

FOR CLASS #3

History of Chevrot Kadisha (not comprehensive)

The historical development and practices of chevrot kadisha begins with biblical sources and continues through the Talmud and into the later Medieval period, most specifically the 1600s. The biblical sources (2000-500 BCE) lay the groundwork and identify the basic elements. While the Talmudic interpretations (200-500 CE) build the communal framework, the collection of laws and customs varied among different communities.

Biblical:

- The notion of a burial began when Avraham purchased land in Machpela and buried Sarah in a cave. (Gen. 23)
- In Genesis 50:13, Jacob's sons carry Jacob's bones to be buried in the land of Canaan.
- The mandate to bury on the same day as a death was mandated in Deuteronomy 21:23.
- The Book of Job speaks of the critical role of communal support for mourners.
- G-d comforted Jacob after the death of his father in Genesis 25:11

Talmudic:

- Baba Batra 7b and 8a talks about how much time one must live in a town in order to be responsible for certain tasks that are undertaken by what is now called a chevra kadisha.
- Tractate Mourning, Smachot xii:5, documents practices of chevrot kadisha in terms of an individuals' delineated tasks with the family of the deceased, the mourners, and the met/metah.
- Asher ben Jehiel stated that once a person dies, the mourners should be automatically comforted.

Middle Ages:

- The objective of a burial society in the Middle Ages was delineated in the responsa of R. Asher b. Jehiel (Responsa, Rule 13, #12).
- The first formal burial society in the Middle Ages was organized in Prague by R. Eliezer Ashkenazi, in 1564. In 1573, R. Moses Moln instituted official rules, regulations, and amendments.
- In the Rishonim period, 1040-1350 CE, there were four major developments:
 - 1) The establishment of communal Jewish cemeteries outside of Israel,
 - 2) The first responsa mentioning the chevra kadisha,
 - 3) Additional written commentary on death, burial, and mourning portions of Talmud,
 - 4) Second wave of compilations of customs and laws relating to illness, death, and mourning.
- The Ramban wrote *Torat Ha-Adam*, the first post-Talmudic collection of customs and laws. It specifically focused on the continuum of illness, death, and mourning. The pattern of sickness, death, burial, and mourning was used as a template for future works on the subject.
- Even with the expanding body of writing, there was no written record of a chevra kadisha until 1300s.

- By the late 1300s, the evolution of full-fledged chevrot kadisha began in earnest. This happened in concurrence with the killing, expulsion, and emigration of Spanish Jews.

During the 1600s-1800s, there were numerous books written about the proper conduct and role of a chevra kadisha. They had broad influence on all subsequent time periods.

Modern Times in the U.S.:

- In the pre-1960s America, the evolution of the chevra kadisha occurred with little support of the religious establishment.
- In terms of the transition from Europe to the U.S., it is possible to say that the tradition was not dropped, but that it was transformed. Chevrot kadisha had to contend with the transition from simplicity to ostentation in the funeral home; having to deal with funeral directors and their profit-driven mind frame; Embalming, which began in the early 20th century, and much more.
- As the number of congregations grew, there arose a need for Jewish burial facilities to serve multi-denominational situations.
- The oldest chevra kadisha in the U.S. is called "Loving Kindness and Truth" and located in New York City. This burial society was established in 1802.