

Preparation and Lesson Plan for Teaching Shmirah to High School Students

Purpose:

This document was created to teach High School students about shmirah. Students who take the class will be able to explain what a chevra kadisha is, will be able to explain what shmirah is and what normally happens during shmirah, will be able to articulate where their community normally does shmirah, and will participate in sitting shmirah at least once in the year following the class.

The anticipated outcome is that students who take the class will participate in shmirah when a local member of the Jewish community dies and volunteers for shmirah are requested. The goal is that at least 10% of those taking the class will sit shmirah at least once within the following year.

This document is intended for use by Jewish educators in the US and Canada, with the hope that at least five Jewish educators will use the lesson plans to teach their students about shmirah, to at least a total of 50 students, over the next three years. This could happen in a variety of settings, such as Jewish day schools, synagogues, or evening/weekend classes. It is hoped that Jewish educators will include these lesson plans in their curriculum for high school students, if they don't already teach them about shmirah.

Preparation before the class:

Note: This part of the outline may not be completely linear. You may meet with the chevra kadisha first, then the school, and then you may need to go back to the chevra kadisha again based on changes requested by the school, or by another local chevra kadisha. Or, you may want to check with the school regarding whether they would be open to you teaching the class before you meet with the chevra kadisha.

- Review the lesson plan thoroughly
- Meet with the local chevra kadisha (plural, if more than one):
 - Tell them you're planning to teach about shmirah to high school students
 - Get their buy-in
 - If you can't get their buy-in to let high school students volunteer for shmirah, you can still teach about shmirah but won't be able to invite the students to participate until they meet whatever criteria the chevra kadisha requires
 - Go over logistics, and make changes to the lesson plan if necessary. In particular:
 - Very length of first shift for students
 - Verify whether they can have someone sit with them
 - Verify where the coffin will be
 - Verify availability for a chevra member to be in the building and to conduct debriefings with students
 - Agree on how the chevra will communicate to you which students actually sit shmirah (in order to track class impact)
 - Agree on how you will get feedback from the chevra about how it's going (student reactions & behavior, etc.)
 - Agree on timing
 - Discuss when you think the class will be taught

- Discuss when you think the first students be available to sit shmira
- Meet with the administrators/teachers at the institution where the Jewish high school students will be:
 - Find out who will be the decision-maker regarding whether you can teach the class, and speak with them
 - Go over the lesson plan with the administrator/teacher
 - Go over the logistics
 - What is the school's policy regarding receiving parental permission for teaching students about this subject material?
 - What insurance is required if students will be going off site to do shmira?
 - How many different groups of students will take the class
 - How many students are in each class
 - How long is the class period
 - Will the whole thing be taught in one class session? If not, how many sessions will you have?
 - Agree on timing: When will the class(es) be taught
 - Make changes to the lesson plan, as necessary

LESSON PLAN:

Note regarding the use of Hebrew in this document: Hebrew words are transliterated. The first time each Hebrew word used appears, it is followed by its English translation in quotes.

Introduction:

- Introduce self
- Introduce the topic:
 - Tell a personal story about shmirah
 - Acknowledge this is a topic that makes some people uncomfortable, and it's okay to feel that way
 - Solicit participation:
 - Who here is feeling a little uncomfortable about today's topic? (Acknowledge and respond to what makes people feel uncomfortable)
 - Who here is glad we're talking about this? (Acknowledge and respond to people who respond)
 - Define chevra kadisha: "holy group of friends"
 - Define what the chevra kadisha does:
 - Group of volunteers
 - Visiting the sick
 - Comforting mourners
 - Caring for the dead
 - Define "meit/ah": deceased person
 - Define shmirah: "watching/guarding"
- Teach about shmirah
 - Solicit participation:
 - Why do you think we do shmirah?
Some possible answers: To guard the body from rodents or other vermin, to comfort the neshamah of the person who died, to comfort the meit/ah's relatives (they know their loved one is not alone)
 - Talk about the possible origin of shmirah: guarding from rats, carrion birds, etc.
 - Text study: Niddah 31a
 - Depending on size of group and time available, either study together, or break up into pairs or small groups and then come together to discuss what was learned
- Discuss what happens to the neshamah: "soul" after death:
 - Solicit participation:
 - What do you think happens after you die?
Some possible answers: Nothing (death is the end of you), your neshamah goes to olam haba "the world to come," you will be reincarnated, you will be with God, you will see loved ones who died before you, etc.
 - Do you believe you have a neshamah that will live on after your body dies?
It is okay for people to say, "yes," or "no," or to be unsure
 - If you believe in life after death, what do you think it may be like?

