STUDY GUIDE

The Final Journey

How Judaism Dignifies the Passage



Compiled and Edited by ROCHEL BERMAN & JONATHAN KROLL



This Study Guide helps the formal and informal Jewish educator deal with important issues surrounding end of life practices. The Guide provides detailed lesson plans on a range of topics including: Placing Death in the Context of the Jewish Lifecycle, The Chevra Kadisha and the Core Values of Judaism, A Demonstration of Chevra Kadisha Rituals and Tasks, and Halachic Issues Regarding Organ Donation. Armed with the necessary tools and reinforced by the transformational success this initiative has had at the Yeshiva High School in Boca Raton, educators of teens and adults will be able to effectively impart knowledge on these critical areas simultaneously enhancing their students' Jewish Identity.

—Rabbi Kenneth Brander, Yeshiva University, Vice President for University and Community Life; inaugural dean, Center for the Jewish Future and Rabbi Emeritus, Boca Raton Synagogue.

The Final; Journey: How Judaism Dignifies the Passage is a pioneering project that educates high school students about the Jewish view of death. It is designed to expose students to both the philosophy of what happens at death as well as the practical procedures of the Chevra Kadisha. I am grateful to Rabbi Jonathan Kroll, Head of School, Yeshiva High School and Rochel Berman, author of *Dignity Beyond Death*: The Jewish Preparation for Burial, for piloting this endeavor. It is my hope that it will be emulated in Jewish high schools throughout the world.

—Rabbi Efrem Goldberg, Senior Rabbi, Boca Raton Synagogue

Our young people know all about some life-style events—bar/bat mitzvah, weddings—but little or nothing about end-of-life customs. This new study guide fills a long-felt need, teaching high school students history, laws and customs of Jewish burial rites. How Judaism emphasizes respect and loving care even at the end of life is a lesson that will enrich and enhance students' lives. Rochel Berman and Jonathan Kroll have given us an educational gem.

—Nancy Klein, Founder and Chairman Rosh Pinah Chevra Kadisha, Westchester, NY

The Final Journey offers an invaluable service to Jewish education—the study of material that is so important, and yet, is noticeably absent from the curriculum. Composed by a most distinguished group of experts, rabbis, educators and members of Chevrei Kadisha, it will most assuredly help our young adults understand both the sanctity of life and the ultimate chesed shell emet.

—Rabbi Leonard Matanky, Congregation K.I.N.S. of West Rogers Park; Dean,
Ida Crown Jewish Academy; President, Rabbinical Council of America



How Judaism Dignifies the Passage

COMPILED AND EDITED BY

ROCHEL BERMAN & JONATHAN KROLL



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and

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ABOUT THE COVER IMAGE:

The knot on the cover is used to fasten the shrouds in which the deceased is dressed prior to burial. Its three loops form the Hebrew letter, *shin*, referring to the initial letter of the Hebrew name of the Almighty. The shrouds are sewn of un-hemmed linen to symbolize impermanence, in keeping with the biblical verse, "For dust thou art and to dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 3:19).

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THE FINAL JOURNEY INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Jonathan Kroll

It has been an honor to be involved in the development of the curriculum for the "The Final Journey, How Judaism Dignifies the Passage." When Rochel Berman initially approached me with the idea of teaching high school students about the Chevra Kadisha and its work I thought that it could be a valuable component in a student's well-rounded Jewish education. Having served on the Chevra Kadisha myself I had wondered why its role was seldom discussed in schools and why the Jewish approach to the end of life was shrouded in mystery.

Once the curriculum was developed and we taught it to high school students, I realized just how much I had underestimated the deep impression that learning about the Chevra Kadisha would have on them. More than serving as a valuable component

of their Jewish education, we found that the lessons enlightened students about core values of Judaism and sparked a profound appreciation for the holiness of life. Recognizing the *Tzelem Elokim*, the image of God, with which each human being is endowed, students understood the inestimable value and dignity of each individual man and woman. Recognizing the *chesed shel emet*, the true loving kindness demonstrated by the members of the Chevra Kadisha, students were inspired to redouble their own commitments to the Jewish people and Jewish practice.

A group of scholars and community leaders helped develop the curriculum and delivered the engaging and informative presentations that were filmed and are available as a video component to this curriculum. Thank you to Rabbi Kenneth Brander, Rabbi Efrem Goldberg, Rabbi Adam Mintz, Rabbi Ben Sugerman, Rabbi Leibel Miller, Yvette Kaweblum, Yerucham Kopelman, George Berman and Sarah Cohen.

We are profoundly grateful to Congregation Rosh Pinah Chevra Kadisha of Westchester, NY, and Targum Shlishi, a Raquel and Aryeh Rubin Foundation, for their support of this project. By enabling us to develop the curriculum and spread Judaism's message about the Chevra Kadisha, they have helped teach so many students not only about the Jewish approach toward death, but about the Jewish approach toward life.

November 2015, Boca Raton, Florida

IMPLEMENTING THE FINAL JOURNEY IN YOUR SCHOOL

Rochel Berman

THE NEED

In the decade since the publication of *Dignity Beyond Death: The Jewish Preparation for Burial*, I have travelled the country speaking to synagogues, school groups and at conferences. In the process, several things have become clear to me:

- The rituals surrounding the Jewish preparation for burial are often characterized by myths and misconceptions. Even among traditional Jews there is a culture of silence about this topic and most people have only sketchy knowledge. The result is that only 15-20% of Jewish deaths are accompanied by a *tahara*. Mostly this represents ignorance rather than rejection of the ritual.
- There is little awareness of the importance of these practices among Jewish educators. Additionally, there are no materials available to teachers that would illuminate the humanity of the elegant path along which the Jewish deceased are taken in their final journey prior to burial.
- To ensure knowledge and appreciation of these time-honored deeds, they should become part of the Jewish high school curriculum in all streams of Judaism throughout the English speaking world.



The centerpiece of this guide is the eight Lesson Plans that comprise the course. Each has been authored by the person who presented. Included within the Lesson Plans are:

outlines and descriptions of the material and sources



- suggested readings
- n topics for discussion
- homework assignments

In addition, for each Lesson Plan we have indicated an appropriate grade level as well as the teaching time to be allotted. In the Appendix you will find a variety of resources that may enhance your teaching opportunities.

Accompanying the Study Guide are videos of each Lesson Plan in progress in the classroom.

HOW TO GET STARTED

At the outset, a Final Journey Coordinator needs to be appointed. The Coordinator should be someone:

- with good managerial skills
- n familiar with the culture of the school
- n familiar with community resources
- n and preferably knowledgeable about the topic

The Coordinator should become totally familiar with the Study Guide and all the videos and should plan to attend all the sessions to monitor the program, distribute and collect forms and to make announcements. Working with the head of the Judaic Studies Department, the coordinator will make decisions on the following:

- Will this be a freestanding course or will it be a curricular unit as part of another course?
- Will the course be taught via videos or will there be a choice to utilize school faculty, or community rabbis and scholars to teach some or all of the sessions?
- which students will be the first participants?
- m What schedule will be followed—once a week, twice a week or once a month?
- where in the school will The Final Journey classes be held?
- How will the course be launched?

The Coordinator should be responsible for initiating all communications. As a new endeavor, there are several constituencies that need to be notified:

n the board of directors

- n parents
- n other students
- n the Jewish community

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We hope that working on this project will be both inspiring and fulfilling and that you will share your successes with us. Don't hesitate to be in touch. We welcome your questions and concerns. Email us at: TheFinalJourney@bellsouth.net



LESSON PLANS

PLACING DEATH IN THE CONTEXT OF THE JEWISH LIFECYCLE

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

GRADE LEVEL: 11th and 12th grades

SUGGESTED LENGTH: 40 minutes

RESOURCES: See Final Journey website for a list of sources

INTRODUCTION

Most people don't learn about death until they encounter it with the loss of a family member or a good friend. Questions like what happens at death, where does the soul go, how do we prepare the body, and what is the afterlife like, remain mysterious and unknown. Education about the Jewish view of death not only prepares people and brings comfort and solace in a painful time that everyone will inevitably face, but it also inspires living a more meaningful life. This lesson seeks to put death in the context of life. In particular, the relationship between the body and the soul is explored. In the course of this, we address directly a number of perennial questions:



- What is the nature of our soul?
- n Where does it go when we die?
- Is this transition painful for the soul?
- n Why do we take so much care with the body of the deceased?

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Through a discussion of the relationship between the body and the soul, students will discover

- n the integration of body and soul
- n the role of righteousness
- what death can teach us about life
- n the role of the Chevra Kadisha

BODY AND SOUL

Most people think of themselves as their body. Thus, when the body dies the person dies with it. That's it: end of story. And that makes death a very scary topic.

At the core of every answer to the myriad of questions revolving around death is the following critical statement: we don't have a soul; we are a soul. A lifetime of caring for our bodies, pampering ourselves, and seeking physical pleasure often leaves us confused, with the mistaken notion that we are a body and we have a soul. Judaism teaches that in fact, it is the opposite.

Our soul has existed since creation itself as an extension of expression of the Almighty, and will continue to exist eternally. Our soul is housed in a vessel called the body for what in the span of eternity is a very short period of time. Our rabbis don't refer to what happens at the end of life as death. They call it *yetzias ha'neshama*, the extraction of the soul from the body because in truth, people don't die. Bodies die, and people aren't buried, bodies are buried.

The Importance of a Righteous Life

How does the soul experience its transition from the body? Is it painful or pleasurable? That depends on how that soul lived life when it was housed in the body. Righteous persons, who throughout their lives invested in nourishing and nurturing the soul, experience its extraction as a moment of bliss and great joy. The righteous see the body as a burden—a source of temptation and distraction that holds back the soul. Of course they recognize that only with a body can the soul express free will and therefore shape and mold it. Therefore, they don't pray for death or welcome it.

When their time comes, our greatest leaders are described as experiencing a kiss of death, a moment of bliss, when the soul was liberated from the shackles of the body. Rav Nachman of Breslov wrote "I can't wait to divest myself of this garment that is my body..." To the righteous, removing the body is as painless and pleasurable as taking off one's suit and tie at the end of a difficult day.

Most people who identified with their body throughout life, and who invested in nurtur-

ing the body while neglecting the soul, experience its extraction very differently. Our tradition teaches that the soul hovers over the body when it is first removed, pained by the startling realization that the body they looked at in the mirror and saw themselves all those years was only a vessel, a vehicle for the soul.

Role of the Chevra Kadisha

The primary responsibility of the Chevra Kadisha is to care for the body and to comfort the soul through its transition and journey. The *Shulchan Aruch* (Y.D. 33) tells us that it is forbidden to leave a dying person alone. The least we can do is to provide that soul with companionship and love during its difficult time. We have a *shomer*, a guard, with that soul until the body is buried, at which time the soul can begin its ascent.

If the body is just a temporary vessel, a source of ephemeral pleasure why do we treat it with such respect dignity and affection before placing it in the ground? If what matters is the soul, why not discard the body by any means?

Shlomo Ha'Melech taught (Kohellet 12:7) "the dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit returns to God who gave it." The soul finds solace and returns to God only after seeing its body return to the earth with dignity and respect. Everything about the *tahara*, the burial preparation, is designed to allow the soul to observe the treatment of its formal body with great respect. We carefully wash the body from head to toe, we clean under the fingernails, in the ears, and we remove all tubes, lines, and catheters. We purify the body by immersing it in a *mikvah* or pouring nine *kavim* of water over it. And then we dress the body in shrouds that are both simple and majestic. We don't talk about extraneous things in the *tahara* room, we have a candle lit to represent the *neshama*, and we don't pass things over the body as if it were a piece of furniture or other object.

When performing a *tahara* there is an acute awareness that the *neshama* of the individual is palpably present in the room, watching, observing, and grieving. Every *tahara* I have been privileged to participate in has left me with a greater consciousness of my own soul, a greater drive to nourish it, and a renewed mindfulness that in fact, *I don't have soul*; *I am a soul that has a body*.

I encourage you to get involved in the holy work of the Chevra Kadisha. There are few activities more satisfying and fulfilling than participating in *chesed shel emet*, loving kindness that cannot be repaid. Contact with death inspires greater meaning in life and nurtures our souls in a way few other experiences can. There are many ways to become involved, not only in the *tahara* room, but serving as *shomrim*, setting up *shiva* homes, helping to make up a *shiva minyan*, stocking supplies, making meals and more.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel suggests¹ that "Death is not understood as the end of being, but rather as the end of doing."

Why isn't death the end of being?

Gail Sheehy has said in *Passages*, "It is a paradox that as death becomes personalized, a life force becomes energized. In the very jaws of this danger is opportunity."

Mhat opportunities do you see in the death of a loved one?

RABBI EFREM GOLDBERG is the Senior Rabbi of the Boca Raton Synagogue, in Boca Raton, Florida.



¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Death as Homecoming," *Jewish Reflections on Death*, ed. Rabbi Jack Riemer, New York: Shocken, 1974, p. 70

THE CHEVRA KADISHA AND JEWISH VALUES

Rabbi Jonathan Kroll

GRADE LEVEL: 11th and 12th grades

SUGGESTED LENGTH: 45 minutes

INTRODUCTION

In this class we present:

- n the actual process that the Chevra Kadisha performs when preparing the body for burial
- n a series of core values that form the foundation of the rituals

Recognizing the *tzelem elokim*, the godliness of each individual, the Chevra Kadisha treats the deceased with ultimate dignity. We posit that the dignified treatment of the deceased's body also reflects the respect that Judaism accords the body which serves as the vehicle through which we perform *mitzvot* and improve the world.



