

Holy Friends—The Jewish Way of Death

by Holly Blue Hawkins

The day started out like a typical Friday morning: I woke up early with the impossible litany of must-do's already running rampant in my head. Each time I sat down to meditate and take a couple of cleansing breaths, the phone rang with something else demanding my time and mind space. Then Sandra called. Sandra only calls for one thing: a *tahara*, at noon, today, before Shabbat. A 90-ish matriarch in the community had died peacefully in her sleep last night. The announcement of her passing was not yet out on the congregational email...noon today. Oh... kay.

I began to triage the calendar, jettisoned most of the urgent items into next week and reached into the closet to pull out the *tahara* clothes I wear for nothing else, always ready for moments just like this. I grabbed flower essence spray and a thermos of tea to ground myself after the ceremony before driving home, downed a light snack to tide me over and headed for the mortuary where our *chevra kadisha* has been performing *tahara* for decades.

Taharah is the Hebrew word for “cleanse,” but to someone familiar with the work of the *chevra kadisha* (“sacred society” or “holy friends”), *tahara* means the Jewish ritual of prayerfully bathing, dressing and casketing a body, a practice that has been part of the Jewish tradition for nearly 2000 years. Although the typical answer to the question, “What is a *chevra kadisha*?” is usually “That’s the Jewish Burial Society,” the role of a *chevra kadisha* encompasses far more than washing and praying over a body before laying it to rest. It is a sacred community that by its very existence embodies many fundamental Jewish values, quietly, and often behind the scenes.

Background

There is a story in the Talmud (tractate *Moed Katan*) that exemplifies how Jewish values influenced decision-making during the early rabbinic period in the first centuries of the Common Era (CE). According to the story, at that time funerals for the wealthy, like many conventional funerals today, were so lavish that “this caused the poor to be embarrassed.” It was therefore decided that everyone should be treated in the same manner, so the common people could care for their dead with dignity.

In a radical statement against what had become the norm, Rabban Gamliel, who, in his time could be thought of as today’s equivalent of the Chief Rabbi, insisted that his body be given a simple burial, dressed in plain attire and buried in a rough-hewn casket. His contemporary, Rav Papa, is quoted as saying that, as a result, “Nowadays people even use shrouds of cheap canvas.” Thanks to Rabban Gamliel, it became the custom for all Jews in death to be dressed the same: in simple garments without embellishments. Nearly 2000 years later, we still dress our dead in garments that reflect the decision made in the early Rabbinic Period in favor of equality in death.

Another story in *Moed Katan* documents the existence of a *chevra kadisha*. A Third Century Rabbi, Rav Hamnuna, arrived in a city and learned that someone had died. He was outraged to see the townspeople going about their daily tasks instead of stopping all normal activity to care for the dead and support the bereaved. But he was assured that “there are organizations in the city that take care of the deceased.” And so this highly regarded rabbi declared: “The rest of the people may continue their work as usual.”

Guiding Principles

Although the centerpiece of *chevra kadisha* communal responsibility is focused on honoring the dead and comforting the bereaved, its traditional role encompasses far more: caring for the sick and needy; establishing and maintaining the cemetery and even burying indigent remains at no cost; bathing, dressing, casketing, guarding and praying over the bodies of the deceased; supporting the mourners; providing meals; and maintaining a sense of decorum and continuity throughout the entire process of dying, death and bereavement.

Among the principles that guide the work of the *Chevra* are these concepts:

Bikur Cholim—Care for the Sick. The first known manual on the Jewish prayers and practices for illness, death and burial, *Ma’avar Yabok* (“Crossing the River Yabok”), was compiled by Rabbi Aaron Berechiah of Modena in 17th century Italy. This collection includes Kabbalistic teachings and practical instructions to care for the sick, as well as the process of dying and of preparing remains for burial.

Kavod HaMeit—Honoring the Dead. There is an underlying belief that we are all created *b’tselem* (in the image of) The Divine, and as such our bodies are deserving of reverence, regardless of how we may have behaved in this lifetime. Even if someone is executed for a capital offense, his or her body is deserving of the same *kavod*—the same honor—as the body of someone who lived an exemplary life.