Some possible answers: It will be wonderful like heaven, it will be boring, it will be lonely if I get there before all my friends, it will be nice to see my grandparents who died when I was younger, etc.

- Nobody knows for sure whether there is life after death, or what it may be like
- We have a tradition that says the neshamah is fond of the body it just left and wants to stay near it until it's sure the body is safely buried
- Even if we don't believe in the neshamah or life after death, members of the chevra kadisha act "as if" the neshamah is present when we are in the presence of a meit/ah
- Discuss what happens in the room during shmirah:
 - Describe the room where shmirah typically takes place
 - Explain whether the coffin be in the room? (If not, describe where the meti/ah will be in relation to the shmirah location)
 - Describe what the room looks like
 - We always treat the meit/ah with kavod/respect.
 - We refer to the meit/ah by name, or as "he" or "she" (or whatever pronoun the person preferred in life), but we do not use the word "it"
 - We don't eat or study Torah
 - We read psalms or other appropriate material
 - Discuss what is considered appropriate reading material in your community
 - Some people read out loud
 - You can do it by yourself, or you can have someone else (a family member, an experienced chevra kadisha member, a friend) do it with you
 - Solicit participation:
 - What do you think it will be like to sit shmirah?
Some possible answers: It will be creepy, it will be scary, it will feel holy, it will feel sad, it will be relaxing, it might be boring
 - What fears or concerns do you have about sitting shmirah? (Acknowledge and respond to all fears and concerns raised)
Some possible responses: Will the body smell bad? What if I hear strange noises? Will there be a restroom there? I don't know enough Hebrew to read the Psalms
 - What appeals to you about the opportunity to sit shmirah?
Some possible responses: It will be nice to be able to sit quietly for a while, it feels good to do a mitzvah, it will help me feel less scared about death
- Discuss logistics specific to students in this class:
 - Regardless of the "typical" shmirah shift, the first shift for students in this class will be one hour, to allow them to try it out
 - For their first shift, they may sit alone or with someone
 - Regardless of whether they choose to sit alone, a chevra kadisha member will be present in the building, and will meet with them briefly before and after their first shift to answer questions and to debrief them on the experience
- Discuss typical logistics:
 - How the need for shmirah is communicated to volunteers
 - How you respond to the call for shmirah volunteers (email, online sign-up, etc.)

- Describe how to get to the typical location(s) for shmirah
 - Distribute map(s), as appropriate
- Describe the typical shmirah room(s)
- Tell them how long a typical shmirah shift is
- Questions:
 - Ask, “What questions do you have?” rather than “Do you have any questions?” If the room is silent, pause longer than you are comfortable, to give plenty of time for those who are reluctant to ask to do so
 - Respond to all questions
 - Give the students a writing assignment, in which they can discuss what they learned in the class, and how they feel about it
- Invitation:
 - Invite the students to try it out
 - Pass out a sign-up sheet for students who are willing to try shmirah to do so

Follow up (to be done after the class is over):

- Follow up with students and/or teacher to obtain feedback regarding the class
- Get the sign-up sheet to the appropriate person in the chevra kadisha, to make sure those who are interested in participating know when future shmirah opportunities arise
- Follow up with the chevra kadisha to determine which students participate in shmirah, keep statistics on the number of students who were taught and the percentage who subsequently sit shmirah
- Approach the school administrator/teacher about follow-up sessions with the students, such as:
 - Class discussion after at least some of the students have done shmirah:
 - How did you feel about it before you did it?
 - What happened when you did it?
 - What was it like?
 - How did you feel about it afterward?
 - For those who haven’t done it yet, why haven’t you?
 - For those who didn’t want to do it, has anything about this discussion changed your mind?
 - Possible future classes you could teach these students:
 - Visiting the sick
 - Taharah
 - Jewish mourning rituals and practices
 - Writing an ethical will

