Resources

Traditional Jewish Burial Rituals

The Chevra Kadisha (Holy Society) in a community cares for its deceased.

In the Portland Metro Area, The *Chevra Kavod Hamet* (Society for Honoring the Dead) provides traditional end-of-life ritual services to the diverse Jewish community, with respect for the human dignity of the deceased.

First Contacts:

It would be ideal if congregations had contact person(s) for the families.

Holman's Funeral Service: most Jewish burials are done through Holman's
2610 SE Hawthorne, Portland 97214, 503-232-5131; www.holmansfuneralservice.com

They are generally the first contact for the family and will inform them of the traditional burial option.

Riverview Funeral Home: some Jewish burials are done here. Same process.
0300 SW Taylors Ferry Rd, Portland 97219; Contact: Gary Sands; 503-246-6488
www.riverviewcemetery.org or www.riverviewcemeteryfuneralhome.com

Chevra Kavod Hamet: The community wide *chevra* serves all of the greater Portland area congregations and unaffiliated except the orthodox community which has its own separate *chevra*. **http://www.chevrakavodhamet.org/**

Rochelle Rosenberg, chair: chevrakavodhamet@gmail.com
503-282-3536, hm 503-481-6716, cell

Jewish Federation: houses the ***Hesed Shel Emet*** which provides indigent burial services. There is a rotation for cemeteries providing plots and for rabbis who officiate.
Debbie Bodie, administrator: 503-423-7845

Unaffiliated Families: Jewish Federation is a good first contact for information for unaffiliated families needing burial services.
www.jewishportland.org
503-245-6219
6680 SW Capitol Hwy, Portland OR 97219

Costs:

Tahara: $60—covers cost of shroud, materials, and helps with indigent burials.
Tahara can be done preceding a burial or a cremation and after some organ donations.

Tahara

The *tahara* (Purification) done by the *Chevra Kadisha* (the Holy Society) consists of 3 parts. It usually takes an hour.

Part One:

This starts with a ritual hand cleaning, recitation of the deceased's Hebrew name and then asking for forgiveness from the *met/a* (deceased, *met*=male; *meta*=female) for any indignity caused by the participants.

The *met/a* is cleaned. While this is happening, passages from traditional texts are being recited.

Part Two:

This part consists of the pouring of purification water over the body. Using pitchers, water is poured in a continuous stream over the entire body, while simultaneously saying, *"tahora hee"* (she is pure) or *"tahor hoo"* (he is pure).

Part Three:

The *met/a* is now dressed in the shroud which consists of a white head covering, shirt, tunic, pants, & belt. The *met/a* may also be wrapped in his/her *tallit*.

The *met/a* is then placed in the casket. Earth from Israel is placed under the body. Shards of clay are placed over the eyes and mouth. The *met/a* is finally wrapped with a *sovev*(sheet) that has been placed in the casket.
Again, forgiveness for any indignity caused by the *chevra* members is requested of the *met/a*. The top of the casket is then closed.

Burying on a budget, the plain pine box

And it's Kosher too

BY PAUL HAIST
Jewish Review

If you shop around the Web for a basic wood casket that meets traditional Jewish burial standards, you might be surprised to find that a simple pine box can cost a lot of money.

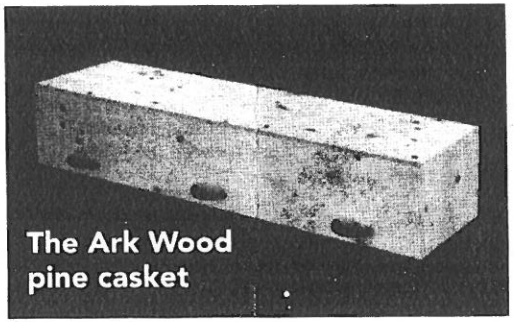
A traditional Jewish casket contains no metal parts, not even screws or nails. Also, they are generally simple in form—modest and dignified cabinetry.

There's a company in the Midwest that builds wood caskets that are simple but handsome—suitable for a traditional Jewish burial—but they cost $2,800.

They look very nicely put together. But $2,800?

If part of a traditional Jewish burial is to avoid ostentation, $2,800, even at today's prices, might be testing the limits of tradition, especially if you consider the true cost of a simple casket.

Crosscut Hardwoods, a specialty wood store in Portland that sells mostly to professional cabinetmakers and other woodworkers currently charges $1.20 per linear foot for a 1-inch by 6-inch white pine board. Say it takes four 7-foot by 6-inch by 1-inch boards to build each of the four long sides of a basic casket and 16 lineal feet to build the two end pieces. That seems like a roomy casket.



The Ark Wood pine casket

That's 128 linear feet, which, at $1.20 a foot, would cost $153.