LESSON OBJECTIVES

Students will learn:

- the *tahara* process of cleaning, purifying and dressing the deceased. During the entire ritual, there is no talking except about the tasks at hand
- n the terms associated with a tahara
- to recognize and discuss the nature of the egalitarian values that emerge from the simple and equal treatment given to each person
- the value that Judaism places on living a life of *mitzvot*—action and meaning—while recognizing how that value is reflected in the process of the *tahara* and burial

CLEANING

Describe the preliminary stage of cleaning the body while being careful not to lose any blood. This involves

- removing medical tape and other obstructions on the skin
- n cleaning feces off the body as a result of a post-mortem bowel movement
- n gently washing the body from the head down to the feet
- n cleaning fingernails and toenails
- being careful not to lose any blood
- placing cloths that have absorbed blood in the *aron*, the casket, to be buried with the body

THE TAHARA

Describe the process of the tahara which follows the cleaning.

- Some funeral homes are equipped with a *mikvah*—a ritual bath. In these homes the body is lowered by a hydraulic lift into the water.
- Most funeral homes are not equipped with a *mikvah*. Instead the Chevra members pour 24 quarts of water in a continuous stream over the body from head to toe.

Dressing

Review each of the items that are part of the tachrichim (shrouds)

- mitznefet—head covering
- n michnasayim—pants
- n ktonet—shirt
- n kittel—robe
- n avnet—belt

Men are wrapped in a *tallit*, a prayer shawl, that has a corner removed so that it is not considered an actual *tallit* of four corners. This emphasizes that actual *mitzvot* are only applicable to the living.

After the Chevra Kadisha dresses the deceased, they place the body in a plain pine casket

lined with a sovev, a large sheet that is used to envelop the *meit*, the deceased. Finally, the Chevra gather around the casket to ask forgiveness of the deceased for any errors of omission or commission during the *tahara*.

JEWISH VALUES THAT FORM THE FOUNDATION OF THESE PRACTICES

1. Egalitarian treatment of all people regardless of social status

The Gemara in Masechet Moed Katan expresses this point:

מסכת מועד קטן כז עמוד ב בראשונה היתה הוצאת המת קשה לקרוביו יותר ממיתתו עד שהיו קרוביו מניחין אותו ובורחין עד שבא רבן גמליאל ונהג קלות ראש בעצמו ויצא בכלי פשתן ונהגו העם אחריו לצאת בכלי פשתן

Talmud Bavli—Moed Katan 278

At first burial was more difficult for the family than the actual death! There were even families that would abandon their deceased and flee. Then Rabban Gamliel came and treated himself very simply and arranged for himself to be buried in linen clothing and the entire nation followed him and people were buried in linen.

- 2. The dignity we afford the human body
 - n the Jewish emphasis on the holiness of life as opposed to death
 - the way in which the human body during its lifetime is tasked with bringing holiness into the world.

The Torah highlights this in *Devarim*—Deuteronomy when we are asked to choose life.

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דברים פרק ל
יט הַעִדֹתִי בָכֶם הַּגֹּם, אֶת-הַ ַּמַיִם וְאֶת-הָ ,ֶרֶץ--הַחַיִּים וְהַ ָּוֶת נָתַ פִּי לְפָנֶי<, הַ ,רָכָה
.וְהַ,ְּלֶלָה; ,בָחַרְפָּ, ֻחַיִּים--לְמֵעַן פּחְיֶה, אַ פָּה וְזַרְעֶרֶ
כ לְ `הֲבָה אֶת-יְהוָה אֱ^הֶי<, לִ יְמֹעַ ֻ קְּלֹץ ,לְדָבְקָה-בַּי: -ִי הּא חַדֶּי<, וְאֹרֶ> יָמֶי<--
.לָ ֻבָּת עַל-הָאֲדָמָה אֲ ֻרֹ נִ יְּ עִיְהוָה לַאֲבֹתָי< לְ `בְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק ,לִיַעַקֹב, לָתֵת לְהָם
.לָ ֻבָּת עַל-הָאֲדָמָה אֲ ֻרֹ נִ יְּ עִיְהוָה לַאֲבֹתָי< לְ `בְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק ,לִיַעַקֹב, לָתֵת לְהָם
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Verse 19—I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before thee life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that thou mayest live, thou and thy seed;

Verse 20—To love the Lord thy God, to hearken to His voice, and to cleave unto Him; for that is thy life, and the length of thy days; that thou mayest dwell in the land which the Lord swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.

This is also highlighted in Pirkei Avot in the words of Rabi Yaakov who declares that involvement in *mitzvot* in this world is greater than the experience in the world to come