ADDENDUM 1 – REFERENCE MATERIALS:

Ultimately, sitting shmirah is about being present with someone, as their neshamah makes the transition from this world to whatever comes next. We can't be certain what happens after death, but the main purpose of shmirah is to provide comfort, if we can, to the neshamah of the deceased person.

The reading of Psalms is intended to comfort the neshamah of the deceased. Some people who sit shmirah may choose to speak to, or sing to, the neshamah. Sometimes relatives or friends of the deceased may stop by during shmirah, and it is our job to comfort them, too.

Below are reference materials that can be used when teaching about shmirah, or to read while sitting shmirah.

Niddah 31a

Our Rabbis taught: There are three partners in man: the Holy One, blessed be He, his father and his mother. His father supplies the semen of the white substance out of which are formed the child's bones, sinews, nails, the brain in his head and the white in this eye; his mother supplies the semen of the red substance out of which is formed his skin, flesh, hair, blood and the black of his eye; and the Holy One, blessed be He, gives him the spirit and the breath, beauty of features, eyesight, the power of hearing and the ability to speak and to walk, understanding and discernment. When his time to depart from the world approaches, the Holy One, blessed be He, takes away his share, and leaves the shares of his father and his mother with them.

“To Kiss a Mezuzah” blog of Susan Esther Barnes about sitting shmirah for the first time:

<http://kissamezuzah.blogspot.com/2012/05/my-first-experience-of-shmira.html>

The following reference materials were all taken from the Gamliel Institute Website, from their class on Taharah and Shmirah:

Blog of Velveteen Rabbi about sitting shmirah:

<http://velveteenrabbi.blogspot.com/blog/2006/05/shmira.html>

Rizpah

In the Second Book of Samuel, Chapter 21, Rizpah is the shomeret for her sons from the time they were killed until they were buried.

2 Samuel Chapter 21

1 And there was a famine in the days of David three years, year after year; and David sought the face of the LORD. And the LORD said: 'It is for Saul, and for his bloody house, because he put to death the Gibeonites.'

3 and David said unto the Gibeonites: 'What shall I do for you? and wherewith shall I make atonement, that ye may bless the inheritance of the LORD?'

5 And they said unto the king: 'The man that consumed us, and that devised against us, so that we have been destroyed from remaining in any of the borders of Israel,

6 let seven men of his sons be delivered unto us, and we will hang them up [impale] unto the LORD

8 But the king took the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore unto Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth; and the five sons of Michal the daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite;

9 and he delivered them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them in the mountain before the LORD, and they fell all seven together; and they were put to death in the days of harvest, in the first days, at the beginning of barley harvest.

10 And Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth, and spread it for her upon the rock, from the beginning of harvest until water was poured upon them from heaven; and she suffered neither the birds of the air to rest on them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night.

11 And it was told David what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done.

13 and he [David] brought up from thence the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son; and they gathered the bones of them that were hanged.

14 And they buried the bones of Saul and Jonathan his son in the country of Benjamin in Zela, in the sepulchre of Kish his father; and they performed all that the king commanded. And after that God was entreated for the land.

Rizpah Poetry:

The Vigil Of Rizpah

by Felicia Dorothea Hemans (1793 – 1835)

WHO watches on the mountain with the dead,
Alone before the awfulness of night?
A seer awaiting the deep spirit's might?
A warrior guarding some dark pass of dread?
No a lone woman! On her drooping head,
Once proudly graceful, heavy beats the rain;

She recks [cares] not - living for the unburied slain,
Only to scare the vulture from their bed.
So, night by night, her vigil hath she kept
With the pale stars, and with the dews hath wept:
Oh! surely some bright Presence from above
On those wild rocks the lonely one must aid!
Even so; a strengthener through all storm and shade,
The unconquerable angel, mightiest love!