At that price, the Midwest casket maker would be marking up his product more than 1,800 percent over the material cost.

Of course, there is other overhead. If we allow $250 for labor, physical plant, insurance and so on per casket, that casket maker is netting about $2,400 for his pine box.

When the time comes to say good-bye to a loved one, it can be difficult not to spend more than we might if circumstances were different and we had more time.

However, a southern Oregon man has a product that is elegant in its simplicity, meets Jewish requirements and is offered at a good price. Some assembly is required.

Paul Firnstein of Ashland founded Ark Wood Caskets with a friend in 1993 after building a couple of simple wood caskets for a local need. That led to requests from others and the creation of the company of which he is now the sole owner.

Firnstein's pine caskets are shipped to the buyer unassembled. He says he ships all over the United States, "about 50-50" to Jewish and other religions and groups including Muslims, Christians, green-living advocates and what Firnstein noted was a growing number of families that want to create home funerals during difficult financial times.

"My main goal was to supply the Jewish community with a casket that exactly meets their needs," he said.

He noted that some makers of caskets offered as kosher actually use metal staples to hold the sides together.

Firnstein's caskets contain no metal; they're held together with self-gluing dowels that are easily tapped into place. He points out that the glue—soy-based PureBond, made by Columbia Forest Products of Klamath Falls—contains no formaldehyde or other toxins.

Also, the rope handles on the casket wrap around its underside to provide additional support.

Firnstein sells his kosher casket for $499, plus shipping. That's $100 less than it sold for a year ago.

For more information about Ark Wood caskets, visit the company's Web site, arkwoodcaskets.com.

The Holy Society

The telephone rings shortly after dark. Sensing somehow that the call is for me, I answer the phone with only a moment's hesitation. I cover the mouth of the receiver for a moment to confer with my wife. She had few expectations for this night in the first place and gives only a brief sigh when I inform her I will be going out. With our children in bed, I know she will curl up with her journals and undoubtedly be asleep when I return.

"I'll pick you up at 9," my caller informs me, and we disconnect. Once again I ask myself how I ever became involved in this sort of a thing, but I accept my responsibility, and await my ride. I spend the brief wait cleaning up the kitchen after dinner, a seemingly endless task, but one that is comforting in its lack of emotional or intellectual demands. My ride appears at the stroke of 9. I grab a jacket and am off.

The mood in the car is subdued, though not somber. My two companions and I engage in small talk, reviewing the status of our families, jobs, and vacation plans. We arrive at the funeral home, its windows dark, and let ourselves in.

The chit-chat abruptly ends, and we set about our assigned tasks. We are members of our local Chevra Kadisha, literally the "Holy Society," one of many such voluntary groups in Jewish communities around the world. The Chevra's sole purpose is to perform ritual preparation of the deceased prior to a traditional Jewish burial ceremony. We serve any member of the community when requested by the family, regardless of affiliation or circumstances of death.

Both men and women participate in the Chevra, with male members preparing men for burial, female members preparing women. Tonight we have been asked to prepare this recently deceased man prior to his funeral the next morning. Jewish tradition dictates that burial take place as soon as possible after death—generally the next day—hence the short notice we received. The preparation is guided by the fundamental premise in traditional Judaism that the deceased should be treated with utmost respect at all times. Based on this, we are not to discuss mundane or extraneous matters while performing our duties, and perform them quietly and steadily. This respectful approach is second nature to me now, though I am disturbed to recall that I did not adopt this attitude in my medical training, but only once I joined the Chevra Kadisha.

The process of preparing the deceased varies somewhat from community to community, but the basic format is well-established by long tradition. First, we perform a ritual handwashing, followed by a brief prayer. We then wash the deceased. We perform this sponge bath with as much care as bathing any incapacitated person, perhaps even more gently because the deceased cannot assist. I cradle the head when the deceased is turned on his side, while my partner washes the back. Abrupt, jarring movements are carefully avoided. We maintain the modesty of the deceased at all times with a towel covering the genitalia. As we begin to wash the deceased, I cannot help but silently consider the cause of death. Are there any telltale scars suggesting a prior coronary artery bypass graft? Cachexia to indicate a malignancy? Defibrillator paddle burns to indicate a failed attempt at resuscitation? My silent visual autopsy is quickly concluded, however, with my speculations unanswered. I mentally chide myself for allowing the distraction and restore my focus to the sanctity of the task at hand. While we wash the deceased, however, my restless mind draws comparisons to my experiences in my medical student anatomy lab. Although we were instructed to "respect the dead" by our professors, we instead engaged in morbid humor and kept our emotional distance throughout the experience. While some of our behavior may have represented emotional immaturity, it seems that the medical subculture did not reinforce our instructors' weak admonitions.