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פרקי אבות ד:יז
הגא הָיָה אֹימֶר, יָפָה בָּעָה `חַת בֶתְ ֹבָה גִּמֵע ִׁים טֹיּבִים בֶעִיּלִם הַגָּה, מִּלֶּח חֵיֵּי
הַעִּילִם הַבָּא
```

He said, "One moment of repentance and good deeds in this world is greater than the World to Come."

Judaism focuses on life over death.

- Death is the ultimate source of impurity in Judaism
- No possessions are buried with the body. Our achievements and contributions during our lifetime made the world a better place and belong in that world. The World to Come is the result of our life lived well.

RABBI JONATHAN KROLL is Head of School at the Yeshiva High School of Boca Raton, Florida.



FUNERAL HOME FIELD TRIP

GRADE LEVEL: 11th and 12th grades

SUGGESTED LENGTH: 1 1/2 to 2 hours (not including transportation)

In advance

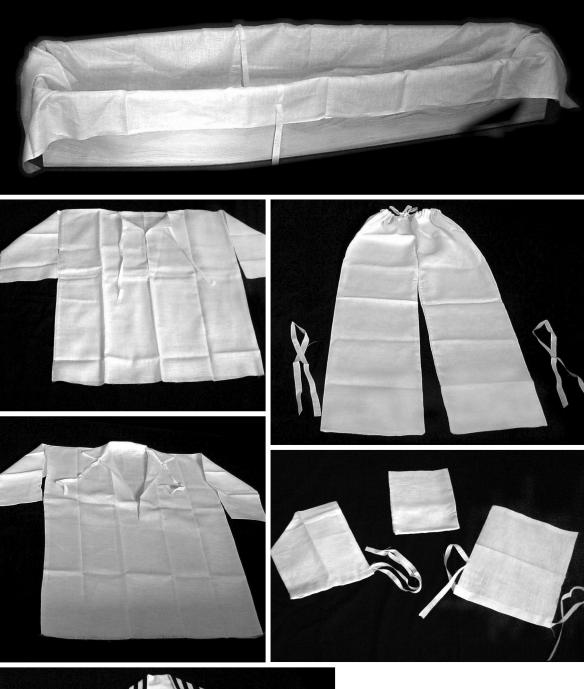
- n Meet with head of local Chevra Kadisha to share program and enlist support
- Arrange transportation to funeral home
- n Reserve a time and date with manager of funeral home at least a month in advance
- Prepare copies of prayers recited during tahara

At the funeral home you will need

- n A TV monitor and Religion & Ethics Newsweekly video of segment on "Jewish Burial Practices"
- n A podium and microphone
- Two sets of shrouds and 2 kosher caskets (if class is more than 15 students).
- n One tallit
- Two long tables for hands-on teaching segments
- Long narrow strips of sheeting for the *shin* knots

PREPARATION

With the head of your local Chevra Kadisha, select a funeral home where the Chevra has performed *taharot*. Call the funeral home manager and make a date to visit the facilities and meet with the manager to discuss program and expectations of the funeral home. Leave a copy of the program and your contact information with the manager. Some funeral homes will block out a time period for the program during which they will not plan any funerals. Others might request that you plan the field trip at about 3 p.m.—a time at which all the funerals of the day will be complete.





TOP: aron, sovev and avnet—casket, sheet and belt; TOP LEFT: k'tonet—shirt; RIGHT: michnasayim—trousers and ties; MIDDLE LEFT: kittel—jacket; mitznefet—women's head covering, pillow and veil; BOTTOM: tallit and mitznefet—prayer shawl and men's head covering

PHOTOS: GEORGE BERMAN

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

Through a number of presentations and demonstrations students will

- n explore prayers recited during a tahara
- n learn about the role of the shomer
- witness a *tahara* performed on a mannequin via video. Included are explanations of the customs (Religion & Ethics Newsweekly video on "Jewish Burial Practices")
- n receive an explanation of a kosher casket
- n under the guidance of a member of the Chevra Kadisha, participate in a hands-on examination of *tachrichim* and learn to tie a *shin* knot
- n take a tour of the tahara room
- n learn about setting up a *shiva* home and paying a *shiva* visit

THE TAHARA

- n view Religion and Ethics Newsweekly Video—Jewish Burial Practices
- read and discuss prayers recited during tahara

THE ROLE OF THE FUNERAL DIRECTOR

Just as there is a Jewish way of life, there is a Jewish way of death. It is estimated that 80% of Jews who come to a funeral home to arrange for the burial of a loved one are totally uninformed about Jewish practices. It is the role of the funeral director or the religious adviser to do the following:

- Provide an overview of a *tahara*. More often than not, the decision of the family not to have the death accompanied by a *tahara* is based on ignorance and not a rejection of the ritual. A frequently mentioned reason for not choosing *tahara* is "he/she was not religious". This misconception requires clarification that *tahara* is the rite for every Jew, regardless of religious observance. In addition, it is important to share the role of the Chevra Kadisha in treating the body with the utmost care and dignity because it is the holy vessel that contained the soul of the deceased
- Explain the importance of *tachrichim* and a kosher casket as the "great equalizers". The same garments are used for all regardless of religious piety, social status or degree of

personal honesty and integrity. Similarly a kosher casket is a plain pine box constructed without metal. In lieu of nails, wooden pegs are used. There are holes drilled in the bottom so that the body is united as quickly as possible with the earth.

- Describe the purpose of the *shomer*—the person who "guards" the body from the time of death until the time of burial.
- Underscore the importance of participating in the actual burial. It is customary for the family and friends to shovel dirt over the casket after it has been lowered into the ground. Just as a parent would not leave a child's bedside without seeing to it that the child was tucked-in, so we should not leave our dearly departed loved ones before tucking them into God's earth.

Many Jews have found their way back to Judaism through engaging for the first time in the traditional practices of burying a loved one. Also students receiving this knowledge for the first time in high school often become self-appointed ambassadors in educating friends and family.

EXAMINATION OF TACHRICHIM

Since the garments are slightly different for men and for women, divide the group in two—one for boys and one for girls. Under the guidance of a Chevra member, groups will review each garment in the order in which it is placed on the deceased. The segment will end with students learning to tie a *shin* knot.

SHIVA—THE MOURNING PROCESS

PRACTICES OF ARRANGING THE SHIVA HOUSE

- n covering of mirrors
- n low chairs for mourners observing *shiva*

THE MOURNING PROCESS

- The period between death and the funeral is a state of mourning known as *animut*. Following the burial, the mourner is known as an *avel*.
- For one week, mourners "sit shiva"—receive guests who console them.
- Even though the *shiva* (first seven days of mourning) has ended, one is considered a mourner for twelve months for a parent, and until the *Shloshim* (the thirtieth day from burial) for other relatives. During these twenty-three days, the intensity of mourning is reduced.
- Children of the deceased are obligated to mourn for an entire year.

THE SHIVA VISIT

- Wait for the mourner to speak first
- Conclude the visit with: "May God comfort you among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

TOUR OF TAHARA ROOM

Conducted by funeral director and head of Chevra.

- n Discuss the features of the room.
- n Display all equipment needed for the tahara on a gurney and review the use of each item.

DISCUSSION

Those responding to student questions might include school faculty, the funeral director and members of the Chevra Kadisha.

In our demonstration, student questions included the following:

What happens when a person dies on Shabbat?

Halachically, when is an autopsy permitted?

How does the Chevra respond to a family request to dress the deceased in his/her favorite clothing?

What are the rules about suicides?

Who qualifies to be a member of the Chevra Kadisha?

Is the procedure different when the deceased is a child?



Members of the Boca Raton Synagogue Chevra Kadisha demonstrate the dressing of the deceased on a mannequin.

SOURCES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF HALACHA AND MINHAGIM FOR TAHARA

Rabbi Ben Sugerman

GRADE LEVEL: 11th and 12th grades

SUGGESTED LENGTH: 70 minutes

INTRODUCTION

Although there are slight variations amongst Chevra Kaddishas around the world, there are basic, standard *minhagim* where the sources can be traced back as far as the *Mishna* and Talmud and the medieval commentaries.

Although some of the practices of the *tahara* are not grounded in original sources, many of them are. We will cover the primary sources and provide basic explanations for some of the practices based on source material.



Some of the earliest sources that describe the Tahara

The following *Mishna* balances the sensitivities of the laws of Shabbat and dignity to the dead. On the one hand, once a person dies the remains have the status of *muktzah* on *Shabbat* and consequently cannot be moved. On the other hand there is a requirement to start the preparation of the body to be buried, what we call a *tahara*, so the *Mishna* delicately balances these two values. In the course of doing so we get a very short glimpse into the procedure of what was being done as part of the *tahara*.

משנה שבת פרק כג

עושין כל צורכי המת סכין ומדיחין אותו ובלבד שלא יזיזו בו אבר שומטין את הכר מתחתיו ומטילין אותו על החול בשביל שימתין קושרים את הלחי לא שיעלה אלא שלא יוסיף וכן קורה שנשברה סומכין אותה בספסל או בארוכות המטה לא שתעלה אלא שלא תוסיף אין מעמצין את המת בשבת ולא בחול עם יציאת נפש והמעמץ עם יציאת נפש הרי זה שופך דמים:

All the needs of the deceased are done [on *Shabbat*]. Oil is rubbed into the skin and the body is washed, provided that no limb is moved. (On *Shabbat*, the deceased has the status of *muktzah* and under most circumstances can't be moved). The pillow is removed from under his head and his body can be transferred onto sand so that his remains are preserved for a longer duration. One can tie up his jaw, not to close the mouth but to prevent it from opening any further . . . and one can't close the eyes of the deceased.

As discussed in the previous lesson the *tahara* process is essentially made up of three different components, (1) the washing of the body, (2) immersion in a *mikvah*, and (3) dressing the body in shrouds. Where possible, we will cite the earliest source that discusses the practice and provide some background.

Washing the Body

We already saw the *Mishna* in *Shabbat* that mentions the practice of rinsing the body. The Beit Yosef, Rav Yosef Karo, when codifying the law, quotes an explanation as to why we wash the body. He also references an ancient custom of rubbing egg on the head of the deceased, a practice that continues to this very day.

בית יוסף יורה דעה סימן שנב כתב הכל בו¹)סי' קיד דף פה ע"ג(מדיחין אותו כדי להעביר זוהמתו שלא יקוצו העם בטלטולו וטחין ראשו בביצים טרופות בקליפתן וזה הסימן קדום לפי שהיו מוליכין אותו חוץ לעיר ליקבר וכדי שיכירו הקוברין שהוא ישראל עשו בו סימן זה והטעם בביצים שגלגל הוא החוזר בעולם:

The Kol Bo writes that we rinse the body to remove the filth so that people will not be disgusted while transporting the body, and the white of an egg is rubbed on the head. This is an old sign as the body was transported outside the city to be buried and so that those responsible to bury will know that this is the body of a Jew. And the reason that we specifically use an egg is because it is round, reminiscent of the full circle of life-death-life.

Purification of the body

The next step in the purification process is to either immerse the body in a *mikvah* or to do a modified purification which is showering the body with 24 quarts of water. We have not found an original source that mentions this custom but this is indeed a universal custom. This custom demands some explanation as this is a most unusual practice with seemingly no *halachic* ben-

¹ The author of the Kol Bo was apparently R. Aharon ben R. Jacob ha Cohen of Narbonne, France (sometimes mistakenly identified as R. Aaron of Lunel). He lived in the 13th and 14th centuries and spent some time in Spain. In 1306 he was expelled from France together with all the Jews there, and he settled on the island of Majorca near Spain. The Kol Bo is apparently the early version of R. Aharon's work *Orchot Chayyim*, which was written years later. The Kol Bo contains *halachic* rulings and discussions of customs on a variety of subjects in 148 sections

efit. We know that the deceased is a source of spiritual impurity, in *halachah* known as an יבא , and immersion in a *mikvah* in no way changes the status of the body. Although there are Kabbalistic explanations for this portion of the *tahara*, we will offer a basic, rational approach to explain this.

The resurrection of the dead is one of the fundamental principles of faith. The basis of this idea is already found in the Prophets, where the 37th chapter of **לאקזחי** articulates this point, in this section of the dry bones being brought back to life.

יחזקאל פרק לח

א(הָיֶתָה עָלֵי יַד־יִּקֹנָק וַ-ִּצְאֵנִי בְרּיִם יְקֹנָק וַוְנִיחֵנִי $^{\infty}$ ַ ַ ָקְעָה וְהִיא מְלֵ ְ ָה עֲצָמֹּת בּ (וְהָעֶבִירַנִי עֲלֵיהֶם סָבִיב סָבִיב וְהִ ֶּה רָ ֻאֹת מְאֹד עַל־ ְّנֵי הַ ֻקְעָה וְהִ הְּ יִבְ ֹֹאַת מְאֹד: גֹ (וַ-ֹּאמֶר אֵלַי בָּן ־ְדָעְ בָּ הַתְחָיֶינָה הָעֲצָמֹּת הָאֵ ֶּה וְ מְרְ בְּ אֲלֵיהֶם הָעֲצָמֹּת הַאֲלָה וְ מְרְ בְּ אֲלֵיהֶם הָעֲצָמֹּת הַאֲלָה וְ מַרְ בְּ אֲלֵיהֶם הָעֲצָמֹּת הַאֲלָה וְ מְרְ בְּ אֲלֵיהֶם הָעֲצָמֹּת הַאֵּיָה וְ מְרְ בְּ אֲלֵיהֶם הָעֲצָמֹּת הַאֵּיָה וְ וְמַרְ בְּ אֲלֵיהֶם הָעֲצָמֹית הָאֵ בְּ הּוֹ בִּי וְנְהִיִּבְּי בְּכָם רִּחַ וְחְיִיתֶם: וּ (וְנָתַ בִּי עֲלֵיכֶם , דִים וְהַעֲלֵתִי עֲלֵיכֶם $^{+}$ ר וְקָרַמְ בִּי עֲלֵיכֶם עֹּר וְנָתַ בִּי וְנְתִּים: וֹ (וְנָתַ בִּי עֲלֵיכֶם , דִים וְהַעֲלֵתִי עֲלֵיכֶם $^{+}$ ר וְקָרַמְ בִּי עֲלֵיכֶם עֹּר וְנָתַ בִּי וְבְּבָּב בְּם רִּחַ וֹחְיִיתֶם וִידַעְ בֶּם בִּי יִקְּוָּם וְלַיִּלְ מִי וֹ וְנְהִי־קֹּאֹל -ְהִיּלְּלֹּ וְרִם וְעָרִי וְנָהְיִיקֹּל וֹ וְרָמִי וְּבְיִי וְהָיִיתָם וִידִעְ בְּּם בִּי בְּעָבְמֹּת עָצָם אֶל־עַצְמִּי: חׁ (וְרָאִיתִי וְהְיֵּהֹב עְּלֵיהֶם עִיר מִלְמָעְלָה וְרִחַ אֵין בָּם: ט (וַרִּאִיתִי וְהְיִהְבּב עְּבָּיהָם עִיר מִּלְמָעְלָה וְרִחַ אֵין בָּם בּי ט (וַרִּאִיתִי וְהָּבִּא בָּלִיהָם עִיר הִחְלָּת בְּי בְּלָבְיִהְם בְּעִר בּּתְ בְּלָב בְּעְבָּמֹלְ הִוּרִם בְּעָלָה וְרִם בְּעֵלְה וְרִם בְּיִלְ וְבָּבְיֹּע בְּיִרְ וְבָּבִיּא בְּרָב וְ בָּבִיא בָּלָר הִיחַ וַּחִיי, וַבּבּיא בָּבָם הִיתְם הַאֵּיֶ הְ וְחִיי: יִלְ וְהָּבְּאֹב בִּי עְנִים הָּבְּיִב בְּיִם וְתִילְ בָּיִלְ מְחִיי בָּבִים הָּתִּים הָּיִל בְּים הָּיִבּים הָּיִב יִ וְ בָּבִיי בְּיִם בְּיִבְּים וְיִילִי בְּי בְּיִי בְּיִבְּעְתָּים בְּיִבּם בְּיִי בְּיִבְייִם וְבְּיבּים בְּיִם וְנְיִיבְּים בְּיבּב וְבְּבִּים בְּים בְּיִבְם וְבְּבִּי בְּיִבּים וְבְּבִּי בְּבִי וְבְּבִּי בְּיִבּי וְבָּבִיּי בְּיִבְּיִי בְּבִּי בְּיִּבְּיִים בְּעִים בְּעְבִּים בְּבִּים בְּבְּבִים בְּבְּים בְּבְּבִּים בְּבִּים בְּבִים בְּבְּבְים בְּבְּבְּבְים בְּבְּבּבּים בְּבְּבְּבְּבְיּבְּבְּבְּבְּבְּבְּבְּבְיבִּים בְּבְיּבְּבְּבְּבְיּבְּבְּיִי בְּבְים בְּיִים בְּבְּבְּבְּבְּבָּבְּבְי

יא(וּאֹמֶר אֵלֵי ֶן־ ְדָם הָעֲצָמֹּת הָאֵ ֶה -ֶל־ ֻית יִּ ְרָאֵל הֵ ָה הִ הֵה אֹמְרִים יָבְ ֹּ יַעֹ וַּ וֹּאַמֶּר אֵלֵי ֶן - ְדָם הָעֲצָמֹּת הָאֵ ֶה -ֶל־ ִית יִ יְרָאֵל הֵ יָה הְבֵּר אַנִיקָם - ֹה־ ְמֵר עַצְמֹּתֵנּ וְּבְּדָה תִּקְוָתֵנּ נְגְזַרְנּ לָנִּ : יב(לָכֵן הִיֶּבֶא וְ ְמַרְ \$ אֲלֵיהֶם - ֹה־ ְמֵר אֲדָנִי יְקְוֹּק הָ הֵּ אֲנִי פֹתַחַ אֶת־קְבְרֹּ תֵיכֶם וְהַעֲלֵיתִי אֶתְכֶם מִ אַרְ־רִּתִיכֶם עַ יִ י וְהֵבֵּאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל־־ 'דְמַת יִ 'ְרָאֵל: ס

יג(וִידַע ֶּפֶ בּי־אֲנִי יְקֹוָק ָפָתְחִי אֶת־קְבְרִּתֹיֵכֶם ּבְּהַעֲלֹּתִי אֶתְכֶם מִ אַבְרִּתֹיֵכֶם עַ ֹי: יד(וְנָתַ פִּי רַּיּחִי בָּכֶם וֹחְיִיתֶם וְהִ ֵּחְ פִּי אֶתְכֶם עַלֹּ־ רְּמַתְכֶם וִידַע ֶּפֶ בּי־אֲנִי יְקֹנָק יִדֹע בָּי וְחְיִיתֶם וְהִ יַּחְנֵק אַ עַלֹּ־ רְמַתְּכֶם וִידַע ֶּפֶ בּיִ־אֲנִי יְקֹנָק בּי וְחְיִיתֶם וְהִיַּחְ וֹּהְיִּם וְהִיִּקְנָק: פּ בִּיִקְנָק: פּ

1. The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. 2. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. 3 And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord God, you know." 4. Then he said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord." 7. So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesiesed, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8.

And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. 9. Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." 10. So I prophesiesed as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

- 11. Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.' 12. Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: 'Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel.'
- 13. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. 14. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord."

During his lifetime, the Rambam² dealt with a controversy regarding belief in the resurrection of the dead. In 1191, late in his life, the Rambam wrote an essay on Resurrection in order to defend himself against the charge of heresy.

רמב"ם² אגרת תחיית המתים ואומר שתחית המתים המפורסמת והנודעת באומתנו, המוסכם עליה מכלל כתותינו, אשר רוב זכרה בתפלות ובספורים ובתחנות אשר חברום הנביאים וגדולי החכמים ימלא מהם התלמוד והמדרשות, ענינה: שוב זאת הנפש לגוף