Rizpah by Henry Kendall (1839 – 1882)

Said one who led the spears of swarthy Gad,
To Jesse's mighty son: "My Lord, O King,
I, halting hard by Gibeon's bleak-blown hill
Three nightfalls past, saw dark-eyed Rizpah, clad
In dripping sackcloth, pace with naked feet
The flinty rock where lie unburied yet
The sons of her and Saul; and he whose post
Of watch is in those places desolate,
Got up, and spake unto thy servant here
Concerning her yea, even unto me:
'Behold,' he said, 'the woman seeks not rest,
Nor fire, nor food, nor roof, nor any haunt
Where sojourns man; but rather on yon rock
Abideth, like a wild thing, with the slain,
And watcheth them, lest evil wing or paw
Should light upon the comely faces dead,
To spoil them of their beauty. Three long moons
Hath Rizpah, daughter of Aiah, dwelt
With drouth and cold and rain and wind by turns,
And many birds there are that know her face,
And many beasts that flee not at her step,
And many cunning eyes do look at her
From serpent-holes and burrows of the rat.
Moreover,' spake the scout, 'her skin is brown
And sere by reason of exceeding heat;
And all her darkness of abundant hair
Is shot with gray, because of many nights
When grief hath crouched in fellowship with frost
Upon that desert rock. Yea, thus and thus
Fares Rizpah,' said the spy, O King, to me."

But David, son of Jesse, spake no word,
But turned himself, and wept against the wall.

We have our Rizpahs in these modern days
Who've lost their households through no sin of theirs,
On bloody fields and in the pits of war;
And though their dead were sheltered in the sod
By friendly hands, these have not suffered less
Than she of Judah did, nor is their love
Surpassed by hers. The Bard who, in great days
Afar off yet, shall set to epic song
The grand pathetic story of the strife
That shook America for five long years,

And struck its homes with desolation he
Shall in his lofty verse relate to men
How, through the heat and havoc of that time,
Columbia's Rachael in her Rama wept
Her children, and would not be comforted;
And sing of Woman waiting day by day
With that high patience that no man attains,
For tidings, from the bitter field, of spouse,
Or son, or brother, or some other love
Set face to face with Death. Moreover, he
Shall say how, through her sleepless hours at night,
When rain or leaves were dropping, every noise
Seemed like an omen; every coming step
Fell on her ears like a presentiment
And every hand that rested on the door
She fancied was a herald bearing grief;
While every letter brought a faintness on
That made her gasp before she opened it,
To read the story written for her eyes,
And cry, or brighten, over its contents.

Shmirah in the Talmud:

One who watches a dead [body] even if it is not his dead [relative], is exempt from reciting the Shema' and saying the tefillah and putting on tefillin and all the precepts laid down in the Torah? — [We interpret therefore]: He who watches the dead, even if it is not his dead [relative], [is exempt], and [likewise in the case of] his dead relative, even if he is not watching it, he is [exempt]...

[To turn to] the above text: One who watches a dead [body], even though it is not his own dead [relative], is exempt from the recital of the Shema' and from saying the tefillah and from putting on tefillin and from all the precepts laid down in the Torah. If there were two [watching], one goes on watching while the other recites, and then the other watches while this one recites.

Berachot 18a

It was further taught, R. Simeon b. Eleazar said: A day-old infant, alive, need not be guarded from weasels or mice, but Og, king of Bashan,¹¹ dead, needs guarding from weasels and mice, as it is said, "and the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth"¹¹

Shabbat 151 b

¹ Genesis 9:2

Shimira Guidelines:

Winnipeg Chesed Shel Emet

For a very different approach to Shmirah, see The Concept of Shmirah from the National Association for Chevros Kaddisha

Many of the traditions and laws that pertain to the care and preparation of the Jewish deceased are founded on two basic principles:

1. The body as the vessel of the soul is to be treated with the utmost dignity and respect.
2. Although at death the soul departs the body, it still remains present near the body and is fully aware of all that transpires in its vicinity.