Trying harder to keep my mind from wandering, I concentrate on my responsibilities, focusing on the mechanical task of cleaning under the fingernails and toenails after the sponge bath has concluded. Having completed the washing, we lower the deceased into a Mikveh, a bath for ritual purification. Finally, after we have carefully dried the deceased, we dress him in a traditional plain white linen shroud, place him in the casket, then wrap a prayer shawl around him. Traditionally, there is no viewing. Before we close the casket, I pause for a moment, consider the deceased, and wonder, Who was this man? Did he live a full life? Who mourns him? Is he at peace?

Our task complete, we ask for forgiveness from the soul of the deceased, for we know that despite our best efforts, we have not remained entirely pure of thought and deed during the hour we have spent in the process of preparation. We leave the deceased in the company of another member of our community, the Shomer (literally, the "watcher"), who will remain overnight to recite psalms while maintaining the traditional vigil until the burial.

The ride home is brief, but a spirit of satisfaction mingled with relief fills the car. The conversation is lighter, more animated, as we return to our families and our lives. We will never have direct contact with the family of the deceased but rather have the inner satisfaction of knowing we have served our community and given the dead the respect they deserve.

The contrast between the attitudes toward the dead that I have observed in my religious communal life and in my professional life is striking. While the emphasis on "respect for the dead" present in traditional Judaism may be formally espoused by the medical profession, it seems our behavior as physicians often falls short of this ideal. My personal attitude toward the dead has evolved since my medical school experiences. As a resident I came to view the dead as an indictment, staring back at me with sightless eyes, reminding me of my failure to preserve life. This was a difficult time to deal with the dead, with my usual response a rapid departure from the vicinity of the dead to the more comfortable company of my living patients. I rationalized this retreat from my deceased patients, reasoning that I had no more to offer after the act of dying was completed. It never occurred to me to spend a few moments with my dead patient in silent, respectful contemplation.

More recently, I have been working on a stroke rehabilitation unit, trying to restore function rather than fight death directly. Here, death is a rare visitor, and not a major part of my professional experience. My primary interaction with the dead is no longer at work but in my religious communal life, and this has afforded me an opportunity to gain a new perspective. In the Chevra, the process of dying is past, and my involvement is confined to dealing with the body of the deceased. Without the emotional investment of having been responsible for this person's life, I can finally view this as its final stage. My responsibility here is to provide the dignified treatment that we all would wish for. Despite my uncertainty about the meaning of life, and my fluctuating confidence in an afterlife, I know that I am doing a true "Mitzvah," a good deed that exists for its own sake, and not for reward. Providing this dignified treatment to our patients who have died seems to be a "Mitzvah" we could all perform a bit better.

Joel Stein, MD
Boston, Mass

The author would like to acknowledge Rabbi Meir Sendor for his thoughtful review of the manuscript.

Edited by Roxanne K. Young, Associate Editor.

"THE DOUBLE SILENCE" CRUMBLES – QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT TAHARA

Some years ago, I began to wonder about the tradition that our hevra membership is supposed to be anonymous, that that when we perform tahara we must be silent. Certainly normal human emotions surface whenever we perform this emotional mitzvah! I know that my own do. But we are not allowed to talk to anyone about those feelings, either inside or even outside the tahara room. I call this the "double silence," and it fascinates me.

When I worked on my doctoral dissertation 10 years ago, I interviewed members of the women's hevra kadisha in London, Ontario, Canada, to learn their feelings as they prepared the met. Here are some of my questions, and some of their answers:

Question: What do you think about as you perform the required rituals?

"It is the same as dressing a baby. Here is the miracle of life or death. She is helpless, dependent on you to give them dignity. It's up to us."

"It appeals to me that I am the last one to touch this person, especially if they have no family. It keeps you from thinking. You just do it."

"You get a sense of closure; it's one last favor you are doing for her. It's not just a robot thing; you want to do a last thing, and you get a sense of satisfaction when she's dressed and placed in the coffin."

"It is important for the dead to be handled by those who knew her. That makes it personal."

Question: What gives you the most satisfaction?

"I feel a connectedness to an ancient tradition. I feel needed. Without me, they can't do it properly. It's part of my life, it is what I do. I don't evaluate it, I just do it."

"This is the ultimate *hesed* [act of loving-kindness], something you do totally free of any desire of looking for a reward. It is pure."

"Even if I don't believe in it, they do, so I do it for them. For me, it is wonderful and very moving that the women of this community prepare other women of this community. It creates a strong bond."

"Taking care of someone is a privilege. They must be taken care of with dignity. I care enough to care for them. I am helping someone else who cannot help herself. She lies there helpless. I am doing the last something special for her."

"I feel the reverence of taking care of the body, which is a vessel for the soul. We need to respect that and to honor that."

"To respect and to care for her, to treat her body with reverence, as if she still were a person."