² One of the greatest Torah scholars of all time, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (Rambam, Maimonides) was born in Cordova, Spain in 1138, and died in Egypt in 1204. His father, Rabbi Maimon, was a dayyan in Cordova, and studied under Ri Migash, the outstanding disciple of RiF. In 1148, after Spain was invaded by a fanatic Muslim tribe from North Africa, Rambam's family went into exile, and eventually settled in Fez, Morocco, in 1160. Even during these difficult years, Rambam was already creating the books which eventually earned him international fame. His commentary on the Mishnah, in Arabic, was among the first of these works. In Fez, Rambam also studied medicine, and later he earned his livelihood as a physician. In 1165, his entire family left Morocco and moved to Israel, although difficulties subsequently forced the family to leave Israel for Egypt. After the death of Rambam's father, the family settled in Fostat (old Cairo). At that time, the Karaites exerted strong influence on Egyptian Jewry, and Rambam fought them with all the weapons at his disposal. Rambam's many-faceted activities included serving as chief rabbi, head of the rabbinical court, and head of the Jewish community. In addition, he taught, wrote, and served as personal physician to the sultan Saladin. Rambam was familiar with every branch of contemporary science and philosophy and every realm of Jewish knowledge—Talmud and halachah, philosophy and ethics—and he penned hundreds of responsa to queries from throughout the Jewish world. He also authored the Guide to the Perplexed, a philosophical treatise that attempts to reconcile Jewish belief with contemporary philosophy. Many of the philosophical concepts in this work were considered highly controversial. Rambam also authored Mishneh Torah (also known Yad Ha-Chazakah), which summarizes the entire oral law clearly, concisely, and in organized fashion. In many communities, particularly among Yemenite Jews, the Mishneh Torah was accepted as halachically authoritative. Another work by Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvot, lists the 613 commandments and presents systematic criteria for the enumeration of these commandments. Rambam's responsa include much material on the Jewish world of his time—its customs, beliefs, and problems, as well as Rambam's own teachings.

אחרי הפרידה זה, מה שלא נשמע באומה מחלוקת עליו, ואין בו פירוש כלל, ואין מותר להאמין באיש מאנשי הדת שהוא מאמין חלוף זה. והנני עתיד לבאר לך בזה המאמר למה לא נפרש אלו הפסוקים כמו שנפרש פסוקים רבים בתורה והוצאנו אותם מפשוטיהם?

וכן - זאת תחית המתים הוא שוב הנפש לגוף אחר המות כבר זכרה דניאל זכרון שאי אפשר לפרשו, והוא אמרו)דניאל י"ב ב'(: "ורבים מישני אדמת עפר יקיצו אלה לחיי עולם ואלה לחרפות לדראון עולם", ואמר לו המלאך)דניאל י"ב י"ג(: "ואתה לך לקץ ותנוח ותעמוד לגורלך לקץ הימין".

Resurrection of the dead is widely known in our belief system, accepted amongst our constituents, with many references found in our prayers, amongst the writing of the prophets, and our Talmud and *medrashim* are replete with references. In essence, our souls will be returned to our body after separation, and there is no debate on this issue, and there are no other ways to interpret this and one cannot believe anyone who believes otherwise

Perhaps based on the above sources, the purpose of immersing the *meit*, the deceased, in a *mikvah* is to remind us of the powerful message that although soul and body separated, the soul will eventually reunite with the body as the *mikvah* is the symbol of purification and life.

Dressing the Body in Tachrichim

We already saw in the previous lesson one reason why we dress the deceased in simple clothing as a means of standardizing the burial process and not making death and burial a class war. We can offer a second reason why the body is buried in simple white clothing.

ילקוט שמעוני³ פרק ג', אות לז ויעש ה' אלהים כתנות עור וילבישם]ג, כ"א[מלמד שעשה לו הקב"ה בגדי כהונה כענין שנא' והנה איש לבוש הבדים וכתיב כתנת בד קדש ילבש מכאן אתה למד שכהן גדול דומה למלאך כי מלאך ה' צבאות הוא לה"ד למלך שראה קרתי אחד והלבישו כבני פלטין א"ל בני פלטין למלך אפילו אותו שהוא קרתני הוא כמונו כך אמרו המלאכים לפני הקב"ה אפילו אדם שהוא יציר עפר הרי הוא כמונו

"And made clothing [for Adam and Chava] and he dressed them" This comes to teach that made them clothing of the Kohen Gadol . . . and the Kohen Gadol in turn resembles an angel. To draw an analogy, the king had a dear friend and dresses him just like members of his palace, whereupon the his ministers note the resemblance

³ Yalkut Shimoni is an anthology of midrashim on the entire Bible, and is attributed to R. Shimon haDarshan of Frankfort-am -Main in the mid-13th century. This is an extensive and comprehensive collection of the literature of the Sages including the *Talmudim, Sifra, Mechilta, Midrash Rabba, Midrash Tehilim, Avot deRabbi Nathan*, minor tractates, *Pesikta, Midrash Tanchumah*, and minor *midrashim*, some unknown, thus being a treasury of *midrushim* arranged according to the biblical verses.

between this "outsider" and themselves. So too, the angels note the similarity between themselves and Adam who, despite his earthly composition, looks like the angels.

The dressing of the deceased in white linen clothing and specifically eight articles of clothing just like the Kohen Gadol serves to demonstrate the striking resemblance between man and angel.

Asking for מחילה

Based on the following sources it is almost a universal practice that the members of the Chevra Kadisha ask for forgiveness from the deceased at the conclusion of the *tahara*.

מסכת שבת קנב:

אמר רבי אבהו: כל שאומרים בפני המת יודע, עד שיסתם הגולל. פליגי בה רבי חייא ורבי שמעון ברבי; חד אמר: עד שיסתם הגולל, וחד אמר: עד שיתעכל הבשר. מאן דאמר עד שיתעכל הבשר - דכתיב אאך בשרו עליו יכאב ונפשו עליו תאבל. מאן דאמר עד שיסתם הגולל - דכתיב בוישב העפר על הארץ כשהיה וגו'.

R' Abahu says, anything that is said in front of the dead, the dead is aware of until the top is placed on top of the coffin...

ט"ז יורה דעה סימן שמד יש בירושלמי המת יודע ושומע קילוסו כמתוך החלום וכל שאומרים בפניו יודע עד שיסתום הגולל:

The Talmud Yerushalmi teaches us that the dead hears its praises like one hears through a dream and anything said in front of him is known to him until the sealing of the coffin.

RABBI BEN SUGERMAN is Chairman of the Toshba Department at the Yeshiva High School in Boca Raton, Florida.

THE CHEVRA KADISHA DURING THE HOLOCAUST AND ACTS OF TERRORISM

Rochel Berman

GRADE LEVEL: 11th and 12th grades

SUGGESTED LENGTH: 60 minutes with a five minute break after 40 minutes

RESOURCES: TV monitor

SUGGESTED READING: Dignity Beyond Death: Chapter 7, "Dignity in the Face of the

Holocaust"; Chapter 8, "Dignity in the Wake of Terrorism"

INTRODUCTION

This lesson explores how the work of the Chevra Kadisha manifested itself during mass disasters — the Holocaust and acts of terrorism in Israel and following the 9/11 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City.

Identity is the key to dignity in death as it is in life. It was the Nazis' intent to demolish their victims' individuality by replacing their names with tattooed numbers. Similarly, repeated acts of terror are also an attempt to rob people of their identity. The randomness of the victims, in fact, sends the message that identity is unimportant.

What does the Bible tell us about the significance of names?



- In *Sefer Shemot*, the Book of Exodus, the Torah recounts the names of the sons of Jacob even though we already know about their lives from the stories in *Sefer Bereshit*.
- In the *Midrash Tanhuma*, Rashi explains that by repeating the names the Almighty is demonstrating his love for them. For they are just like the stars that God counts and names both when they come out at night and again when they return at daybreak. As it says in the Book of Isaiah (40:26): "He counts out his heavenly legion calling each by its name."

In Judaism there are numerous times when we invoke individual names. (ask class to enumerate).

- when an individual is called to the Torah
- n when we say a *mishaberach* for someone who is ill
- when we say yizkor as a memorial for the dearly departed
- n at the beginning of the *tahara* ritual when we advocate for the deceased's soul before the Almighty and again when we ask forgiveness for any errors of omission or commission during the *tahara*

This positions the deceased at center stage and underscores the undeniable identity and uniqueness of that individual.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Through first-person accounts students will learn how

- n the work of the Chevra restores dignity to innocent victims
- n the Chevra functioned during the Holocaust
- survivors responded to being members of the Chevra in the aftermath of the Shoah
- ZAKA responds at the scene of an Israeli terrorist attack and beyond until the time of burial
- Stern College students became involved in *shmira* after the 2001 bombing of the World Trade Center

THE HOLOCAUST

At the Beginning of the War

The first sign of the war against the Jews was Kristalnacht, November 9–10, 1938. This marked an ominous turning point for German and Austrian Jews. Synagogues as well as Jewish businesses and buildings had all their windows broken. According to Robert Kirschner in *Rahbinic Responses of the Holocaust Era*, between 2,000 and 2,500 Jewish men were arrested. Some were shot and then cremated. It was the German government's practice at that time to return the ashes of the murdered Jews to their relatives. Since cremation is not permitted by Jewish Law, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Kirschbaum, head of a rabbinic family in Frankfurt, issued a *tak-kanah*, a legal ordinance, that each container of ashes should be wrapped in a *tallit* and placed in a casket with the shrouds inserted in the casket.

Isolating Jews in Ghettos

As the war progressed, the Nazis began to isolate the Jews from the general population into ghettos. Rabbi Ephraim Oshry was an expert in Jewish law in the Kovno ghetto in Lithuania. After the war he published a five-volume work, *Responsa to the Holocaust*. When the Kovno ghetto was liberated at the end of the war, human skeletons, skulls, body parts and bones were strewn about. The question became, "How do we re-humanize the dehumanized?" In *Responsa from the Holocaust*, Rabbi Oshrey said as follows:

"After considerable deliberation, I ruled that corpses found underneath burned buildings should be collected together with the loose earth near them, since beyond a doubt, blood and flesh of victims were mixed in with the loose soil. . . . Because it was impossible to identify the bones and limbs as belonging to particular individuals, we buried them together in a collective grave—known as a "kever achim"—the grave of our brothers."

Survivors with memories of having to bury family and friends

Almost six decades after the *Shoah*, survivors who were only in their teens or early 20s during the war remember having to bury family members or friends.

Arnold Shay, an 82-year-old survivor from Benzdin, Poland was in his early 20s when he had to bury his father. He describes the difficulty he encountered.

(*Dignity Beyond Death*, read pages 130–31, inserted at the end of the lesson plan. Prepare a student to read this passage out loud to the class)

What was the response of survivors to death after the Shoah?

Some survivors became involved in the Chevra Kadisha following the war in direct response to their wartime experiences. They were also motivated by the great value placed on *chesed* in their pre-war homes.

As a young girl in her upper-middle class home in pre-war Hungary, Elizabeth Nussbaum delivered *challah* and *gefilteh fish* every Friday afternoon to poor families for their Shabbat meal.

Mrs. Nussbaum survived the ghetto and several concentration camps, and settled in Kansas, where she was recruited for the Chevra Kadisha. She responded because she viewed it as an act of *chesed*. Her thoughts reflect both her early upbringing and the hardships she endured during the Holocaust. She said:

As a survivor I feel guilty that I am alive and so many members of my family are not. I sometimes see my family in the deceased person for whom we are doing a *tahara*. It's almost as if I was offering the victims of the Holocaust a kindness that they were not afforded when they met their horrific deaths.

"My husband wasn't happy with my involvement in the Chevra. He was also a survivor and had been through much more than I during the war. He wanted to protect me from death. I never told him where I was going when I went out to do a *tahara* because I didn't

want to upset him, I simply said I was going out with the ladies" (*Dignity Beyond Death*, page 137).

What do we learn from hearing these stories?

- The older the survivors were at the beginning of the war, the more likely they were to adhere to the Jewish tradition after the war.
- Despite the unimaginable restrictions and danger, many Jews who experienced the Holocaust were determined to offer whatever dignity they could to those who perished, and many continued to provide *chesed shel emet* even after the Holocaust.

Topics for discussion

- 1. The Arnold Shay story offers us many opportunities to explore risk.
 - List all the incidents of risk
 - When you hear the word "risk" what do you think of?
 - What inspired each of the people in the story to take risks?
 - What situations in life would prompt you to take a risk?
 - Mhat would cause you to reject risk?
- 2. Elizabeth Nussbaum joins the Chevra Kadisha in her community after the war.
 - What do you think of her response to doing taharas?
 - Her husband's response to death after the war is the exact opposite. What do you think of the difference?
 - How do you feel about the way Elizabeth handled his opposition? How might she have done this differently?

TERRORIST ATTACKS AND CHEVRA CHALLENGES

ISRAEL

Among the first line responders to terrorist attacks in Israel are members of ZAKA—Disaster Victims' Identification. Matis, an Israeli who travels between Israel and the United States, explains how he became involved with ZAKA:

(*Dignity Beyond Death*, read pages 144–145,inserted at back of lesson plan. Prepare a student to read this passage out loud to the class.)

The Code of Jewish Law on assassination

It is interesting to note that according to the *Shulchan Aruch*, The Code of Jewish Law, "Any Jew who is assassinated by a non-Jew should be buried in the clothes which he/she wore as a demonstration of the sacrifice they made in God's name." Therefore,

- Those who lose their lives in terrorist attacks and Israeli soldiers who die in combat are buried with their blood stained clothes
- Mhile prayers are recited, the body is not disturbed with washing and dressing.
- Depending on the *minhag* of the Chevra Kadisha, they may place *tachrichim* over the body.

Bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City

Prior to the bombing of the World Trade Center, Americans were accustomed to reading or hearing about terrorist attacks in distant places. This changed radically on September 11, 2001.

Mass disasters place individual identity in peril. So desperate were those trapped on the top floors of the World Trade Center that some wrote their social security numbers on their arms in the event that was all that was recovered of their bodies. Rescue workers combed the tons of rubble for the smallest shreds of identity. Since most of the bodies were reduced to ash there were very few proper burials, and, of course, very few *taharot*. The remains were brought in refrigerated containers to the New York Medical Examiner's Office for possible identification.

As we have already learned, from the time of death until the time of burial, there is in Judaism an obligation to guard the body. The practice, called *shmira*, is performed by individuals who read passages from the Book of Psalms as they sit with the deceased. Congregation Ohab Tzedek, in Manhattan organized volunteers from the tri-state area to do *shmira* in 4-hour shifts. People were desperate to be of help and before long 200 volunteers had been recruited. They provided this service 24/7 for almost a year. It fell to the Yeshiva University Stern College for Women to provide *shmira* on Shabbat because their dorms were just a short walk from the Medical Examiner's Office. Since the religion of the deceased whose remains were retrieved was unknown, the *tehillim* recited were meant for the consolation and redemption of all souls.

Sharon Weiss-Greenberg, who did *shmira* post 9/11 when she was an 18-year-old Stern College student, had this to say: (play videotaped interview):

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

Armin Osgood, who organized this effort on behalf of Congregation Ohab Tzedek, said: "It's incredible that this enormous tragedy should bring forth such unity of spirit and of caring."

- N Why do people come together in a time of crisis?
- n If you were called upon to do shmira, which Psalms would you choose to read and why?

ROCHEL BERMAN is the author of *Dignity Beyond Death: The Jewish Preparation for Burial*, winner of the Koret International Jewish Book Award. She serves as The Final Journey Project Director.



ARNOLD SHAY'S STORY

My father was a tailor and a highly respected member of the Chevra Kadisha. When the war broke out, we were not allowed to engage in any religious activity, so *taharas* were only performed in very special instances.

The night the Germans came to take my father, he was already in bed. He said, "I know where you are planning to take me. You will not take me out alive." With a rifle butt they broke his chest, as my mother and I looked helplessly on. When I saw that my father was spitting blood, I walked toward the bed to help him and was struck by the Germans en route. I passed out, and when I came to my father was unconscious, but still alive.