Shmira—Guarding. Our tradition specifies that we are to watch over the body of the deceased from the time the person has breathed their last until their body is laid to rest. Historically, *waching* (Yiddish for “watching”) had

a practical function of keeping the body safe from desecration. A more expanded understanding of *shmira* is that we function like an “honor guard” watching over the body, providing a steady presence for the soul of the

departed during this confusing time of separation, and also protecting the sacred space around the dying process and the bereaved. By extension, we are protecting the tradition as well.

Confidentiality. Another aspect of *kavod hameit* and *shmira* is preserving the dignity of the deceased by surrounding the entire *tahara* process with the highest level of confidentiality. For some, this extends as far as the absolute anonymity of members of the Chevra. Unfortunately, over the centuries this level of confidentiality has caused the entire role of the *chevra kadisha* to become veiled in secrecy. On the other hand, there is a certain beauty in looking around a congregation and not knowing who cares for our beloved dead.

Nichum Aveilim—Comforting the Bereaved. There is a detailed code of conduct for supporting the bereaved and visiting a house of mourning. This includes a timetable for activities: when mourners should refrain and also when to resume, to assist them in moving through their grieving process and gently re-integrating back into society.



Carpenters



Tachrihim makers



HaMeit

21st Century Chevra Kadisha

Remarkably, after 2000 years of being torn apart by plagues, pogroms, expulsions and exile, the Jewish people have managed not only to survive but to develop a resilience, a kind of collective post-traumatic growth that is perhaps rooted in the sense of preciousness that often comes with being face-to-face with uncertainty. Those same foundational values that were established by the early sages have provided a substantial bedrock upon which we now base our core values. This includes the entire spectrum of care for our most vulnerable in their times of greatest need: the sick, dying and bereaved.

There is a series of paintings created in 1772 depicting the *chevra kadisha* of Prague. These illustrations are still astonishingly accurate; the activities have changed very little over the centuries. A flourishing 21st century Chevra not only performs the millennia-old ceremonies, but does so in the context of contemporary synagogue life. Integrating advances such as digital record-keeping, online education, social media and streamlined communications

position us to respond within a characteristically Jewish context to the growing trend of death awareness and the needs of an aging population of Baby Boomers.

To prepare as a community for the needs of the “Silver Tsunami,” the *chevra kadisha* is positioned to expand beyond *tahara* and *shmira*. In addition to the behind-the-scenes service of providing last acts of kindness for our beloved dead, the Chevra is uniquely qualified to provide additional services to both clergy and community. This expanded role can include community and congregational education, pre-planning assistance, cemetery management, interfacing with the mortuary and inclusion of members of a congregation in activities such as building caskets, sewing *tachrichim* (traditional garments in which the dead are dressed) and prayer leadership during the critical days and weeks following a death.

All One Chevra

Here is an example of the *chevra kadisha* network in action: When the shooting occurred at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburg last October, killing 11 Jews at morning Shabbat services, the local *chevra kadisha* mobilized to create a container of sanctity around their personal and communal tragedy and care for the bodies of their own. There was also an outpouring from Chevra members nationwide in the form of practical expertise in organizing the complexity of tasks—in person and via texts and email—and in offerings of emotional and liturgical support as events unfolded. This has continued since then.

For this year’s conference, *Kavod v’Nichum*, the cross-denominational *chevra kadisha* community of North America—whose name means honor and comfort—has devoted an entire day of the conference to a reverent retrospective of the Tree of Life incident. This time has been set aside to explore what we have learned as a faith community and how to bring that awareness into our collective wisdom for future times of hardship. Also, we want to remain present as a source of solace for those

Chevra members most intensely impacted by the experience.

There is a Jewish tradition of dedicating a time of study to the memory of our beloved departed. With this understanding we recognize that an aspect of bringing *kavod* (honoring) to each experience, however painful, is learning what we can from what confronts us. *Nichum aveilim* (comforting the bereaved) extends beyond providing comfort to the family, friends and community. We also acknowledge a level of trauma that members of the Chevra may experience—particularly in situations of violent death—leaving an imprint that doesn’t go away for months, years, a lifetime.