"I feel a sense of responsibility to the person, to their family, and to the Jewish community."

Question: How is God present when you perform tahara?

"There is a spirituality present, especially with someone in no pain anymore."

"I'm not sure I believe in God, but there is definitely the good feeling of sharing the awesomeness of the finality of life. It is a contagious feeling."

"This feels like the work of God. It's like walking into sacred space. I could walk into that space, and I didn't need to intellectualize it, analyze it, or understand it."

"It is a mitzvah, and as I get older I feel like doing more to move to a higher level of spirituality."

"I am bathed in a spiritual feeling, particularly because I had helped put her to rest."

Question: How has serving on the hevra kadisha changed your feelings about your own death? About death in general?

"I do think of my own death. I have a serious heart condition from which I may die. If it will bring my children the same good feelings it brings me, then let the hevra kadisha prepare me."

"I want to sew shrouds for me and my husband. It would have meaning for me to do that. The doing of the task reminds me of my own mortality."

"I do think about my own death. Sometimes I joke about it to relieve tension. I want those who knew me to perform tahara."

"I begin to think about my mother's death, how her transition will be."

"I wonder who will do me? I hope it will be people who know me and love me."

"It has made me much less afraid of death. I have looked death in the face, and it isn't so bad."

"Each time I do it, I hope there is someone to care for me when I go."

"It is reassuring to know that I will be well taken care of, that as I do this for others they will do it for me."

How could anyone not be moved by these emotions that hevra kadisha members experience as they prepare the met? I am moved beyond words whenever I serve on a hevra kadisha. It is truly holy work.

— Rabbi Mel Glazer

Portland ensures proper Jewish burial for all Jews

BY DEBORAH MOON
Jewish Review

An intensive and collaborative effort stretching across three states last month enabled a Jewish man to have the proper Jewish burial his daughter thought was impossible and prompted an Arizona rabbi to marvel at the Portland Jewish community's commitment and organization.

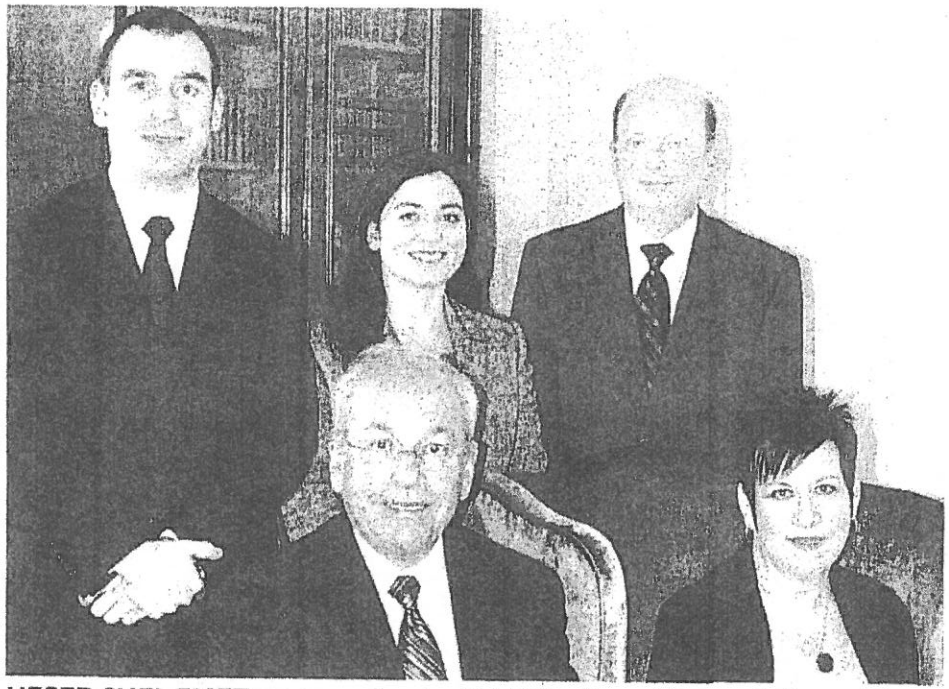
The ability to rapidly arrange a proper Jewish burial for a man who was already at a funeral home awaiting cremation, was due to the existence of Hesed Shel Emet, the Oregon Jewish Indigent Burial Society. The memo of understanding that created Hesed Shel Emet in 2009 has been signed by 32 rabbis, 11 Jewish cemeteries, three hevra kadisha (burial societies), four agencies and Holman's Funeral Service and Riverview Cemetery Funeral Home.

Hesed Shel Emet (unrequited kindness) was the brainchild of Cedar Sinai Park Development Director Debbi Bodie after she helped arrange a Jewish funeral for a resident of Robison Jewish Health Center who had outlived her financial resources. Since then, the fund that bridges all segments of the community has provided a proper Jewish burial for seven individuals.

