

Creating a Regional Chevra Kadisha Consortium

A Project Designed by Dan Fendel
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I. THE BIG IDEA

Often a region has several Chevra Kadisha groups, each primarily serving its own congregational community, each working independently, with little knowledge of what the others are doing. In such a situation, the support and services provided to the region may be enriched by creating a Regional Chevra Kadisha Consortium, with each Chevra Kadisha as a participating member.

Such a Consortium can strengthen the individual groups, through mutual cooperation and understanding, and provide enhanced service to the region through joint community education projects. The Consortium can also create a greater sense of pluralism, tolerance, and mutual respect among the Consortium's members and their individual communities.

POTENTIAL CONSORTIUM ACTIVITIES

Initial specific activities that the Consortium might undertake include:

- * developing a structure through which groups could provide personnel for each other as needed for *taharah*, *shmirah*, and so on, including providing a *rosh* for a new group, providing personnel with special medical expertise if needed, or sharing *shmirah* shifts when more than one *met/ah* is at the same funeral home.
- * promoting learning, including regularly scheduled trainings, through mutual sharing among the Chevra groups, about the variety of traditions and practices being used
- * developing and conducting educational programs for Chevra members about their work.
- * developing and conducting educational programs for the region on Jewish views and practices concerning end-of-life issues, including coordinating *drashot* at area synagogues.

Additional possible long-range activities might include:

- * developing joint strategies on issues such as reducing costs of funerals and promoting in-ground burial rather than cremation.
- * planning joint annual *Zayin Adar* celebrations.
- * assisting Chevras in broadening the scope of their work to include a fuller spectrum of end-of-life support.

- * organizing an annual conference similar to the Kavod v'Nichum conference, but on a local scale.
- * assisting in establishing new Chevras based on interest from area congregations.
- * setting up inter-faith gatherings on end-of-life practices and rituals, especially with Muslims, Buddhists, Bahai, Native Americans
- * extending the project to include a broader geographical area.

II. THE A, B, C, D OF THE PROJECT

AUDIENCE

- * The primary audience for such a project would be the existing Chevra Kadisha groups in the region and their members, as well as non-profit Jewish funeral homes.
- * A secondary audience would be the broader Jewish community of the region, especially the congregations served by these Chevra groups, as well as community organizations such as Jewish Family and Children's Services and Jewish hospice.
- * If feasible in the future, the audience might be expanded, perhaps to include a larger geographic area (at least in regard to some of the Consortium's activities).

BEHAVIOR

This project looks for the following behaviors to result:

- * Mechanisms will be established to allow Chevra leaders to contact one another when volunteers are needed for *taharah*, *shmirah*, and so on.
- * Chevra groups will engage in joint mutual-education activities, so that leaders and members will gain understanding of each other's practices and policies, including an understanding of how work would proceed when members participate in another Chevra's activities.
- * Chevra groups that have not yet formulated clear policies on sensitive issues (or have not even determined methods for setting policies) will move further toward doing so.
- * The Consortium itself will conduct educational programs for the larger Jewish community.

CONDITIONS

The creation of the Consortium might develop initially through email and phone contact, leading to an initial joint meeting involving representatives of all the groups. This initial meeting would then be followed up by a series of meetings to organize activities and establish administrative processes.

In order for the Consortium to function successfully, groups will have to:

- * be familiar with, and be respectful of, each other's practices regarding the carrying out of the basic Chevra Kadisha functions (e.g., *taharah*, *shmirah*).
- * be aware of, and be respectful of, each other's policies regarding sensitive issues.

Thus, an important initial task of the group will be to establish ground rules and understandings that promote mutual respect.

DEGREE

The initial joint meeting should include participation from all of the regional groups, including at least one male and one female lay leader from each, as well as clergy connected to at least some of the groups. It needs to be recognized that the degree of involvement in the Consortium may vary among the groups, with some Chevras more interested than others in joint efforts.

