Kibbud Ha'met:

CONSERVATIVE JEWS AND THE HEVRA KADISHA

The *Hevra Kadisha* is among the least well known and understood traditional Jewish institutions. Indeed, congregational Hebrew schools and day schools do little more than mention these "holy societies." Nor do casual conversations among synagogue members generally include a discussion about washing dead people. Still, for those synagogue members that participate in the work of these groups, the practice is a source of spiritual uplift and personal satisfaction.

by Judith Kuper Jaffe

Hevra Kadisha societies—those groups of Jews charged with carrying out the *mitzvot* surrounding *kibbud ha'met*, honor for the deceased—must oversee or perform tasks ranging from washing the dead body (*taharah*) to providing for the needs of bereaved families. Typically, members are trained by veteran *Hevra Kadisha* members, and all participants are required to display proper respect for the process—absolutely no displays of lightheartedness are tolerated during its work.

The physical washing is accompanied by prayer and by the act of asking the deceased for forgiveness. Historically and traditionally, membership in a *Hevra Kadisha* has been bestowed upon the most respected and pious individuals in the community. Under no circumstances may non-Jews perform these preparations. *Taharah* is not considered a hygienic act but rather a religious requirement.

Jewish law dictates that the dead be buried in clean, white linen, cotton, or muslin shrouds, hand-sewn specifically for this purpose. This custom suggests that there is equality in death, despite the material wealth that a person may command in life. Nineteen hundred years ago, Rabbi Gamliel established the law that all Jews be buried in the same clothes, *takhrikhin*, so that the poor would not be shamed in death and the rich would not attempt to outdo one another. Likewise, all the laws of burial offer dignity and respect for the deceased and for the living.

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Today, a number of *Hevra Kadisha* societies (some of them established prior to the founding of local congregations) function almost as legacies handed down, not only within communities and congregations, but within families. Indeed, several of the Jewish funeral home directors with whom I spoke were born into families of *Hevra Kadisha* members. In West Hartford, Connecticut, funeral home owner Leonard Holtz makes it his business to visit area congregations, helping them set up *Hevra Kadisha* societies. Among the congregations he has assisted in this regard is Temple Beth Sholom in Manchester.

The fact that almost every Conservative congregation in the southwest region of the United States has a society which fulfills all the traditional functions, except gravedigging, may well be attributable to the fact that the areas in question have no Jewish funeral homes. In more populous Jewish areas—for example, in Northern New Jersey—it would appear that there are no *Hevra Kadisha* societies in any of the area's Conservative congregations. Conservative Jews there who desire the services of such a group rely on *Hevra Kadisha* societies from outside their own community.

Whether or not a community is able to maintain such a group depends on several factors. First, it would appear that a well-informed and educated existing group is needed both to teach and to sensitize the community to the *mitzvah of kibbud ha'met.* It is quite understandable that volunteers do not flock to these groups. One *Hevra Kadisha* member admitted, "It's hard for people—even other Jews—to fathom why I'd do such a thing."

Nearly every active *Hevra Kadisha* has viewed the video "A Plain Pine Box," available from The United Synagogue Book Service. A documentary program filmed on location at Adath Jeshurun Congregation in Minnetonka, Minneapolis, and telecast as part of an ABC-TV series, it records the complex emotions of Rabbi Arnold Goodman (now spiritual leader of Ahavat Achim in Atlanta, Georgia) and members of the congregation's burial society as they undertake the rituals surrounding death and burial.

Adath Jeshrun's Chevra Kavod Hamet (The Respect for the Dead Society) recently commemorated its 20th anniversary by setting out to enhance the community's knowledge and practice of traditional funeral practices. Creating a new brochure, they also held a special panel discussion reintroducing the congregation to the history of the society in an effort to set the stage for the future. Over 90 people attended, and 50 new volunteers were recruited to their ranks.

At Congregation B'nai Emunah in Tulsa, Oklahoma, there are 15 - 20 members in the synagogue's *Hevra Kadisha* society. Members are recruited through the synagogue bulletin and through efforts by the rabbi to promote the concept. Rabbi Marc Boone Fitzeman is himself a member of the society, as are two retired rabbis in the community. Additional members do not join with any regularity—an ongoing problem for the group.

Longtime Knoxville, Tennessee, resident Mary Brown is a member of Congregation Heska Emunah. She has been a *Hevra Kadisha* member for over 30 years. "There are 10 women in our strictly volunteer group since there are no Jewish mortuaries in the area," says Brown. In all the congregations spoken with, separation of the sexes is strictly maintained. Although the rituals are identical, women prepare only female bodies while men do the same for other males.

In some communities, the *Hevra Kadisha* is a unifying factor. In the small Jewish community in Calgary, Canada, there are four synagogues: Orthodox, Chabad, Conservative and Reform. The entire Jewish community works together in fulfilling the functions of the *Hevra Kadisha.* Rabbi Geoffrey Haber, former rabbi of Beth Tzedec Conservative congregation in Calgary (now spiritual leader of Temple Emanuel in Englewood, New Jersey), speaks proudly of the community's success in cooperating to define and implement the ritual format, despite the diverse membership. The society boasts 80-100 volunteers, with some individuals filling specific roles. Some may do only *taharah* (washing), while others are engaged only in sewing *takhrikhin.*

Rabbi Haber explains that rabbis may play a role in "enforcing" proper burial procedures by refusing to officiate at funerals where the proper *taharah* has not taken place. He suggests, however, that these efforts are likely to be more effective in smaller areas, where clergy maintain greater control, than in larger centers, where commercial funeral homes and cemeteries hold sway.

Sylvia Luskey, president of the 105-year-old Conservative Synagogue in Fort Worth, Texas, says she first became intrigued with the idea of a *Hevra Kadisha* about 18 years ago, while attending a Sisterhood luncheon in Dallas. Luskey asked the young man sitting next to her why he had become a member of a *Hevra Kadisha.* He responded, "It's the very last thing you can do for a friend... and it's the only thing someone can't thank you for."

Luskey was deeply moved by this comment and joined the Dallas group. When she moved to Fort Worth, she joined the society there. Approximately twelve women and ten men belong to the *Hevra Kadisha* groups in Fort Worth. Luskey notes that she likes to be called often, stating, "I like to know it's done correctly." She volunteered to perform *taharah* for her mother-in-law and for several of her husband's aunts.

"It used to be a job for the older women," Luskey explains, but notes that more young women in the community are now offering their time. Every year at the synagogue dinner, members of the *Hevra Kadisha* are recognized and honored.

Related to the issue of *Hevra Kadisha* is that of securing *shomrim,* or individuals responsible for watching the body from the time of death until interment. Today, congregations are finding it increasingly difficult to find such volunteers. According to one *Hevra Kadisha* member, serving as a *shomer* used to be a paid position, allowing senior citizens or students to "pick up a few dollars." Now, with the increasing affluence of the Jewish community, fewer people are interested in earning money by performing this *mitzvah.*

As Jews, we believe that human beings are created in God's image. Each person is endowed with a special holiness and dignity that does not dissipate with death. Death may destroy the physical body, but Judaism teaches that we must continue to respect the soul that is housed within this body. As a result, great care must be taken to prepare a dead body properly. In serving as a member of a *Hevra Kadisha* society, one has an opportunity to perform one of the most important *mitzvot* commanded by our religion. Additionally, it is clear that those who fulfill this vital function derive tremendous personal and spiritual satisfaction from doing so. K

The author, a resident of River Edge, New Jersey, and member of the JCC of Paramus, writes frequently on topics of Jewish interest.