas* Avraham for her final journey

The workings of the *Chevra Kaddisha* are generally shrouded, if you will, in mystery. Even when one participates in a *tahara* (the ritual preparation and purification of the Jewish deceased for burial), the customs understandably evoke an aura of other-worldliness, explained most fully, perhaps, by the *Kabbalists*[1]. One *Shabbos* lunch, a friend spoke briefly about her role as a member of the *Chevra Kaddisha*. I was impressed and a bit in awe, finding it hard to imagine preparing *meisim*—the deceased—for their final home.

I had forgotten that at that *Shabbos* lunch I'd expressed interest in observing a *tahara*, so when I got the call it was a bit of a shock. I decided, however, that since this was such an important *mitzva*, I would explore it. From the sidelines. The friend who had originally piqued my interest about the *Chevra Kaddisha* picked me up a few hours after I'd received the invitation. She told me that, really, nothing was expected of me. I could participate if I wanted, or not.

When we got to the Memorial Chapel, I retreated a bit into myself—my father had passed away only a few months earlier. We did not walk into the chapel as I had expected, but downstairs where apparently the *tahara* would be performed. There, in a little corridor, I was told to don two aprons, a pair of rubber boots, and two pairs of rubber gloves. Four other women and I, reading from a faded sheet attached to the wall, *davened* that *Hashem* help us perform this deed with the right intentions.

> Somewhat nervous and certainly somber, I walked into a large tiled, open, well-lit room. There lay a stilled Jewess, completely swaddled in sheets. This was Sarah *bas* Avraham.

Somewhat nervous and certainly somber, I walked into a large tiled, open, well-lit room. There lay a stilled Jewess, completely swaddled in sheets. This was Sarah *bas* Avraham. Sarah's bed was a spotless white metal gurney, waist high, the foot of which was slightly angled over a porcelain trough built into the floor.

The leader of our "team" began by uttering the only conversation I was to hear for the next hour and a half. "Sarah *bas* Avraham, please forgive us if anything we do as part of the work of the *Chevra* offends your *kavod*." She then carefully cut away Sarah's wrappings in silence. Two others mutely inspected the body as her swaddling fell away... the only sounds were the clip of scissors, and the whispered prayers of the fourth *Chevra* volunteer.

I was afraid to look at Sarah's face, but my eyes were drawn to her. I never saw her fully, as care was taken to keep her face covered with a white cloth. Later I learned that although the eyes of the dead cannot see, exposure of the face (the most revealing part of a person) is a source of great embarrassment to the *neshama*. The *neshama* itself is said to hover about the body in confusion and pain until burial is completed. The silence, now broken only by splashes of water as the women gently and methodically cleansed Sarah, was in deference to her *neshama*, and a tribute to the holiness of the task at hand.

The leader then asked me, through sign language, if I would care to remove Sarah's nailpolish. (The *meis* must return to its source with as few obstructions—*mechitzos*—as possible.) "No way!" I thought as my head independently nodded yes. My throat had gone dry. This would be the first time I'd ever touched someone who was not living. But I was distracted from panic as I walked to the end of the table to accept the acetate-saturated cloth. Why had the leader not passed it to me directly across the gurney instead of having me walk out of my way? I did not know then that it is an insult to hand articles over the *meis* as if the *meis* were just a "thing." Therefore any exchange of objects is conducted beyond the *niftar*.

[1] Each *Chevra*, as a rule, incorporates many of its own *minhagim*.

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I took Sarah's right hand gingerly into my left hand, surprised at the strength and the cool. Small, they were locked in a graceful curve. My timorousness was replaced with what I can describe only as a caring wonder. What had she done with these hands? Had she cooked for her husband and children? Played with grandchildren? Written letters? Books? Played piano? Had she erred with these hands? With my own right hand I daubed the pink away, feeling a warmth for this stranger whose face I could only glimpse. I also felt a deep sense of privilege that would recur each time I would prepare a Jewish woman for her final journey.

The cleansing of Sarah's body was performed piecemeal. Only the section being washed was exposed; all else was kept covered by a white sheet. Care was taken to save for inclusion in the casket any cloth that had absorbed even a hint of blood. The final *tahara*—an immersion in water— was performed quickly. One of the women immediately shook out a fresh sheet and covered Sarah with it.

The dressing process was very beautiful. Sarah was shrouded in an immaculate white bonnet, pants, undershirt and overshirt, secured at the knees, waist and collar with three loop bows. The loops represent the tines of the Hebrew letter *Shin*—the first letter of one Name of *Hashem*. One team member saw to it that the bows lay flat and pretty, while the others offered a poignant supplication in Yiddish that Sarah *bas* Avraham remember her status as a *Yiddishe tochter* (Jewish daughter), and that she recall her Hebrew name while on her final course.

When Sarah was placed in the *aron* (casket), she looked clean, warm and cared for. After the *aron* was closed and a candle lit, we gathered around and asked for pardon had any of the preparations been performed without the respect due her as a *bas Yisroel*. We offered our hopes that any debt of pain or suffering had been paid in the world of the living, and that her journey to the Next World be only one of reward. Moved, I felt at that moment tremendous pride and love of being Jewish, a bond with these women of the *Chevra Kaddisha*[2], and less afraid, somehow, of the passage of death. ■

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[2]To learn more about the meaning and simple beauty of a Jewish burial, its customs and laws, you may write for information from the Jewish Burial Society at 85-18 117th Street, Richmond Hill, NY 11418.