A few days later, while I sat at the machine in the tailor shop making Nazi uniforms, I was informed that my father was close to death and that I should go home immediately. I couldn't get a pass to leave, so I ripped off my yellow star and sneaked out of the back door of the shop. I was able to walk home without being detected. I got home to find my mother standing in the hallway crying. Knowing that my father's death was imminent, the Chevra Kadisha had already arrived. One member of the Chevra, Rav Shalom, pleaded with my mother to stop crying so that my father would not be unduly upset. As I approached my father's bed, he stretched out his hand. I wrapped it in mine and he died shortly thereafter. This was April 28, 1942. He was forty-six years old. My mother softly uttered, "Baruch dayan emes" – Blessed be the True Judge.

Performing *taharas* was forbidden, but because my father had been a member of the Chevra, two of the men risked their lives and performed the ritual on the only table of our one-room basement home in the ghetto. The men brought in the *tahara* board and I filled the buckets from an outdoor spigot. They washed him, covered him with a sheet, and returned him to the bed.

The tachrichim macher couldn't sew the shrouds because the Germans had ordered him to stop working. Instead, he gave me a piece of linen and showed me how to cut them. As is the custom, I sewed them by hand without making knots in the thread. It was a single, sack-like garment. My mother helped me dress my father on the bed, and when we were finished I went to the Judenrat to get a permit to bury him. It took about four days, during which time my mother and I slept on the floor because we had only one bed.

I obtained a casket from the gravedigger and we carried my father three miles to the cemetery. At the cemetery, the Chevra uncovered his face and placed broken shards on his eyes and mouth. I could only get a permit for six people to go to the cemetery so there was no *minyan*. Nevertheless, I recited the *kaddish*.

TERRORIST ATTACK IN ISRAEL AS TOLD BY MATIS

As I stopped for a traffic light in Jerusalem, I noticed a bus just ahead of me. A terrorist appeared from behind the bus and began shooting people in the bus. Even though I was not trained, I got out of my car and began taking out the injured.

One of the injured I took out was a twelve-year-old girl, who died in my arms. A ZAKA volunteer came up to me and told me that every drop of blood that came out of her body had to be retrieved and buried with her. My clothes were full of blood and there was blood on the pavement. The girl was taken to the identification center and then to the funeral home for burial. I had to go home to change my clothes and to surrender the blood stained garments to the funeral home for burial with the child.

Since I got involved, I felt obligated to be present when the family was notified so I could tell them how it happened. I accompanied two other volunteers to the house. When we got there, we knocked on the door, but there was no answer. We decided to try the door anyway. When it opened, there were lots of people gathered and they started singing "Happy Birthday" in honor of the girl's twelfth birthday. They thought she was on her way home and this was supposed to be a surprise. Usually ZAKA comes with a few people, one of whom is a psychologist to deal with the probable trauma. Some families become enraged and start throwing things and hitting, so that at least two or three people are needed to handle whatever comes up. In this instance, we chose to call out one family member to inform her. The person was a

cousin of the victim. She began to scream and then the whole family came out to see what happened. You can't imagine the screaming and yelling and total shock!

We stayed about an hour and tried to calm them down and to help them with the funeral arrangements. The funeral took place the same day. I was supposed to leave Israel that night, but changed my flight so that I could attend the funeral. This incident totally changed my life. I feel that there is nothing more important than helping ZAKA in whatever way I can.



THE HISTORY OF THE CHEVRA KADISHA IN AMERICA

Rabbi Adam Mintz

GRADE LEVEL: 11th and 12th grades

SUGGESTED LENGTH: 60 minutes with a 5 minute break after 40 minutes

SOURCE MATERIAL

Arthur A. Goren, "Traditional Institutions Transplanted: The Hevra Kadisha in Europe and America, in *The Jews of North America*, ed. Moses Rischin (Detroit, Wayne State, 1987), 62-78

Mareleyn Schneider, *History of a Jewish Burial Society: An Examination of Secularization* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 1991)



Elka Deitsch, Sharon Liberman Mintz, Weibke Light, David Wachtel, From this World to the Next: Jewish Approaches to Illness, Death and the Afterlife (New York: The Library of Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1999)

INTRODUCTION

This lesson will examine the history of the Chevra Kadisha in America, especially the burial societies of the Eastern European immigrants to the United States at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. We will explore the role of the members of the different burial societies, their impact on the community and their function in the growth and assimilation of these immigrants into mainstream American life. The lesson will begin with a short survey of the history of the Chevra Kadisha prior to the beginning of Jewish immigration to America.

- Talmudic period—the community served as the burial society
- First official burial society—Spain, in the 14th century
- n First Ashkenazi society—Prague, 1564

What was the role of the Prague Chevra Kadisha?

- n the burial process beginning with the *tahara*
- arranging and caring for the *shiva* house and those sitting *shiva*
- n visiting the sick
- a community charity providing clothes for the Jewish poor and dowries for the Jewish brides

Not everyone was allowed to join the Chevra in Prague

- n men and not women who buried women
- n religiously observant
- n good reputation in the community
- accepted by the Council of Elders of the Chevra
- n hereditary succession of membership privileges from father to son

All members:

- n had burial rights for themselves and their families
- n had the right to attend the Chevra dinner on Zayin Adar, the seventh day of the month of Adar, marking the anniversary of the death of Moses

These Chevras with similar roles and rules were found throughout Western and Eastern Europe in the following centuries. Some Chevras had several hundred members while others had just a handful of members. But they each served similar roles and services.

Then, the Chevra comes to America:

- n First Chevra in America—1785 Shearith Israel Congregation in NYC
- This Chevra provided the traditional services of preparation for burial and preparation of the *shiva* house
- Membership was seen as a social credential. Synagogues used the threat of revoking membership to guarantee that members respected the rules of the synagogue, including maintaining proper decorum during services.

EASTERN EUROPEAN JEWISH IMMIGRATION

- n 1880-1924 2.5 million Jews immigrate to America
- n Most come through the Lower East Side

How were the Chevras organized?

- Due to the overcrowding and difficulty in communicating in English, each community in Eastern European set up a *landsmanschaft*, or society, to take care of Jews who had emigrated from these towns and cities. One of the major roles of these *landsmanschaften* was the purchase of burial plots for all their members.
- n So, in the late nineteenth century, burial societies were organized around the *lands-manschaft* and not around the *shul*. It was more important for many to belong to a *landsmanschaft* than to belong to a *shul*.

What and where were the Jewish Cemeteries?

- No cemeteries in Manhattan—too expensive
- n Cemeteries in Queens and Brooklyn
- Family plots were introduced
- Cemeteries are called Gardens as a marketing ploy to sell family plots.
- First example of the Americanization of the traditional Jewish burial practices—family plots
- Role of funeral director
- No funeral directors in Europe. The cemeteries were close to town.
- In America, people died in hospitals, so someone needed to arrange for death certificate and transportation of the body to the cemetery.
- Transport the mourners to the cemetery
- n Negotiations with the cemetery for proper plots or to open on Sundays
- Funeral director became a critical job and worked directly with the Chevra
- Eventually funeral chapels were introduced to help in this process. Once again there is no need for the shul to get involved in the process
- Another example of the Americanization of the traditional Jewish funeral practice

However, there was some exploitation of the Jewish burial system.

Big Jack Zelig, a notorious Jewish gang leader was murdered in 1912. The Jewish newspapers reported that "Only the funeral of Rabbi Jacob Joseph surpassed it." There were 36 carriages and 25 cars that took mourners and friends to Washington Cemetery in Brooklyn. Cantor Goldberg and his choir recited the memorial prayer and Rabbi Adolph Siegel delivered the eulogy. Big Jack was buried between Jacob Gordon, the famous Yiddish playwright and an eminent rabbi. The *Forward* reported the next morning that "In Europe he would have received a 'donkey's funeral', burying him outside the cemetery fence."

The reaction to these excesses were the creation of burial societies for the poor.

You could join a society for \$3/year. This guaranteed burial.

The annual dues provided opportunities for the society to support poor Jews in New York

- The traditional role of the Chevra has returned.
- This doesn't prevent funerals such as Big Jack's but it gives everyone the privilege of having a funeral.

As Jews became more Americanized in the second and third generations, many of these Jews moved away from a traditional Jewish lifestyle. Many men worked on *shabbat* since in America there was a six day work week until the 1930s. Many Jews became lax in the laws of *kashrut* and some did not want to identify with the old-fashioned ways of their parents. One group that was created to address these Jews was the secular Workmen's Circle. Deeply committed to Jewish culture, they were opposed to maintaining traditional Jewish practice in America. They established a burial committee to oversee burials.

- They introduced eulogies that quoted from European literature rather than Psalms
- n They allowed burial in expensive coffins
- They omitted the process of tahara
- Jews chose to be buried with the Workman's Circle and not with their landsmanschaft

There was strong opposition from the Orthodox. Rabbi Leopold Greenwald of Columbus, Ohio wrote a volume titled *Kol Bo al Avelut*, in which he attacks the non-Orthodox for abandoning traditional Jewish burial practice. He also rejects the practice of above ground burial which became popular even among Jews in the middle of the twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of the burial societies in America reflects the evolution of the Jewish communities in this country. In the late 19th century, the immigrant Jews tried to maintain the traditions

of their *shtetls* and towns in Eastern Europe. They wanted to continue their traditional lives, at least regarding burial practices in America. As Jews became more Americanized, their burial practices followed. The introduction of fancy coffins and even mausoleum burials signified that many Jews chose American practices of burials over traditional Jewish ones.

Ironically, while the Orthodox rabbinic community mocked these American burial customs, the Orthodox funeral also introduced many American burial practices. The fact that the eulogies are now delivered in a chapel rather than at the grave is an American practice. In the end, much as has been true throughout Jewish history, the host culture has a major impact on the Jewish immigrants and citizens of that land.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

- n Compare the Chevras of today with the Chevras of the early 20th century.
- n Discuss other examples of Americanization of traditional Jewish practice.
- Should *halacha* adopt the norms of the host society and culture?
- Mhat will the American Chevras look like in 50 years?

RABBI ADAM MINTZ is the founding rabbi of Kehilat Rayim Ahuvim in New York City and a professor of Jewish History at City College, New York.



HALACHIC ISSUES REGARDING AUTOPSY AND ORGAN DONATION

Rabbi Kenneth Brander

SUGGESTED LENGTH: 80 minutes (60 minutes to present, 20 minutes for questions)

GRADE LEVEL: 11th-12th grade

INTRODUCTION

When teenagers receive their driver's license they are often at a loss when asked if they would like to be an organ donor. If the teen comes from an observant family they are likely to refuse to become an organ donor because they think that Jewish law forbids it. But is that actually the case? Does *halacha* prohibit organ donations? Is there a special *halachic* document that one should fill out instead of the standard one issued by the DMV? These decisions are oftentimes uninformed, with most people lacking a basic knowledge of the underlying *halachic* principles necessary to answer this question. This class will present the various definitions on *halachic* death and organ donation, to clarify these very important issues.



LESSON OBJECTIVES

I think it is important for high school students to learn about the value of helping others.

Organ donation is something that speaks to those values. Jews cannot only be recipients of organs, they must also be donors. Jewish law tells us that we have a responsibility for *tikkun olam*—healing a fractured world. When we talk about organ donation through the prism of Jewish values, it enhances the appreciation of *halacha* by our young people.

Through learning about the *halachic* definitions of death and what Jewish law has to say about organ donation, the students will:

- n gain an appreciation for the tremendous value Jewish law places on life
- gain an appreciation for the respect Jewish law has for the body, even after death
- become more knowledgeable about the *halachic* definition of death
- n become more knowledgeable about when autopsies are permitted
- recognize our role in the sacred task to save lives

- engage their friends and parents in a conversation about becoming *halachic* organ donors
- n be able to dispel myths about the view of organ donation in Jewish law
- understand the methodology employed by modern day rabbinic authorities to tackle halachic issues, which did not exist in previous generations

CHALLENGES OF DONATING ORGANS

Many observant Jews believe that organ donation is "not a Jewish thing," but there is in fact a great misconception amongst the Orthodox community about the notion of organ donations.

Some believe that donating organs is forbidden because the halacha prohibits a person from putting themselves at any risk.

Others argue that organ donation violates Jewish law because it is a desceration of the body. Since our bodies were given to us by God, we have no right to desecrate them. However, it can be argued that one may put themselves at limited risk to save someone else's life and giving an organ posthumously is not considered desecration of the body when it is done to save another's life.

THE HALACHIC DEFINITION OF DEATH

Must both the brain and the heart stop functioning in order for a person to be considered dead? If this is the case, from a practical standpoint there are many organs which cannot *halachically* be donated because they are rendered useless shortly after blood stops pulsating throughout the body.

Or is halachic death defined as brain death?

If this is the case, doctors can keep the heart pumping artificially in order to harvest vital organs. If brain death is considered death, we must further explore which brain functions must

cease for the person to be considered halachically brain dead.

Issues of desecrating the body

Devarim 21 (Source #1): If a person is put to death the body must be buried immediately to prevent desecration of the body.

Talmud Bavli Avodah Zara 29b (Source #2): This is the basis for the law which prohibits benefitting from the dead.

Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 349:1 (Source #3): There is no difference between the treatment of Jews and non-Jews in this regard.

If this is the case, donating organs should be forbidden.

Shulchan Aruch 357:1 (Source #4): Burial may be delayed if it will ensure the dignity of the deceased, e.g., it will allow more relatives to attend the funeral.

R'Yechezkel Landau (*Noda Biyehuda Yoreh Deah* 210)—speaks of a person who died in London and there was concern that the illness which took his life would kill others; the only way to prevent further death was by performing an autopsy to discover the pathology of the disease.

On the one hand an autopsy descerates the body, but on the other hand there is a commandment to save lives which overrides all other commandments.

R' Landau ruled that saving lives takes precedence and an autopsy doesn't desecrate the body

in this case. It is, in fact, an honor because the body can be used to do a *mitzvah* of saving another life. The one qualification he placed on his ruling is that the autopsy must be done for a person whose life needs to be saved immediately—it's not just being done for scientific research.

We learn from this that cutting into a body isn't considered disgracing the body when it can immediately save another life.

CRITICALLY ILL PATIENTS AS POTENTIAL DONORS