Most recently, while at a professional conference in Dallas, Texas, Bodie received a call from Chabad of Oregon Rabbi Moshe Wilhelm requesting urgent help for the family of a man who was scheduled to be cremated the next day. The man's Jewish daughter in Arizona was distraught because her half-sisters in Oregon felt the family could only afford a cremation, which University of Arizona Chabad Rabbi Shmuel Teichtel told her was counter to Jewish tradition.

Teichtel called Wilhelm, who called Bodie.

Far from Portland, Bodie called Holman's, the funeral home which has handled most of the Hesed Shel Emet burials. After a flurry of phone calls between Dallas, Portland and Tucson, within a few hours Holman's had collected the body and arranged a Jewish funeral, which all three daughters attended and appreciated.



HESED SHEL EMET program director Debbi Bodie and Holman's Funeral Home president Dan Holmes (both seated) have worked together on many indigent Jewish funerals with the aid of (from left) Cameron Holmes, Alissa Holmes Kalamaris and Scott Newkirk.

Wilhelm said that Teichtel was amazed by the organized response from Portland's Jewish community to ensure this final mitzvah is available for all Jews who reside in Oregon or Southwest Washington at the time of their death.

Bodie gives much of the credit to Holman's, who she said has been quietly performing this service for decades. One of the few funeral homes in the state that is still family owned, Holman's is now operated by Dan Holmes, with the assistance of his son Cameron Holmes, daughter Alissa Holmes Kalamaris and long-time employee Scott Newkirk. Both Cameron Holmes and Newkirk are funeral directors with years of experience in Jewish burial practices.

Holman's opened in downtown Portland in 1854, before Oregon was a state, where its close proximity to synagogues made it the funeral home most Jews turned to. In 1923, the Holman family moved the business to its present home on Southeast Hawthorne, where it has continued to serve the Jewish community. Dan Holmes began working for the third generation of Holmans 38 years ago and quickly came to see Howard and Margaret Holman, who had no children of their own, as a second set of parents.

"At their deaths, I was the one they entrusted to carry on the business," said Dan Holmes, adding he feels extremely fortunate that his own children "are working in the business to help this family business continue."

Ever since the influx of Jewish refugees from the Soviet Union and later the former Soviet Union, Holman's has been helping ensure a proper burial for all Jews regardless of their means to pay. Since many of the refugees were elderly when they arrived and unable to find employment, Dan Holmes said many could not afford funeral expenses.

"Because of our relationship with the Jewish community, we felt it was something we needed to do," Holmes said. "On many occasions, we provided funeral services and Jewish caskets at no cost when there were no funds."

Holmes said he is grateful to Bodie for creating Hesed Shel Emet to ensure all local Jews can have a proper burial.

"It's wonderful what Debbi has stepped up to do to help the Jewish community and establish this fund for those who are less fortunate and to be able to help them," he said.

Newkirk, who has been at Holman's for 15 years, praised Bodie for creating Hesed Shel Emet and for her help in coordinating indigent funerals.

"It's nice to see a community come together and take care of their own; it's not something you see in a lot of traditions," he said.

Bodie said even before the formation of Hesed Shel Emet, the community recognized the need to take care of its own.

"But there was nobody to see it through or to think of fundraising," said Bodie. "Now that this program is in place and there is more awareness, the community is stepping up."

But she said the need continues and ongoing fundraising is essential. Just before the most recent two burials, she sent out a fundraising letter requesting people consider making a donation in memory of those they have lost.

Holman's also has a letter from Bodie explaining the program and donation envelopes available. Kalamaris, who works with families on pre-planning, said families arranging a funeral consider a donation to ensure others also can be buried in dignity.

Those who need the assistance of Hesed Shel Emet or wishing to make a donation, should contact Bodie at 503-423-7845.

December 12, 2010

Reviving a Ritual of Tending to the Dead

By PAUL VITELLO

The volunteers are taught to begin at the head, washing the face before proceeding to the neck and right shoulder. The right side is to be washed before the left side, the front before the back. There are prayers to say. Small talk is forbidden.

The Jewish protocol for tending to the dead governs almost every interaction between the living and the deceased from the moment of death until burial. The ritual, which has been part of religious law for two millenniums, mandates the protection of the physical and spiritual remains.

But for many decades, most Jews in the United States have lost touch with those protocols — if they have ever heard of them — in favor of conventional funeral home services that replace volunteers with professionals who, by their nature, skip the more metaphysical and personal elements of the process.

Now, a movement to restore lost tradition has motivated a new generation of Jewish volunteers to learn a set of skills that was common knowledge for many of their great-grandparents: the rituals of bathing, dressing and watching over the bodies of neighbors and friends who have died.

