

What Is Shmira? – from Kavod v'Nichum's Gamliel Institute

Shmira is the ritual guarding of the person's body. In some ways it can be likened to an honor guard.

Shmira is traditionally done from the time of death until burial. In some communities shmira is not started until after the tahara.

A shomer (male guard) or shomeret (female guard) may do the shmira. Some communities may have only male shomrim (plural); others may have men do shmira for men, and women for women.

Those who do shmira are usually not the mourners. Sometimes they're grandchildren; sometimes they're community volunteers; sometimes they're friends; they can even be students. In some communities teens are matched with adults. In some communities non-Jews do shmira with Jews. Shmira can be a good way for out of town relatives to re-connect with the deceased and the funeral process.

There is a dichotomy between those who do shmira on a volunteer basis and those who do it for pay. Heavily populated Jewish communities often have paid shomrim available. Less densely populated communities, and in communities where there has been education about this mitzvah usually provide shmira volunteers. Some communities may combine volunteers and paid shomrim. For example, paid shomrim might handle overnight shifts, or do shmira over Shabbat or on special holidays. In some communities, chevras will coordinate shmira shifts. If shmira is needed for two people, they may share the task so that they supplement each other when they don't have enough people to fill in all the slots.

The Jewish tradition explains shmira in two ways - a physical guarding and a spiritual guarding.

Physical guarding is designed to protect the body. Originally this was protection to keep away animals and others who might try to violate the body in some way. Hopefully today's shomrim will not need to protect the body from animals, but they may play a role in other kinds of physical protection.

Mix-ups in bodies have occurred. There is a role for shomrim to play in confirming identification and maintaining a "chain of custody." Ideally, the shomer would check the identification tags on the body and/or casket and verify them with funeral home logs and then confirm identification with the name of the person they received with their shomer assignment.

Shmira is also about guarding, or watching the spirit of the person who died.

Shmira is quintessentially a process of soul-guiding... in the hours and days after a death, the spirit of the deceased hovers in close proximity to the body. Reading of Psalms during the time of shmira is designed to help the soul move on. But what does that mean? How can a person reading Psalms in the presence of a dead body help the soul in the transition? It is actually quite simple; think of soul-guiding as a contemplative nonverbal communication between the world of the living and the realm of the discarnate soul. Sitting in front of the deceased, reciting Psalms, one should hold an attitude of a loving connection with the person who has died. In the heart and mind imagine sending a message that says, "It's okay to leave behind this world, and move on." The task requires trusting intuition and one's inner voices, listening inwardly for a response, and being attentive to synchronistic, meaningful experience. Soul-guiding is not a science; it is an art.

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Shmira has a ripple effect beyond the deceased. Knowing that a community representative is with their loved one brings comfort to the family. The community, which wants to help but is not quite sure what to do, becomes engaged in a task that provides this comfort.

Finally, the activity of the shomer can have a profound impact on them. Time spent in meditation or quiet reading of psalms, is often a welcome break from our overloaded lives. No distractions of television, cell phones, or pagers allows us to focus on the life lost, and to reflect on our own lives.