Rambam *Hilchot Avel* 4:5 (Source #6)—a critically ill patient is considered alive and you cannot hasten their death. This teaches that every minute of life is critical and we cannot proactively hasten death, even to save someone else.

Rabbi Jacob Reischer (Sh'vut Yaakov 3:75 Source #8) and R' Chaim Ozer Grodzinski (*Achiezer* 2:16 Source #9)—speak of a person who will not live more than 6 months without an operation. With the operation he could live longer, but might also die on the table; they rule that even though every moment of life is sacred and you are risking several months of life the operation is permitted provided one has consulted medical experts.

(Sources #10–13) We do not require a person to aggressively lengthen life if the patient is suffering. While we cannot actively terminate life we are not required to prolong it. Along these lines, morphine to make someone more comfortable would be allowed, even if it may shorten life—since the purpose is to alleviate pain and not to hasten death.

Putting Yourself at Risk to Save Someone Else? The Issue of Kidney Transplants

(Source #14) Shulchan Aruch Chosen Mishpat 426:1 and Source #15 Rambam Hilchot Rozeiach 1:14—A Jew cannot stand idly by and watch someone else be injured or die. Must a person put their own life at risk to save someone else who is in danger?

(Source #16) Aruch HaShulchan Choshen Mishpat 426:4—The Talmud Bavli rules that a person cannot put themselves at risk while the Talmud Yerushalmi rules that a person must put their lives at risk. As a result the Rhishonim did not codify the approach of the Jerusalem Talmud. Nevertheless, we must evaluate each case on an individual basis. A strong emphasis should be placed on saving someone else's life, even when there is some risk to your own life, especially when we know that otherwise the other person will definitely die.

(Source #17) R' Yitzchak Yaakov Weiss, *Minchas Yitzchak* 6:103—Kidney donations are permitted because the risk is minimal. It is not *halachically* mandated, but it is not forbidden and is considered a *mitzvaln*. Since the *Talmud Bavli* does not require a person to put his life at risk, there is no violation if a person chooses not to donate.

(Source #18) R' Ovadia Yosef, *Yechaveh Daat* 3:84—writes that it is a *mitzvah* and the person who donates will be saved and protected in 1,000 different ways.

Conclusion: From the *halachic* materials live organ donation is permitted, considered a *mitz-vah*, but not mandated.

Determining Death

Mishna Yoma 8:7 (Source #19)—If a building collapses on Shabbat and we do not know if someone is buried under the ruins, we may remove the ruins even though it will constitute a violation of Shabbat, since the potential to save a life takes precedence over Shabbat.

Gemara Yoma 85a (Source #20)—if one is found in a ruin what are signs that help determine whether someone is alive? The Talmud records two different opinions. One opinion suggests you check the breathing and another you check the breathing and if there is no indication of such you must check for a heart-beat. This argument may represent two different paradigms of defining life and death. The first approach suggests you just check for breathing; they are defining death as the cessation of spontaneous respiration, an activity controlled by the brainstem.

According to this approach in the Talmud, life is defined as brainstem life; the definition of death is when the brainstem is no longer functional. Accordingly, if a person were breathing artificially and not because of brainstem activity, the person would still be considered dead. The approach that demands one check for a heartbeat suggests that brainstem death is not sufficient to determine death; rather death must include the cessation of cardiac function. Accordingly if a person was breathing artificially but still has cardiac function they would still be considered alive.

According to many the *responsa* of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *Iggerot Moshe Yoreh Deah* 3:132 (Source #23) rules that the definition of life is breathing. So if blood is flowing and multiple organs can still be harvested, but there is no breathing, the person is considered dead, and has organs that can be used for transplant.

Rabbi Brander—a person *cannot* write that they are an organ donor on their driver's license because hospitals rely on cerebral hemisphere function in their definition of brain death—while we would consider the patient to still be alive; *halacha* is more stringent and requires complete brain stem death. Therefore one should use a *halachic* donor card.

The Chief Rabbinate of Israel and Rabbi Ovadia Yosef rule that the definition of death is brain stem function.

Rabbi Herschel Shachter, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Rabbi Yosef Chaim Eliyashiv rule more stringently and say that there are other sources in the Talmud that define life based on heartbeat, so organ donations can be given but only after cardiac cessation.

CONCLUSION

Posthumous organ donation is permitted and mandated, but what can be given is dependent on how one defines death.

One group rules that once the brainstem is no longer functioning, anything can be donated; Another group rules that if the heart is beating the person is still alive; since the heart can still beat after brainstem death, this limits the types of organs which can be donated. Live donation (e.g., a kidney) is a *mitzvah* but is not mandated since there is some risk to the donor.

RABBI KENNETH BRANDER is Vice President For University And Community Life, inaugural Dean of the David Mitzner Center for the Jewish Future at Yeshiva University, and founder of the Yeshiva High School.

WHEN ORDINARY PEOPLE DO EXTRAORDINARY THINGS

TAHARA AS A TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

GRADE LEVEL: 11th and 12th grades

SUGGESTED LENGTH: 90 minutes with a 5 minute break after 60 minutes

RESOURCES: An eight-foot table with four chairs for three panelists plus a moderator

SUGGESTED READING: Dignity Beyond Death: Chapter 4, "Meeting the Challenge"; Chapter 5, "Personal Impact"

INTRODUCTION

When a call goes out in a community or in a synagogue for people to become members of the Chevra Kadisha, there are those who say, "Oh, I could never do that!" and there is a much smaller group that says, "Maybe, I could do that. I think I'll try." The truth of the matter is that nobody really knows for sure that they can do it because performing a *tahara* is like nothing else one has encountered. But since the rate of dropout is minimal, those that respond positively must be a self-selected group. These ordinary people—men, women, young and old, from all walks of life and socio-economic levels—are then joined together in an elite society that enables them to engage in one of the most extraordinary experiences of their lifetimes—one that is truly transformative.

For the final session in this course, we brought together a group of three people whose experience doing *tahara* has

- n transformed their perceptions of themselves
- n impacted their feelings about Judaism
- n enhanced their appreciation of team members with whom they have worked
- made them more comfortable with the concept of death

Appropriate panelists can be recruited through the chairperson of the Chevra Kadisha in your community. Try to select both men and women, and people of different ages. In the event that you cannot recruit people in your community, personal profiles in Chapters 4 and 5 in *Dignity Beyond Death* can be used as a resource.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Through the experiences of a panel of individuals who are knowledgeable and passionate about the ritual and are able to articulate this in a meaningful way, students will learn that

- n a diverse group of people serve as Chevra members
- the intensity of the experience creates strong bonds and mutual respect among members of a team
- doing a *tahara* reinforces members' Jewish identity. This is especially the case for *balai t'shuva* and converts to Judaism
- n being a member of the Chevra Kadisha strengthens community ties

In our project demonstration the following people were panelists:



RABBI LEIBEL MILLER
Director, Chevra Kadisha of Florida

Topics

- n how he became involved in the Chevra Kadisha as a young yeshiva student
- n his first tahara
- establishing Chevra Kadisha groups throughout South Florida



GEORGE BERMAN

A founder of the Congregation Rosh Pinah Chevra Kadisha, Westchester County, NY; Head of the Men's Chevra and responsible for training

Topics

- n impact of becoming a member of the Chevra Kadisha as a baal t'shuva
- n how serving on the Chevra can change one's outlook
- n anecdotes of his own and of those he trained



SARAH COHEN

Yeshiva High School Graduate (2007); Member of the Boca Raton Synagogue Chevra Kadisha

Topics

- n why she joined the Chevra as a young woman
- what she finds meaningful
- n how it has changed her outlook

CONCLUSION

The course concluded with an open discussion about both the format and content of the material. Because most sessions ended just minutes before the next period, students welcomed the extended time for sharing ideas.

SUGGESTIONS GOING FORWARD

The first course was conducted over a two and a half week period. This did not allow enough time to absorb one topic before another one was introduced. It also did not enable us to give reading or written assignments to enhance the learning process. In the future, the course will be spread out over a four-week period, with two sessions each week. Depending on your school calendar, consideration should also be given to scheduling one session a week over an eight week period.

- If possible, an hour should be allowed for most lessons, with a 45-minute presentation and a 15-minute discussion period. A series of suggested discussion topics should be prepared in advance. The Field Trip and the last session should be scheduled for 90 minutes.
- n When appropriate, students should be invited to present. They might read aloud passages from source material that will be followed by discussion, or have different students read *tahara* prayers and discuss their meaning with the class.
- Being on the cusp of a major transition in their lives, whether it is a gap year abroad or off to college, seniors are particularly suited to engaging with this topic.



REFLECTIONS BY STUDENTS

The following essays, written by students, are reflective of the impact the course has had on their lives. The titles of the essays can be topics for discussion with excerpts of their insights presented to the class for exploration.

RESPECT FOR THE DEAD

by Ariella Atkin

In learning about *tahara*, we studied each step of cleansing the body and preparing it for burial. The lessons and practices that we discussed gave me a greater understanding of life and Jewish identity. With every class, we learned different ways in which we respect the deceased.

One way of giving respect to the *meit* is by preserving as much of the body parts and fluids as possible. This is a *mitzvah* that we undertake on behalf of the *neshama* of the dead, so as not to embarrass or degrade the *meit* in any way. The body is watched from the time of death until it is cared for by the Chevra. The *shomer* who guards the body says *tehillim* for the deceased, as a sign of respect for his *neshama*.



The men or women who do the *tahara* do not speak about anything except the process itself while performing it. The people doing the *tahara* care for the body as if the deceased's family was watching. Every step is carefully done in order to ensure the body is cared for properly.

Even after cleansing and dressing the body with the greatest care, the people who did the *tahara* say a *tefila* to the deceased, asking him for forgiveness in case they did something wrong. I found this to be one of the most inspiring aspects of the *tahara* process. Even though they were incredibly gentle and careful, they want to ensure that the deceased was given the utmost respect.

Although at first glance the *tachrichim* and the plain pine coffin do not appear to be the nicest to be buried in, they are a symbol of equality which gives respect to all people. *Tachrichim* are a plain linen shirt, pants, and hat. They are a symbol of equality because rich or poor, young or old, all are buried in the exact same *tachrichim*. The same applies to the plain pine coffin that everyone is buried in. Although a rich man may prefer to be buried in the finest clothing, *tachrichim* serve as a humbling equalizer, a symbol of *kavod* to Hashem, in whose image we are all created.

Each of these practices is an important part of the *tahara* process. Those who are members of the Chevra Kadisha carry on the *mesorah* of Jewish burial, treating the deceased with the most care and respect possible. What I found to be the most inspiring part of what the Chevra does is that they can never ask for anything in return or even get a thank you. Everything that the Chevra does is voluntary and *l'kavod hamelt*.

BODY AND SOUL

by Brooke Veingrad

ur essence and being and who we are is our soul, and the body is just an extension of it. The body helps the soul carry out its actions and protects the soul from the outside world. The Ramchal says, "In order that God's goal best be achieved, the Highest Wisdom decreed that man should consist of two opposites. These are his spiritual soul and his unenlightened physical body." The two are in constant struggle, which helps the soul grow stronger and stronger. So with *techiyat hameitim*, the body is treated with such care because it is the soul's vessel and kept the soul holy. The body helps the soul to prevail and when it does, it "not only elevates itself but the body as well" (Ramchal).



This really impacted my life because it shows the importance of nourishing your soul and keeping your body healthy to be the best vessel possible. Not only should you be eating healthy and exercising for your body, but you should especially be "eating healthy" for your soul, your true essence. "Eating healthy" refers to learning and doing good deeds that lead to a better and cleaner soul. This concept made me pay more attention to my actions and concentrate on the things I do throughout the day. This also reminds me that every day could be my last, and every action can be my last act, so I should try to do acts of kindness happily, giving my body and soul a perfect exit from this world. I learned from this how important my body is for my soul. It gives me strength to eat the apple instead of the donut or go for a run instead of sitting at my computer and watching a movie.

By continuously reminding myself that I do not have a soul—that I am a soul I will live each day differently. Plato said, "the soul and the body exist independently: the soul represents the real person." Since I now know that my soul is me and that I am a soul, my future will be forever impacted. Although I will sometimes slip up and do things that do not nourish my soul, I will always try to strive better and continuously work on myself. This lesson helps me see how important *techiyat hameitim* is for the present and future, too. I understand why such care is taken for the body and how important the body is for the soul. Not only does the body make the soul stronger, but it also protects it from the outside physical world.

The soul and body together make up each and every one of us. The soul is our essence and our true self, but without the body we would not accomplish anything. Knowing this helps me strive for greatness and be the best person possible.

YOU WILL BE CARED FOR

by Dani Ditchek

he whole process of purifying and burying a Jewish body is very interesting to me. What struck me the most about this procedure is how carefully and respectfully the body is treated until it is buried. As the soul is constantly watching after it leaves the body, the Chevra Kadisha must act with the utmost respect. While they are doing the *tahara*, there is no speaking. Everything that they are doing is for the body and the soul without any distractions. They are totally focused on the body. They wash and dress the body in a very proper and orderly way. At the end of the cleansing, the Chevra Kadisha blesses the body and addresses it by name in order to make it more personal. The entire procedure is incredibly courteous.



On the March of the Living, we visited various camps where Jews were killed during the Holocaust. In Birkenau, we saw these large pits in the ground that were filled with water. We were informed that those pits are where the Nazis would dump the ashes after they burned the bodies. In Majdanek, we saw seven tons of the ash that remains from the Jewish bodies that were cremated. We went to a children's mass grave, where the Nazis smashed the childrens's heads against rocks to kill them in order to save bullets. Then they were brutally thrown into large ditches.

After seeing these horrible sites, I understand the importance of the *tahara* process. Those innocent Jews were brutally murdered and then "thrown away" without anyone ever caring how or where they were buried. They deserved a proper process but were never able to receive it. However, there are stories told of secret Chevra Kadisha organizations in the ghettos. When someone died, they would try extremely hard to do a whole *tahara* in secrecy. This shows how important the process really is. Those people risked their own lives in the ghetto in order to ensure that others received a proper *tahara*.