It is a nationwide revival propelled in almost equal parts, experts say, by an emerging sense of mortality among baby boomers, a reaction against the corporate character of the funeral home industry and a growing cultural receptivity to past spiritual practices, even some that make many people squeamish.

Rabbi Elchonon Zohn, the founder and director of Vaad Harabonim of Queens, a national association of rabbis who promote traditional burial, has crisscrossed the country in recent years teaching the philosophy and technique. He described the approach as attending not just to the bodies, but also to "the feelings of the dead."

"We don't think of this being we are preparing for burial as a 'body,' " said Rabbi Zohn, an Orthodox Jew whose knowledge of burial tradition is mainly sought after by the non-Orthodox. "It's a person; and that person in our view is still alive in a parallel world, very much aware of what's happening."

People who can approach a deceased person in that spirit, he said, are potential members of a "chevra kadisha," translated variously as a burial or sacred society.

In the New York region and on Long Island, where he has concentrated his efforts, Rabbi Zohn estimates that 25 percent of Jewish burials today incorporate the burial rituals, compared with about 2 or 3 percent 15 years ago.

His estimates are consistent with national trends, said David Zinner, executive director of Kavod v'Nichum, or Honor and Comfort, a

Washington center for information on Jewish burial practice. "From approximately zero in the 1970s and '80s, we now have literally hundreds of chevra kadishas operating in New York, New Jersey, Chicago, San Francisco, you name it," Mr. Zinner said.

Two books, he added, are considered among the revival's seminal influences: "The American Way of Death," Jessica Mitford's 1963 exposé about the funeral industry, and "A Plain Pine Box," a 1981 work in which Rabbi Arnold M. Goodman describes a Minneapolis synagogue's return to traditional burial practices.

For the most part, the volunteer tradition has been maintained in Orthodox communities, which make up about 20 percent of the American Jewish population, and lost among the others — Reform, Conservative or unaffiliated.

Members of the Park Slope Jewish Center, a Conservative congregation in Brooklyn that did not have a burial society within anyone's memory, started a society about seven years ago, after the deaths of two congregation members in quick succession, both young mothers.

Rabbi Carie Carter, the synagogue's spiritual leader, said the emotional aftershock of those deaths seemed to reveal a missing link in the chain of the community's ties. There were temple groups organized for visiting the sick, and others for visiting families when a relative died. "But we were missing that space in between, caring for the dead themselves," Rabbi Carter said.

In 2003, she and a member of the congregation, Rabbi Regina Sandler-Phillips, a social worker whose interest had evolved from her work in 9/11 disaster relief, organized the Park Slope chevra kadisha with a handful of volunteers. There are now 70, about one in seven members of the congregation.

Like most, the Park Slope burial society is roughly divided into two groups. The first, and smaller, is composed of those trained in preparing the dead for burial. The second contingent of volunteers is organized — usually two people at a time, for two hours at a time — to keep vigil beside the deceased every moment until burial.

Both rituals are based in the notion of treating the dead as one would the most helpless member of one's community, Rabbi Sandler-Phillips said.

"What we do with the body at the end of life is very much like what we do with a child when it is born," she said. "We wash it carefully, we wrap it in clean swaddling, and we watch it around the clock."

Gathering one evening recently in the basement of an Orthodox funeral home in Borough Park, Brooklyn, Rabbi Sandler-Phillips and some volunteers reviewed the ritual of preparing someone for burial.

The society has mobilized a dozen times in the past five years, but most members of the synagogue still use conventional funeral home services. The most recent burial in which the chevra kadisha participated took place in September.

"We will always address the person by name," the rabbi said, standing with the others in a fluorescent-lighted room of white tile furnished with a stainless-steel table and a large, rectangular stone bath tank filled with water. "We begin with a prayer asking for forgiveness in advance if anything we do offends the honor of the deceased."

The walls are covered in prayers to be said during the washing, lifting, emersion, drying and dressing of the body. Men prepare the

bodies of men; women, those of women. No one outside the burial society may observe its work; and beyond the circle of those directly involved, volunteers may not discuss any individual's rites.

Rabbi Sandler-Phillips said that during preparations, some people, herself included, prefer to sing rather than speak the prayers, which are mainly psalms and readings from the biblical Song of Solomon. Her favorite is the song that starts: "How beautiful you are, my beloved friend."

At all times, she said, the emphasis is on the dignity of the deceased, and respect for the irreducible reality of death. Embalming is forbidden by Jewish law — one of the practical reasons for requiring burial within 24 hours — and so is the use of airtight coffins, or anything that impedes natural disintegration.

Ilene Rubenstein, 57, one of the volunteers, said most people in her congregation remained cautious about committing their remains to the care of neighbors and friends because of a kind of modesty, a sense that privacy is less disturbed if remains are handled by strangers and professionals, she said.

