



Not just for the Orthodox anymore
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Volunteers joining burial societies

By Chanan Tigay
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NEW YORK — The call came in the late afternoon: A Jew has been killed in a car crash. The body is lying in a nearby funeral home, waiting to be prepped for burial. Can you get over here tonight?

Jackie Stromer remembers his first glimpse of the victim.

“He looked totally serene,” said Stromer, who works with a New Jersey Jewish burial society. “Like he was taking a nap.”

What Stromer could not see was the massive trauma the impact had inflicted beneath the surface.

“We were told in no uncertain terms that if we removed his jeans, we’d take off a leg,” Stromer said.

That raised a question: According to Jewish custom, a person should be buried wearing and bearing nothing with which he or she did not enter the world.

Aside from traditional, pocketless burial garments known as tachrichim, the deceased, as the saying goes, “can’t take it with them” — jeans included.

But Stromer said the decision was simple: The man was buried in his dungarees, with traditional burial pants laid over them.

“If by the removal of their clothing you’re going to, in fact, dismember the body, you don’t do it,” he said.

That was in keeping with what’s known as kavod ha’met, or respect for the dead, which those involved in chevra kadisha burial societies say is their primary concern.

“The considerations are generally as follows,” Stromer said. “You want to gather up any blood that came out at the time of death” and bury it along with the body. “You want to bury as intact a body as you

possibly can, and you want to follow all the prescribed rituals as closely as you possibly can. That's the hierarchy in which you operate."

Whether they're Orthodox, Reform, Conservative or Reconstructionist, Jews across the board are forming a growing number of chevra kadisha groups throughout the United States and Canada.

According to several participants at a recent chevra kadisha conference organized by Kavod v'Nichum — a group whose name is Hebrew for Respect and Comfort — Judaism's divergent streams, at odds on myriad issues of theology, ideology and practice, are finding common ground when it comes to caring for corpses between death and burial.

Indeed, participants say, the primary differences in ritual burial preparation — known as tahara — lie not between Orthodox and non-Orthodox chevras, but between groups from disparate geographic and ethnic backgrounds.

"I think it's one of the few areas of Judaism where Jews are pretty much united in practice," said Ira Feigenbaum, who is part of a chevra kadisha group in Hartford, Conn.

Hundreds of volunteer burial societies exist throughout North America, from small towns to big cities. Some are multid denominational, both because basic practice varies little between the denominations and, in the case of smaller locales, because there simply are too few Jews to be picky.

Participation in a tahara is considered to be among the highest forms of mitzvah, because recipients of the service can't thank those carrying it out.

"That's why it's chesed shel emet, the truest act of kindness," said Rabbi Joseph Ozarowski, the incoming rabbinic chaplain of the Jewish Healing Network of Chicago and author of "To Walk in God's Ways: Jewish Pastoral Perspectives on Illness and Bereavement."

Taking part in a tahara is "intensely spiritual," said David Zinner, executive director of Kavod v'Nichum, which provides assistance, training and resources about Jewish death and bereavement practices throughout the United States and Canada.

"It connects people with a life-and-death process in a very intimate way and really helps them get in touch with God and with their own spirituality and mortality," he said. "It's the ultimate reality check."

In addition to spiritual concerns, tahara practitioners must deal on a frequent basis with the most practical — sometimes gruesome — elements of working with the dead. That was highlighted by a sampling of questions asked during a seminar on "Advanced Tahara" at the conference:

- If a bandage seems likely to rip the skin if it is removed, can it be left on the body?
- If a person has been killed in an auto accident and broken bones are protruding from the skin, can the burial garments be altered to fit around misshapen limbs?
- If a Foley catheter, held in place with a water-filled balloon in the bladder, remains fitted in a dead

body, but proves tough to remove because it is still inflated, can it be left in for burial?

- If it seems likely that removal of a feeding tube or a tube in the neck will lead to bleeding, can it be left in?

“As far as I’m concerned, there is only one halacha when it comes to chevra kadishas, only one guiding principle: kavod ha’met,” or respect for the dead, Stromer said. “Having treated that as your guiding source, everything else is common sense.”

Each of these scenarios, in other words, ought to be dealt with on an ad-hoc basis, with respect for the deceased primary in the decision-making process.

For many years, chevra kadisha groups and taharas primarily were the domain of the Orthodox. But that has begun to change over the past 30 years — since the publication of Arnold Goodman’s “A Plain Pine Box” — as burial societies from across the religious spectrum have emerged.

In the past five to 10 years, insiders say, the number of non-Orthodox chevras has greatly expanded.

Some 170 people attended the Kavod v’Nichum conference, hailing from 25 U.S. states and three Canadian provinces. About 10 percent to 15 percent were Orthodox, 20 percent Reform or Reconstructionist, and about 50 percent Conservative, organizers said.

The rest were funeral directors, Jewish Family and Children’s Service workers, hospice representatives and the like.

While the figures don’t reflect the overall make up of North American chevras, which remain overwhelmingly Orthodox, insiders say they do reflect the growth of non-Orthodox chevras.

“The American funeral industry has not responded consistently well to the ritual needs of American Jews in many ways,” said Rabbi Linda Holtzman, director of the department of practical rabbinics at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College near Philadelphia and leader of the local Reconstructionist chevra.

“What we have done as a Jewish community is take a ritual that we as a community used to be in control of and hand it over to outside professionals,” she said. “Doing taharas seems to be a way of reclaiming the community’s responsibility and role in taking care of someone, not just throughout his or her life but after death as well.”

For further information on chevra kadishas, visit www.jewish-funerals.org.

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