Understandably, a community-at-large endeavors to carry on and find its own way to “new normal” after a tragedy. Along with our vow to protect the privacy of the deceased may come a veil of disenfranchised grief that can only be shared among those who understand. At such times, members of the Chevra turn to one another for comfort within their uniquely common bond.

As I meet *chevra kadisha* members from around the world, who are Jewish by faith but ethnically diverse, I have come to understand that there is only one *chevra kadisha* and that we are all part of it. Regardless of variations in how we perform the ceremonial care for the dead, what recipes may be involved in meals of consolation or other fine details, or even what language we speak, we are all one *chevra kadisha*; there is a bond you can see in the eyes, and in the shared understanding of the precious fragility of life itself.



Meeting Hall at Cheshunt

Natural Deathcare Movement

Traditional Jewish burial is inherently “green” in many ways. The casket is made of simple wood, with no metal or synthetic materials; in some settings the burial is done in shroud-only. The body is not embalmed, and non-biodegradable materials are not permitted in the casket. If possible, graves are hand-dug. Jewish cemeteries with explicitly “green” designations are springing up around North America. In the United Kingdom—where the trend toward woodland burial parks is far more widespread—the Joint Jewish Burial Society has established the first Jewish Woodland Cemetery in the UK in Cheshunt, north of London.

Although the history of each ethnic/religious group that has immigrated to North America is unique, we have encountered a common challenge to maintaining our respective death traditions: the rise of commercial mortuaries and cemeteries has contributed to a decline in family and community involvement in after-death care. Practices such as routine embalming, vaulted burial plots and lavish funerals, virtually unheard of in centuries past, have become the norm.

Among the tasks of the *chevra kadisha* are promoting cultural awareness, advance planning and coalition-building in the form of educating local hospitals, coroner’s offices, non-Jewish mortuaries



Hand-dug grave



Woodland cemetery at Cheshunt

Photos Holly Blue Hawkins

and cemeteries about how to honor, not only a Jewish individual's death, but also the Jewish deathcare tradition. And we are not alone in the desire to promote culturally diverse death awareness.

Death itself has become abnormal, secretive and the purview of professionals. The idea of faith communities creating a sacred space in which to perform ceremonial after-death care has ironically become a revolutionary act requiring planning, research, education, mobilization of resources, legal battles and conscious efforts to recover rapidly disappearing practices that were, until recently, the expected norm. Historically, when Jews founded a new community, the cemetery and *chevra kadisha* were the first infrastructure established. But whether it is a place for Jews to perform *tahara* or another community's traditional or innovative after-death honoring, caring for the bodies of our loved ones has become a human rights issue, a human *rite* to be reclaimed.

My *tahara* attire ready to go

Epilogue

Each *tahara* is different and yet similar, and each time I participate I feel myself going deeper into the sacredness. Often I find myself picking up the body in my arms like a child, to reposition her on the preparation table or adjust the ceremonial garments. I feel the weight of a body without a soul enlivening it, and I feel the emptiness of this vessel devoid of its contents. Such holiness, such privilege...

We lift her body into the casket, place pottery shards and sand from Israel, recite more liturgy, wrap her in her familiar prayer shawl and carefully drape the fringe, place the lid for the last time and wipe it down with a

damp cloth to remove the fine layer of dust that may have accumulated. More prayers, speaking to the soul of the deceased, we ask her forgiveness for any indignity we may have caused in our efforts to honor her, wheel the casket with feet toward the door and proceed around the back of the mortuary to the chapel where the body will lie in state.

I kiss the casket as I leave and back out of the chapel in respect. I find a sink and ritually wash my hands again, go to my car, pull off my head covering and shake out my hair, spray the flower essence formula, take a few deep breaths and sips of tea, and turn the key in the ignition. Back at home I disrobe in the laundry room. My *tahara* clothes go directly into the washing machine, and I go into the shower. In clean clothes I make a fresh cup of tea. There is nothing to say. 🌿



Holly Blue Hawkins is a Natural Deathcare advocate, author, educator, Gamliel Institute faculty and Rosha (Head) of the Community Chevra Kadisha of Santa Cruz, California. She provides training in a wide variety of end-of-life subjects in both Jewish and secular settings. hollyblue@LastRespectsConsulting.com