For some volunteers, there is also the fear of death.

"I have to admit, the first time, I wasn't quite ready for what a dead body looks like," Ms. Rubenstein said.

"But you get over that quickly," she added, receiving nods of assent from the others. "And for myself, knowing that I will be in the hands of people who care about me," she continued, glancing around her, "that's what I want when it's my turn."

קהילת שיר תקוה

How do we best fulfill the mitzvah of honoring our dead?

A Shir Tikvah discussion for the Days of Awe

***K'vod haMeyt* – "honoring the dead"**

Congregation Shir Tikvah is served by a number of committees which make sure that all its communal functions are carried out effectively and in ways consonant with Jewish ethics and ideals. One of these committees was originally called the Cemetery Committee; its charge was to ascertain the necessary arrangements so that Congregation Shir Tikvah will be able to bury our dead when the time comes.

Over time the committee realized that their responsibility was broader than finding a suitable piece of ground for burial plots. The Jewish ethic of *k'vod hameyt*, honoring the dead, includes several important *mitzvot* related to caring for the dead, caring for mourners, and facilitating the participation of the community in the process.

The Cemetery Committee thus changed its name to the Kvod haMeyt committee. The Kvod haMeyt Committee presents this Yom Kippur discussion toward the end of offering our congregational community the opportunity to learn about the issues related to Jewish death and burial so that we can make the best decision regarding how to fulfill this mitzvah for our members.

***Halvayat hameyt* – "accompanying the dead" to burial**

The Moment of Death

When someone dies, those who hear the news traditionally recite the blessing

> ברוך אתה יהוה אלהינו מלך העולם דיין האמת
> *Barukh atah Adonai Eloheynu Melekh ha'Olam dayan ha'emet*
> Blessed are You Adonai our God, Power of the Universe, True Judge.

Those who are most affected will probably only be able to gasp out the abbreviated version:

> ברוך דיין האמת
> *Baruch Dayan HaEmet*
> Blessed is the True Judge.

This is a statement of acceptance, not thanks. We affirm that this is the way the world works. People live and then they die. So will we.

Aninut

The ones who are bereaved are in the most intense state of mourning between the death and the funeral/burial. They have no obligations under Jewish law at this time. The rest of us are obligated to come to their aid in several ways:

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From the moment when a person dies, Jewish tradition provides that they are not alone. Our ancestors believed that the soul hovered near the body between death and burial. It is a mitzvah, therefore, to take part in keeping the dead company until the burial. Volunteers take turns sitting by the body and reading psalms; this is called *shemirah,* "guarding".

It is a mitzvah to help to prepare the body for interment. A specially trained group called the *Hevra Kadisha,* the "holy circle", performs *taharah* (washes) and dresses the body (men attend men, women attend women); traditionally the body is wrapped in plain linen shrouds.

Death is something to which we all come equally; human equality is emphasized in a number of Jewish mitzvot related to death and burial. All should be buried in plain shrouds, in a plain wooden coffin, with a simple ceremony. Rabban Gamaliel II lived in a time when the custom was to make funerals very ostentatious, and the costs of burial grew so great that some people who could not afford to keep up would simply abandon the bodies of their dead. Gamaliel II, who was the leader of his community, prescribed a simple style of burial for himself – he was carried out in inexpensive linen shrouds. Therefore, all the people followed his example.

The Funeral
It is a mitzvah to keep the cost of funeral and burial low so that all may be buried in an equally respectable manner.

It is a mitzvah to bury the dead quickly. This is derived from the Torah: "His body shall not remain overnight...You shall surely bury him the same day." (Deut. 21.23). In the Talmud the concept is developed:

> If the relative keeps the body overnight to honor the deceased – to have his death made known in nearby towns, to bring professional women mourners for him, or to procure for him a coffin and shrouds – he violates no precept, for all he does is done for the honor of the deceased. (BT Sanhedrin 46b-47a)

It is a mitzvah to delay burial so as to allow for the donation of organs which may help to save another's life or improve the quality of that life. In some cases it may also be a mitzvah to donate one's body for scientific research, but the emotional costs to the mourners who must delay the closure of the burial for a year or more should be taken into consideration.
Embalming the dead is usually not necessary unless burial must be delayed. Requirements of *kvod hameyt* prescribe only those embalming techniques which leave the body intact.

It is a mitzvah to be sensitive to the needs of the mourners, and to support them in their grief.

R. Simeon ben Eleazar said: do not try to comfort your friend while the body of your friend's loved one yet lies unburied. (Mishnah Avot 4.18)

Attending a funeral is part of the mitzvah of *halvayat hameyt,* which is specified as one of the *mitzvot* which is so important that it is impossible to measure its importance. The rabbis of the Talmud taught that one may interrupt the study of Torah to attend a funeral procession. Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rav: A man who sees a body on the way to burial and does not accompany it blasphemes his Creator.