Thus the Shmirah serves two purposes:

1. To safeguard the physical body.
2. To offer respect to the maiv and consolation to the soul by not leaving the body unattended.

The recitation of Psalms (Tehillim) is comforting and soothing to the soul at a time in which it is believed to be in distress. The best way to perform Shmira is to be with the body at all times, while reciting Tehillim.

Our guidelines and regulations for Shomrim are a minimum standard for our Chevrah. For the Shomer to go beyond the minimum standard is certainly a great Mitzvah.

OBLIGATIONS OF THE SHOMER

1. Please arrive promptly, or call if you are going to be late.
2. Shomrim must dress appropriately at all times in deference to the deceased and to any family or friends who may be present. Clothes must of course be clean. Apparel such as t shirts and sweatpants are not acceptable.
3. The Shomer is here to be with the deceased. Shomrim should not answer the phones or the door. While it is not expected that Tehillim will be recited continuously for an entire shift, at least 30 minutes of every hour should be spent reciting Tehillim.
4. Tehillim may be read in Hebrew or English, quietly or aloud. Shomrim may choose to read the Psalms in order, or may choose to read a selection of passages. A list of suggested chapters is available.
5. Tehillim must be recited in close proximity to the body. Shomrim may sit in the Tahara room itself, in the Board room, the front room, or in the Chapel. When sitting in the Chapel the doors to the Tahara room must be open. When sitting in the Board room or front room, the doors to both the casket room and to the Taharah room must be open. While reciting T'hillim or in proximity to the deceased, there is to be NO eating, drinking, smoking, talking on the phone or listening to music.

6. During a break, when not reading Tehillim, the Shomer may engage in other activities such as reading, walking, homework etc. At no time is the Shomer allowed to leave the building during their shift. Shomrim are permitted to eat in the Board room, after closing ALL the doors to the Tahara room. Only kosher food is to be brought into the facility. A small fridge is located in the Board room, along with a small microwave oven. Everyone is expected to clean up after themselves.

7. There is a main floor washroom available for Shomrim. Supplies are located in the back storage area. Please keep this area CLEAN and stocked for the next person.

8. NO SMOKING IS PERMITTED IN THE BUILDING.

9. Shomrim may use the telephone on the Fax machine for outgoing local calls.

10. All the doors to both buildings are to be locked at all times. Do not open the doors unless prearrangements have been made through Rena to permit the attendance of family or friends of the deceased or to permit shift change for Shomrim. Emergency numbers are listed on the bulletin board in the storage area. First contact is Rena at 229-7912.

11. First Call service may attend at any time to bring a deceased person to the facility. They have their own keys to the back door and you may hear them coming in and out. Please go to the back and let them know that you are here, so that they will not set the alarm on the way out

12. Shomrim are required to be respectful of the deceased and the family and are responsible for the cleanliness and safety of the funeral home at all times.

13. A key component of our work is confidentiality. Any details of the deceased, the family or the Chevra Kadisha are to remain private. Breach of confidentiality is reason for dismissal.

A sign in sheet is provided in the Board room; please make sure to sign in and out. Paycheques will be distributed on a bi monthly basis.

I have read and understood the terms of this document and agree to the policies and procedures as outlined above.

Signed

Date

Shmirah Stories:

Much less is written about Shmirah than Taharah. Yet shmirah can also be powerful - for both the family and the shomer. There is no tradition of secrecy for shmira, so there are opportunities for the shomer to discuss the experience with the family.

In the balance of life, and life is certainly full and we are all busy, rarely are we given the opportunity to affect the life of another human being quite so deeply and at a time of their complete emotional vulnerability. Performing the mitzvah of shmirah is one of those opportunities.

Why Should I Be a Shomer? - Chevra Kavod Hamet - 2003 Bruce Nemer - Minneapolis, MN

I feel compelled to share what they did for Joe and for our family and how empowering others to help can change a community. Joe, my husband, died August 14, 2006. It was not unexpected, but nevertheless it was a shock. He had been diagnosed with leiomyosarcoma two years earlier and was in hospice at home for his last week. At this time, our entire family gathered together at our home for his last days, taking turns sitting and talking with him, holding his hand, listening to his beloved Broadway musicals. So when Joe left us, we were simply not prepared to leave him alone....