When we went to the funeral home and watched an example of a *tahara*, I realized how serious and special it really is. We were told why each step is done and how, and then watched them perform the step. No other religions treat a dead body with the same respect and care as the Jews.

Most people are scared of death and all that comes with it. But learning about this process and how it is done showed us that even after you die, you will still be watched and cared for. After taking these classes, we all have a better understanding of death and the importance of the *tahara* process.

CHEVRA KADISHA DURING THE HOLOCAUST

by Jessica Griff

uring the seminar titled *The Chevra Kadisha and the Holocaust*, I was impressed that Jews continued to practice these burial rituals under such harsh and limiting conditions. Even though they were not following *halacha* perfectly, they still tried to dignify their family members' bodies.

Returning from the March of the Living, a program that visits concentration camps and ghettos in Poland, I have a reaffirmed appreciation for Judaism's burial practices. Before I went on my trip, I simply thought it was a nice concept to respect the deceased. But after traveling to the death camps and standing in gas chambers and crematoria where so many Jews were murdered and their bodies treated like garbage, I realized how unique and uplifting the



Chevra Kadisha's practices are and how lucky I am to have learned about the Chevra Kadisha prior to my trip.

Outside the Jewish cemetery in Lodz, Poland—the largest Jewish cemetery in Europe—there is a beautiful building. My group, mostly conservative and reform Jewish teenagers, walked inside not knowing what the building was; we were then told it was an old *tahara* house. Only a select few including me understood what that meant. If I had not attended Rochel Berman's seminars, I too would not have known the significance of the building. The concept of Jews using this room during the time they were forced to live in the ghetto made what we learned in school real. We met a woman whose grandfather was buried in the Lodz cemetery during the war. She recalled what her grandmother had told her about his death. Although it was extremely difficult to arrange a proper burial, her grandmother did everything in her power to ensure that her husband would go with the utmost respect to his eternal resting place. While most people in the ghetto would strip the dead of their clothes and belongings and then throw them in the street for pickup, there were still Jews who upheld the *halachic* practices. Despite all the horrific circumstances under the Nazi regime, Jews found value in keeping the Chevra Kadisha functioning.

Learning from these incredible stories of heroic Jews who risked their lives adhering to Jewish laws inspires me to stay true to my religion and solidifies my commitment to one day have a proper Jewish burial. Not only did the seminars educate me on an imperative ritual in Judaism, but it also equipped me to share what I learned with the students I was with on March of the Living. Naturally they were confused as to what a proper Jewish burial is. Thankfully, I had the right answers to help enlighten them, and hopefully convince them to educate their families and want a *tahara* too. That I was able to share what I learned with those less educated than I am made the entire seminar worthwhile for me.









Tahara House at the Lodz Cemetery in Poland. Courtesy Annetie and Neil Shachiter

WE ARE ALL EQUAL

by Kayla Gross

ne concept that I found particularly interesting and inspiring was that every Jew is buried in the same outfit, the same *tachrichim*. No matter how religious or how wealthy or what your social status is prior to your death, you will leave this world completely equal to all other Jews. No one has to worry about what suit or what dress they will be buried in, because Jewish law dictates that everyone is dressed the same.

One reason why I found this aspect of the burial so amazing is because, in a way, it symbolizes the fresh start that we will all receive once leaving this world and going to *olam haba*. We entered this world equal and now we must enter the next, even more important world equal as well. I also like this concept because death is so mysterious—it is our transition between worlds; it doesn't seem



right that one would worry about something materialistic and insignificant, such as clothing, when it comes to death. The simple, uniform *tachrichim* seem much more appropriate.

This concept teaches us an important lesson about looking at the world around us through completely non-judgmental eyes. It is no secret that this world of ours is so utterly messed up by every human being's tendency to look at others and compare them to their own selves. It is human nature to find the flaws in anything whenever possible, and it is human nature to look at the world with subjective eyes. This law teaches us the imperative lesson that, although we may think one person is better than someone else, deep down we are all God's children and we are all inherently equal.

This has been a problem that I have personally been trying to tackle over the past few years. I have done a lot of personal reflection. I have been trying to be *dan l'caph zechut* and not compare people if I do not know them because that is something that I deem profoundly wrong with this world of ours. So hearing in the Chevra Kadisha course about everybody being buried in the same way gave me hope and made me feel that all of my efforts have counted for something.

I also think that learning about this will affect the rest of my life because I am leaving high school soon and entering a stage of my life when I am really about to discover who I am and who I want to be. By definition that means what type of Jew I will become and how I fit Judaism into my life. The fact that everybody is buried in the same clothing shows me that Judaism cares. We want everybody to be given a chance, to be treated impartially. So seeing that Jewish law incorporates something that I value so much into this "final journey" is comforting, and is even further proof to me that Judaism is meant for me; it does correspond to what I believe in.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WHITE CLOTHING

by Laura Betesh

he concept that impressed me most was the dressing of the deceased in the white clothes—tachrichim.

At first, when we were introduced to this class, I was a little scared of what was to come. After a couple of lectures, I realized that the concept of death is not scary, but that there is a mystery behind it. I had not known anything about burial, nor about the Jewish way of the *tahara* process prior to this class. The only thing I knew is that it is called the Chevra Kadisha, because my dad is a volunteer. In the first few classes, we discussed where the soul is immediately after death and we also discussed how important it is that we keep all the lost blood and body parts out of respect for the soul.



I found it interesting that the soul hovers over the body during the *tahara* and that we clean the body out of the utmost respect for not only the soul, but for the family members of the deceased as well. Prior to our trip to the funeral home, Rabbi Kroll discussed with us the process of how one is taken care of from death until the burial. We learned that there are volunteers from the shul who come to clean the body carefully, and then they dress it in white clothing. This concept of the white linens interested me the most. After hearing about this, I immediately had a few questions. For example, why white clothing and not anything else? Why can deceased women wear pants?

The most interesting class was the trip to the funeral home. There, we watched videos on how to dress the deceased and we even saw a group of women that are part of a Chevra Kadisha dress a dummy. Unlike other religions, a Jewish person is not dressed in his or her usual clothing. The Jewish funeral emphasizes the spirit and the soul rather than physical and material matters. The body is dressed in *tachrichim*—white garments that are handmade and are fitting for someone who is about to be judged by Hashem. Also, white garments are worn by all the deceased because by using these garments, those who cannot afford fancy clothing are not embarrassed. The Jewish ritual of cleansing the body and dressing the deceased in nice white clothing is also relieving to the family members. They know that the deceased is in good hands and that they are being taken care of respectfully and carefully. This concept of the *tachrichim* has helped me further my knowledge of proper Jewish burial. Now I am prepared for the future with my understanding of Jewish burial practice.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RESPECT

by Rachel Petrover

oing into this class on *tuhura*, the traditional Jewish ceremony by which the body is cared for and cleansed before burial, I was not sure what to expect or what I was about to experience. I know my mother is part of our community's Chevra Kadisha, but she never spoke about or even mentioned being part of this exclusive group, so having an entire class dedicated to the subject aroused my curiosity and caught my attention. Of course I learned a great deal about the importance of a Jewish life and a Jewish burial, but learning how we as Jews specifically handle the body before burial really amazed me; the process of cleansing is very specific and minute details are held to the utmost importance, nothing is overlooked.



What I took most out of this class was the heavy emphasis on how much respect we must have not only for the family in mourning, but for the body of the deceased as well. The Chevra behaves as if the soul of that deceased person was present and watching the entire ritual unfold. Materials are never passed over the body and there is never any small talk. Material has to be moved around the body and the only words mentioned are the small mumbles of blessings and the requests for forgiveness if they, the Chevra, have done anything wrong or have performed anything in a disrespectful manner.

In modern day non-denominational funeral homes, the people taking care of the body usually have no affiliation with the family of the deceased. They handle the body without much thought because it is simply their job. There is no thought of the deceased person's past, present or future; they are simply going about their working day casually. In contrast, at a Jewish funeral home, the mindset is quite the opposite. All members of the Chevra are volunteers; they choose to serve without pay, showing how important the *tahara* process is to them. No one is forcing them to do it, they simply feel the need to act, and they feel responsible to make sure every Jew is buried properly. Because of this, they treat the body with the utmost respect and importance. The Chevra handles the body gently and with care. Although they may not know the deceased personally, there is a connection that every Jew has with one another, that we are one nation and one people. The entire *tahara* process is done in the most respectful manner possible, and this is what I believe to be the most influential lesson that I learned from this class.

CHALLENGES OF THE CHEVRA KADISHA DURING THE HOLOCAUST

by Raquel Zimmerman

ransitioning from learning about the Chevra Kadisha to marching on the railroad tracks of Auschwitz-Berkenau, I finally realized the importance of this *halacha*. We learned in one of our classes that despite their many hardships, the Jews in the ghettos desperately attempted to fulfill the *mitzvah* of Chevra Kadisha. They tried their absolute hardest to make sure that their fellow Jews were buried in the correct way, and that the *halachot* of Judaism were kept alive, even in such a dark place.

Amazingly, the first day we arrived in Poland we were taken to the Lodz ghetto where I stood in the actual *tahara* room that the Jews used in the ghetto. I was in complete shock. Everything we were taught in our class came to life! It made me realize how pious



and incredible the Jews were. It is so crazy to think that even under such brutal conditions, the Jews were thinking about *tahara*—especially because there were so many deaths—you would think that at a certain point death would become irrelevant, that no one would care about the dead bodies. However, miraculously, that did not happen. The Jewish bodies were tenderly given a *tahara* in the midst of the severe hunger, thirst, dirt and lashings. Despite everything, they still believed in G-d and in the sanctity and purity of the human body. It is so heartwarming to know that the *tahara* returned to the Jews the dignity that the Nazis attempted to take from them. They died with respect and in the proper manner.

The Nazis tried so hard to strip the Jews of their religion, but the Chevra Kadisha proved that they were unsuccessful. The Nazis may have won in numbers, but we persevered and we are still here. We are here, and we continue to do *taharot* on our deceased. No one, not even the Nazis can destroy us, and the Chevra Kadisha is a constant reminder of this. This experience of learning about and then actually seeing a *tahara* room from the Holocaust has given me so much pride in my Judaism. It also makes me so appreciative of the Chevra Kadisha, and the risks they took to keep Judaism alive throughout that terrible time. As I am privileged and lucky enough to have been born in a different era than those in the late 1930s and early 1940s, I feel it is my responsibility to teach others the laws of *tahara*. I feel I should explain to my family members, who may not know the rules or the *halacha*, how important it is to have a *tahara*.

Learning about the intense and inspiring work of the Chevra Kadisha, then standing in an actual *tahara* room from the Lodz ghetto, my appreciation for this *halacha* has been indescribably enhanced.

APPENDIX

THE FINAL JOURNEY: HOW JUDAISM DIGNIFIES THE PASSAGE

COURSE ASSIGNMENT I

Foreword to Dignity Beyond Death by Rabbi Irving Greenberg

Read the Foreword, taking note that Rabbi Greenberg uses the term "death" 40 times and 31 times speaks of "love/loving".

Explore the following in your essay of about 500 words

- n In what way does he join these two terms?
- Why are the members of a *tahara* team required to provide loving kindness to the deceased, who is perhaps someone whom they have never met?
- Would we be required to offer the same love to this person before he died? How would it be different?
- Since every person is created in the image of God, what is our obligation to those who exhibit cruel, selfish or even criminal behavior?
- Rabbi Akiva tells us that the *mitzvah* of loving your neighbor as yourself is the most important principle in the Torah. Does this also apply to our non-Jewish neighbors? What has been your experience?
- Mhat can we learn about love and compassion from our burial practices?

FOREWORD

by Rabbi Irving Greenberg

I WEPT AS I READ THIS BOOK, crying repeatedly all the way through. It is not that this book is so sad or heartbreaking. In fact, this book is simple, gentle, moving, frequently inspiring and never morbid. However, my wife and I are the parents of a child (he was a young man of 36 at the time) who was cut off before his time. II was struck by a van which ran a yellow light while he was riding a bike in the land of Israel on the way to his sister's house. We were held back from him by distance and by Shabbat and Yom Kippur which followed immediately after the day of the accident; by the time we arrived for his burial, the tahara had been done. We never saw his beautiful face again, after the last time, almost twenty-four hours before he left on his trip. I wept as I read partly because of the unresolved grief at such a devastating, irreplaceable loss. Equally, however, I was touched and stirred, imagining the loving kindness, the austere dignity, the human care, the respect for privacy, the grace-filled help for the helpless which marked the ancient ritual of tahara (purification) which was done for him as it has been done for Jews for thousands of years. As I read, I felt a deep gratitude to Rochel Berman for undertaking to bring this good deed, this responsibility, to the attention of the people of Israel, so that more and more people will be the beneficiaries of this final act of love.

THE JEWISH PREPARATION FOR BURIAL

Loving kindness (chesed) is a central characteristic of the Jewish tradition. First and foremost, this mitzvah is owed and given to the living. The inherent dignity of every human being is grounded in the fact that he/she is created in the image of God. As the Talmud instructs us (Sanhedrin 37A): The image of God is born with three fundamental dignities: 1) infinite value – this is why if you save one life, it is equivalent to saving a whole world; 2) equality – every human is a legitimate image of the divine but no one type is a preferred representation. The claim that there is a superior image of God is a form of idolatry. The denial of the equal dignity of another human being constitutes the denial of their being an image of God.