Viewing the body is considered a breach of Jewish law since it cannot be an equally positive experience in all cases. Some people's deaths leave them looking terrible, and so as not to upset their mourners, it was ruled that all dead shall be covered. In cases where someone needs to see a loved one in order to achieve a sense of psychological closure, a private visit with the dead is recommended, but the dead should never be made a public display.

It is a mitzvah to give a *hesped,* to speak of the dead at the funeral. The use of myrtles as decoration at a funeral is mentioned in the Talmud, but flowers are discouraged by tradition lest the practice lead to ostentation. It is a mitzvah to give *Tzedakah* in honor of the dead.

The Burial

Respectful burial is a mitzvah incumbent upon the entire community in which a death takes place. Even a *kohen*, who is required to keep himself ritually pure and therefore may not come in contact with the dead, is obligated to ritually defile himself in order to tend to the needs of the dead if he comes upon an unburied body.

The purpose of burial is to return the body to the dust from which it came. A coffin is not traditionally used, but in places where it is used, it should be simple wood. Where grave liners are legally required, it is possible to ask for "kosher" liners, which include holes drilled in them so that there is no blocking of at least a small direct relationship between the dead and the earth.

In ancient days in the land of Israel burial took place in caves carved out of stone. After one year the bones would be collected and placed in an ossuary, hence the term "gathered to the ancestors". When we went into exile, suddenly the ground and hills in which we buried our dead was no longer the Land of Israel; it was the land of non-Jewish peoples among whom we lived, often not easily. A Jewish cemetery became a small piece of Jewishly consecrated ground; one traditional practice is to put some earth from Israel into the grave of a Jew buried outside of Israel. Forced to live separately, we developed a custom of separate burial, among our own. The Jewish cemetery is considered holy, and in Hebrew is sometimes called a *beit hayim,* house of life, or *beit olam,* eternal home. Both of these names reflect traditional Jewish beliefs related to life after death. In premodern times, respect for Jewish dead required burial in a Jewish cemetery where the grave would not be vandalized or robbed.

In our own day, many cemeteries maintained by synagogues still do not permit the burial of non-Jews due to traditional separatism. A congregation which welcomes non-Jewish partners and spouses, however, does not maintain the ban on the burial of non-Jews, although usually there will be no non-Jewish burial rites in a Jewish cemetery.

Also due to beliefs about the afterlife (and possibly to differentiate ourselves from the customs of other ancient peoples), cremation was considered contrary to Jewish law. In modern times some people have felt that cremation was also too reminiscent of the fate of many of our people who died in the *Shoah,* the Holocaust. However, some survivors feel that out of respect for and solidarity with their family members who were murdered, they want to be cremated. It is a mitzvah to respect their wishes. Cremation may also be understood as an environmental and economic mitzvah, especially in areas in which the living do not have enough room, or where prices for body burial are unethically high.

The Shivah

After the funeral the mourners return to the home for the seven-day period known as *sitting shivah,* so called because they sit on low stools or on the ground as a sign of mourning. The word *shivah* simply means "seven". It is a mitzvah to visit them, to bring them food, to talk with them or to be silent with them as they need, and to arrange prayer services in their home each evening so that they can say the mourner's *Kaddish.*

Sheloshim

The rest of the first thirty ("sheloshim" in Hebrew) days from the day of the funeral and burial are a time of beginning to return to life and life's pursuits for the mourner. It is a mitzvah to remain sensitive to their needs and supportive of their grieving process.

> Rav said: only after twelve months does one begin to forget the dead. (BT Berakhot 58b)

Yarhzeit

The year which is officially regarded as the extent of the mourning period ends with the first *yarhzeit,* the anniversary of the death. It is marked by the saying of Kaddish in the synagogue (which can be recited as often as the mourner wishes for one full year). It may also be marked by a gathering at the grave for the dedication of the grave marker (which perhaps used to take a full year to engrave; now it is ready much earlier). All mourning restrictions are lifted from the mourner at this time, but we know that mourning in some fashion will continue.

Questions for consideration:

1. what is respectful treatment of the dead to you?
2. what is respectful Jewish burial?
3. is it necessary to bury Jewish dead in a Jewish cemetery to fulfill the obligation of respectful burial?

For further reading:

Maurice Lamm *The Jewish Way in Death and Dying*
Arnold M. Goodman *A Plain Pine Box: A Return to Simple Jewish Funerals and Eternal Traditions*
Ed. Jack Riemer *Jewish Reflections on Death*
Ann Brener, Jack Riemer *Mourning and Mitzvah*