III. PREPARATION

LEAD ORGANIZER TASKS

The lead organizer(s) of the initial joint meeting would do the following:

- * Develop a description with potential activities of the group.
- * Compile a list of regional Chevra Kadisha groups and their leadership.
- * Make initial contact with each group to determine its potential interest in the project, and survey the interested groups to find a date/time for the initial joint meeting.
- * Develop, in cooperation with leaders from the individual groups, an agenda for the meeting, with attention to making sure that each group has a sense of "ownership" of the project.
- * Handle logistics for the meeting (location, materials, refreshments, etc.).
- * Do an "environmental scan" to get a sense of what other regional groups have done to create a similar structure.

TASKS FOR LEADERS OF EACH CHEVRA

In anticipation of the initial joint meeting, the leaders of each Chevra would:

- * work with the lead organizer(s) to develop the agenda and plan the logistics
- * provide information to that Chevra's members about the ongoing plans
- * gather, e-mail to a central repository, and bring to the meeting:
 - copies of any manuals they use
 - copies of any by-laws or other governing or policy documents
 - basic data on their work, such as how many members (male, female) the group has and how often, and in what capacities, the group functions

IV. QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES

Additional questions and challenges that the Consortium will need to answer and/or resolve as it proceeds include the following:

- * What are the respective roles within each Chevra of the lay leadership and the clergy leadership? (This is likely to vary from group to group.)
- * What should be respective the roles of lay and clergy leadership in the Consortium itself?
- * What role, if any, should related groups such as funeral homes or cemeteries play in the Consortium?
- * How can the differences in perspective from group to group and movement to movement be best reconciled and respected?

V. EXAMPLE

The East Bay (Oakland/Berkeley/Walnut Creek/Lafayette California area) is blessed with many Chevra Kadisha groups. In preparation for establishing a consortium in the East Bay of the type described here, the following information was compiled:

a. LOCAL GROUPS AND THEIR LEADERS

The following are known Chevra groups, with lay leaders as indicated:

- * Chochmat HaLev (Berkeley): Aliza Shapiro
- * Congregation Beth Jacob (Oakland): Neska
- * Congregation B'nai Shalom (Walnut Creek): Cantor Mark Dinkin
- * Congregation Netivot Shalom (Berkeley): Mary Breiner, Leo Levinson
- * Kehilla Community Synagogue (Piedmont): Jane Hoberman
- * Temple Beth El (Berkeley): Vivian Clayton
- * Temple Sinai (Oakland): Dan Fendel, Sarah Tunik

There are other East Bay groups that may have Chevrans, but no contact information is yet available. There are also at least two synagogues in San Francisco are known to have Chevrans:

- * Adath Israel (Orthodox)
- * Sha'ar Zahav (Reform)

In addition to having many synagogue-based groups, the greater San Francisco area is served by Sinai Memorial Chapel, a non-profit Jewish funeral home that has a long history in the area and has a branch in Lafayette in the East Bay. Personnel from Sinai Memorial have expressed interest in being involved in the process of creating a consortium.

The next step planned in this information-gathering process is to obtain a list of synagogues and rabbis from the East Bay Council of Rabbis.

b. POTENTIAL MODELS FOR THE CONSORTIUM

The following are known regional groups, with primary contact people as currently known:

- * The Jewish Funeral Practices Committee of Greater Washington—David Zinner [*Notes:* This group was established as a federation about 35 years ago, and involves 48 individual synagogues. Bob Housman is another contact person.]
- * The Chicago area Chevra groups that are beginning to work together (including Progressive Chevra Kadisha)—Deborah Brown; Michael Slater; Liz Feldman [*Notes:* PCK was initially trained by David Zinner, and contains 3-4 individual groups' in turn, PCK trained at least 2 other congregational groups.
- * The Santa Fe community Chevra Kadisha group—Rick Light

These existing groups operate on different bases. For example, the Washington group has collaborated on a joint contract with funeral homes, but each synagogue Chevra takes care of *taharah* for its own members. In Santa Fe, the groups are beginning to work as a single Chevra for *taharah*, and the Chicago area group has a joint annual *Zayin Adar* event. Groups could collaborate by assigning one or more days of the week to each group, or could develop a protocol for sharing the responsibility for providing services to the unaffiliated.

No particular structure is being proposed for this project, and the structure could change over time as the groups learn about each other.