The final fundamental dignity is: 3) uniqueness — each human is one of a kind; there will never be another person just like this one. The denial of another's uniqueness — by stereotyping and anonymous degradation — constitutes disrespect and denial of the Other as a precious image of God. In the Holocaust, the Nazis did not only seek to kill every Jew. They first denied their humanity and their uniqueness. Hence they shaved off the hair of Jews coming into the concentration camp and tattooed them with a number. The prisoners were denied their name as preparation for being turned into the "faceless presences" of mussulmen, the living dead, whom Primo Levi described as "an anonymous mass…always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them..."

Loving kindness is more than a commandment even as the fundamental human dignities are more than categories imposed by divine decree or societal law. The infinite value, equality and uniqueness of the Other – when truly experienced – evoke astonishment, even awe, and finally, love. How can one not fall in love with a creature so remarkable, so varied and vital, so distinctive that each true experience is a one of a kind event that stirs love and delight in the Other? In turn, the love confirms – and intensifies – the value, the equal dignity, the uniqueness of the Other – both in the individual's self-awareness and in the response of the one who loves the Other. Meeting these images of God which I love, in sharing a life together, I feel obliged to help when they are needy (= gemilut chasadim – acts of loving kindness), to overcome their

DIGNITY BEYOND DEATH

poverty or deprivation (= tzedakah - obligated sustenance), to be happy in their joy and to be sad when they are downcast. Thus these mitzvot are not external commandments; they are duties of the heart which, willingly and from within, turns to shower the Other with chesed and concern.

In its truest form, love wants to always be with the Other; the lover is filled with joy and well being when helping and sharing with the Other. Love makes one want to be with the beloved forever, in life, in vital shared experience, in joint mission. But here love meets the cruelest foe, death. Death is the enemy of life. It robs the loved one of his/her value, equality and uniqueness. Death snatches the irreplaceable one, the one I have become so attached to, the one so inextricably bound up in the web of my existence — and rips that one out of the fabric of my life. The wound is raw and hard to heal. Oh, for just one more time to hear the gentle voice, one more embrace and kiss, one more smile, one more shared kindness, laughter, joy, one more task done together to fulfillment. But it is not possible. The cutoff is final. The yearned-for moment is denied.

Since death is the inescapable fate of all humans, does this make a mockery out of life altogether? Does this destiny make love a temporary illusion all too soon to be taken away? Does mortality turn the deep bond of attachment into a permanent generator of aching loss, into a torment, a source of tears that will only end with one's own death? And what about the body that is left behind when life ends? Since it is robbed of its value, should one get rid of this now useless object? Should one flee from the dead body which incarnates the loss; the end of all hopes, plans, emotions, dignities?

The Jewish answer is: "love is stronger than death" (Song of Songs, 8:6). When death strikes, one discovers that love *does not* end with the termination of life. Out of this deep affection, the body, remaining, is to be treated with loving respect. Even though it is only the shadow of the vibrant image of God of the living, after all, it is still the residue of that infinitely precious image. Death cuts through much of the fanfare and froth of living and reveals clearly what is truly respectful; mortality illuminates what is the eternal dignity as against the evanescent importance of celebrity and accomplishment. Here

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come the laws of *kavod ha-met* (honoring the dead), which Rochel Berman has so beautifully, modestly and quietly laid out for us, guiding us through the final expressions of love and human connection.

When people die, they become helpless. They cannot take care of themselves – so those who love them must see to their needs. A person who has lived a truly human life will have loved and loving ones to look after him/her. But Jewish law spreads the mantle of Divine love over everyone and decrees that the community is responsible for the last kind acts of caring so that no one will be denied equal, respectful treatment. Whether the neglect were due to lack of funds, or being caught in a catastrophic situation, or having no family ties, or the family being preoccupied and cut off from helping by the currents of life is irrelevant; the community should step in and provide the final care. After all, were people not equal in life? Therefore, they must be treated with equal dignity in death.

Burial practices serve as a remarkable testament of the bond of humanity. From the moment of death, no human body is to be left alone. Death appears to be the ultimate state of being cut off and isolated. But love responds by stepping forward, in solidarity, to be with the deceased. This treatment is irrefutable testimony that this departed one was and is bound up in the bonds of life and love. Psalms and prayers of blessing are offered by the *shomer* (the guardian/watcher) who accompanies the corpse.

Next comes the role of the *chevra kadisha* (the holy band) of volunteers, so touchingly and humanly depicted by Rochel Berman. The *chevra* carries out the final rites of *chesed* (covenantal love) and not for pay. They stand in for God (who did this service for Moses when there was no one around), for family, for community, for humanity as they lovingly provide the final accompaniment, the preparation for the final journey. Rochel tells us the volunteers' entry points, their maturation, their feelings, their life enobling experiences. She tells all this with restraint, understatement and respect.

Next comes the final purification (tahara) ceremony so eloquently described in this volume. This mitzvah is not done for money; rather the volunteers pay with the infinitely valuable coin of their own irreplaceable life

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and time in order to give the dead person the kind and reverent attention that no commercial enterprise can match. In the *tahara* room, rich and poor, famous and unknown, the mighty and the powerless, the wizened old one and the heartbreakingly young child are treated with equal painstaking care and dignity – for they are equals. Here, the traces of the final blow, the final illness, the final enervations, are washed away (as much as they can be, for vainglorious cosmetics are not to be used). The body is dried and brushed and anointed. Here, the clothes of ostentation and display are removed as are the bloodied rags of wounds and illness, of accidents and murder, as are the fashionable clothes. They all are replaced by the simple white *tachrichim* (burial clothes) through which all the dead, treated equally, are garbed in equality. Eventually, the dead person will be placed in a plain pine box coffin – in acknowledgement that neither conspicuous consumption nor earthly treasures spent can add one scintilla of dignity (that is based on externals) to this precious, unique person who lay before us.

But first comes the climax of the *tahara*: the pouring of the water of purification. In Jewish tradition, purity and impurity are the binary code of life. Life is purity; death is impurity. God is pure life and God is the purifier. Indeed the home of God (the Holy Temple) is so totally the realm of life/purity that it can never be entered into by dead humans. The Temple cannot even be entered by humans who have come in contact with the dead—unless they first undergo purification, e.g., a rebirth ritual that shakes off the dead hand of lifelessness, of inability to create, of absence of feeling. (With the destruction of the Holy Temple, this law is inoperative—except that a Cohen [priest] is still bound to avoid active contact with the dead.) Manifestly, the deceased has fallen into the clutch of death and is thus 'impure'. Still, in a final statement of life affirmation, a torrent of water (minimally 9 *kavim* = approximately 24 quarts) is poured on the corpse and the body is declared (3 times) to be ritually pure.

Perhaps this pouring is symbolic language that the person is not locked in the embrace of death but is entering a new dimension of existence – eternal life with God. Perhaps the act is a signal of the unquenchable Jewish hope for

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resurrection – the renewal of the embodied human being. Classic Judaism is committed to the perfection of the world in a Messianic age when "death will be swallowed up in eternity" and "God will wipe off the tears [of loss] from every face" (Isaiah 25:8). This final triumph of life over death is prophesied for the Messianic age (Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:2). Perhaps this ritual is a witness that death is not to be 'blamed' on the deceased or treated as if it were a devaluation of the person. In proclaiming that the individual is pure, the *chevra* is asserting that, in sum, the life of this deceased person has increased life in the world. The *chevra* testifies that the dead one's existence magnified the presence of vitality, creation, being on earth, outweighing the consumption, the failures, the stillborn efforts which mark every person's life. All of this is truthfully, precisely, tellingly presented in this precious book which lies before you.

Acts of loving kindness are the highest acts of humanity; the quality of *chesed* (committed love) is the distinguishing mark of nobility for Abraham's seed, the children of Israel. But of all the forms of kindness, the noblest are acts of *chesed shel emet* (pure or 'true' loving kindness). These are the caring acts done for the dead. Every other form of kindness is in some way shadowed by the possibility of being recompensed by the object of our compassion. How often do we do a good act hoping that it will be noticed – and possibly rewarded – by the people we serve? Such considerations are legitimate and ubiquitous. But caring for the dead is an act of pure love. The recipient is powerless and can never pay back. By acting, nevertheless, we are motivated by empathy and shared humanness, driven by a love that is satisfied to express itself, expecting neither reciprocity nor return.

Acts of *chesed shel emet* are so worthy that Ruth became a Biblical heroine for showing devotion to her departed husband who was childless. So that his name would not disappear into oblivion, she left home and family to become a Jew, taking on poverty and marginalization in the process. She persisted until a redeemer was found to marry her so they could jointly create a child to carry on the dead man's name. As a result, Ruth, born of a people whose descendants were to be permanently excluded from coming into the people

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Israel, became the mother of royalty, King David, which is to say, the ancestor of the Messiah. The moral is that ultimately the Messianic triumph of life over death can only be generated by people who ignore selfish calculation and desire for reward. They simply, elementally, uphold the dignity of the dead and the furtherance of the chain of love and caring for the dead and the living alike.

Consider then what Rochel Berman has done as represented in this book. She started this work galvanized by the death of her father whom she deeply loved. She realized that she had no idea what was done with his body before burial and responded with a search to uncover the process of tahara which in a dim way she misunderstood and feared. Discovering the kindness and loving care in this preparation, she set out to bring this mitzvah to the attention of others. She conducted surveys and interviewed participants for countless hours; she learned the details and regulations; she participated in many hundred tahara rituals herself. Then keeping faith with countless people who could never pay her back, she lectured widely and wrote this luminous book. This manuscript is the outcome of endless hours of pursuit of chesed. This text is a distillation of pure chesed shel emet; it is an extended act of loving kindness beyond reward. Open your eyes to read this incarnation of love beyond death. Gaze on it and see the light streaming from it. Hold it and understand that in your hand is the fulfillment of the Biblical verse, "The soul of a human being is the lamp of God" (Proverbs 20:27).

Let us pray that many will read this book and be inspired to practice pure loving kindness. The ultimate outcome will be acts of love, performed by many ennobled people, in final respect and honor of countless human beings who lived and died in the image of God.

COURSE ASSIGNMENT II

Profile of a Member of the Chevra Kadisha

With the help of the head of the Chevra Kadisha in your community, identify individuals who would be willing to share with a student their Chevra experiences. The students should

- n be given the necessary contact information and set up interviews at mutually convenient times
- n prepare a profile of the Chevra member with whom they spoke
- n send a short note of thanks to Chevra member

The following are a list of suggested questions:

How long have you been involved in the Chevra Kadisha?

What made you interested?

Do any other members of your family serve on the Chevra? To the best of your knowledge, is there any history of involvement in the Chevra in previous generations?

Do you remember your first tahara? Tell me about it.

What was your first response to contact with the deceased?

In what ways was it what you expected? How was it different?

What do you find rewarding?

What do you find difficult?

Have you ever done a tahara on a person you knew?

Is it different than doing it on a stranger?

Does knowing what happens during a tahara change how you feel about death? Can you tell me how?

How do you feel when you have completed a tahara?

How does being a member of the Chevra relate to your Judaism?

What is the response of your family—your spouse, your children, to your involvement in the Chevra?

COURSE ASSIGNMENT III

Think about one aspect of the c	course that you found
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n	into	rmative

- n elevating
- n disturbing
- n transformative

You may draw upon

- n the lecture material
- n something you read
- n a personal experience with death rituals

In your own words:

- n briefly describe what you selected
- n depict how it affects your life now
- ${\tt n}{\tt }$ reflect on how it might impact your life in the future

This essay should be about 500 words and should be submitted to						
by						

SESSION EVALUATION

Name of Session

PLEASE CHECK YOUR RESPONSE
The session provided me with a great deal to think about:
q agree strongly q agree q disagree strongly
The material presented was interesting and well organized:
q agree strongly q agree q disagree strongly
The time allotted to the subject was:
q too short q too long q just right
I am looking forward to the next session:
q a great deal q somewhat q not at all
Comments (if any):

Thank you.

COURSE EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Prior to taking this course, I thought the topic was (please check your response):
q important q inappropriate for teenagers q a little scary
Rate the course overall (please check your response):
q excellent q very good q good q fair q unsatisfactory
What are the strengths of the course?
How could the course be improved?
What did you learn? How did this course change you?
Which session did you find most interesting?
At some point in your life might you want to become a member of the Chevra Kadisha in your community? (please check your response)
q yes q no q maybe
Thank you

SAMPLE TAHARA PROCEDURE MANUAL

In the Jewish Way in Death and Mourning, Rabbi Maurice Lamm makes the following observation:

The rules and regulations that govern the activities of the Chevra Kadisha are widely scattered in the literature of Jewish law. Customs have been transmitted by word of mouth from generation to generation and they frequently vary in details from country to country and community to community. No single outline of procedures can possibly reconcile all the differences, most of which have some valid basis in Jewish law and tradition.¹

The manual presented here follows the Ashkenazic customs. It is an adaptation of the one used by the Congregation Rosh Pinah Chevra Kadisha, which serves Westchester County, N.Y. For Sephardic customs, see Rabbi Dr. Herbert C. Dobrinsky's A Treasury of Sephardic Laws and Customs.

Guidelines

All Jews are eligible for a *tahara*. The Chevra may perform a *tahara* on an individual that will be embalmed and placed in a mausoleum. They may also

¹ Rabbi Maurice Lamm, The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning, p. 240.

² Rabbi Dr. Herbert C. Dobrinsky, *A Treasury of Sephardic Laws And Customs*, Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1986, pp. 399–403.