The Final Journey - A Tale of Two Cities - USCJ Review - Spring 2007

Time lost its meaning in that cubbyhole of a room. It condensed and expanded until I couldn't remember what month or what season it was. Though it was the middle of the night, I stayed wide awake. And I looked up, every so often, right into that window that separated my world from the bodies', distracted by the shadows dancing from the flickering candle on its sill, shadows that often appeared to be coming from beyond the glass....

A Mitzva For the Dead, a Comfort For the Living - New Jersey Jewish News - 11/20/2008

Last week a beloved member of my synagogue died. She was the epitome of quiet, graceful strength, a woman for whom every day was filled with hope and promise—in her 60s, she had just finished another degree and embarked on a new career. I have always felt powerless in the face of death and this time, even more so. God does what God does, death happens; questioning won't change a thing. But this loss seemed as wrong as that of a young person, or war. Why can't God fix it? So when offered the chance to sit shmira and keep vigil in the hours before the funeral so her body and soul would never be alone during that time, I volunteered. I wanted to take some kind of action, anything, to try and right the balance of the universe....

Sitting Shmirah blog by "Alto Artist" - 5/25/2009

In a small room on Troost Avenue, in the dark of night, a 2,000-year-old Jewish tradition is being upheld. That is where Gene Soloff (or sometimes Craig Caplan) sits in his role as the shomer, Hebrew for "watcher," who "guards" the bodies of deceased people at Louis Memorial Chapel until burial, reading Psalms by the hour. Of all the Jewish customs associated with death and burial, shemira is perhaps the least known...

The Night Watchmen of Jewish Tradition - Kansas City Jewish Chronicle - 10/2/2009

It's well past midnight, and the building is deathly quiet -- except for the murmuring of a lone sentinel softly reciting passages from a holy text. Others are present, but they are not among the living....

The Body Guards - Washington Jewish Week - 5/19/2010

One would expect "This American Life" to be a little less respectful and out of our comfort zone. But Shalom Auslander's story Beware of God has an interesting ending. The audio begins at 40:35.

But it would have been unthinkable for Harriet to leave Sid alone, not after 48 years of marriage, not after the last two years of almost never leaving him alone, of carrying him, feeding him, doing all the talking for him. So she kept on talking.

Keeping Them Company at the End - New York Times 10/20/2010

Links to Shmirah Stories After 9/11:

VIGIL: Stretching a Jewish Vigil for the Sept. 11 Dead

<http://www.jewish-funerals.org/wtcshmira.htm>

Long Watch over WWC Dead

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1668913.stm>

Today's Climate Should Strengthen, Not Diminish, Identity

<http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/17880/today-s-climate-should-strengthen-not-diminish-identity/>

Sp[iritual Surveillance: Watching the Dead of 9-11

<http://commie.droryikra.com/v67i2/9-11/shmira.html>

My Watch over WTC Dead Changed Me

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/2600753.stm

Watching Over the Dead with Shmira

http://www.jewishexponent.com/article/24319/Watching_Over_the_Dead_With_Shmira/

ADDENDUM 2 – SUGGESTED LIST OF READINGS FOR SITTING SHMIRAH:

Any book of Psalms. One with Hebrew, transliteration, and translation into English would be ideal

“K’Vod Hamet: A Guide for the Bereaved” by Rabbi Stuart Kelman

“Nihum Aveilim” by Rabbi Stuart Kelman and Dan Fendel

“Jewish Rites of Death: Stories of Beauty and Transformation” by Richard A. Light and Thea Light

“A Plain Pine Box: A Return to Simple Jewish Funerals and Eternal Traditions” by Rabbi Arnold M. Goodman

“The Jewish Way of Death and Mourning” by Maurice Lamm

“A Time to Mourn, a Time to Comfort” by Dr. Ron Wolfson and Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs

“Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead, and Mourn as a Jew” by Anita Diamant

“Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning” by Jack Riemer