Reforming and Reviving a Chevra Kadisha

When I was appointed to be the chairman of Congregation Agudas Achim’s cemetery committee and head of its men’s Chevra Kadisha in February 2014, both the men’s Chevra and the women’s Chevra had six members, whose ages ranged from the mid-fifties to eighty. Moreover, while I cannot speak about the women’s Chevra, the men’s Chevra performed Taharah in a perfunctory manner that seemed to me to lack any true spirituality. Therefore I set myself two goals as the chairman of the cemetery committee and Rosh of the men’s Chevra. The first was to increase the membership of both the men’s, and women’s Chevras. The second was to imbue our Taharah with greater dignity and spirituality.

My first step was to attend the Gamliel Institute’s annual conference in Miami, Florida in March 2014. There I learned how to conduct a meaningful, dignified Taharah, and gained insight on making the experience spiritually fulfilling for the members of the Chevra. Shortly after I returned to Austin the men’s Chevra was called on to perform Taharah for one of our synagogue’s most esteemed members. Before we began, I met with the Chevra members and explained how we would perform the ritual using the techniques demonstrated by Rick Light at the Gamliel conference. After the Taharah we discussed our views and feelings about the ceremony. The unanimous opinion was that the new way of doing Taharah was vastly better than our previous one. It evinced more honor and dignity for the met, and it was much more spiritually meaningful for the Chevra members. We have continued using the new procedure, and the morale of the Chevra is noticeably better than it used to be.

Encouraged by my success in reforming our way of conducting Taharah, I turned next to recruiting new Chevra members. My first attempt was to send an email to every congregant, soliciting volunteers for both the men’s and the women’s Chevras. I got absolutely no response to this solicitation, and I decided I needed to confer with my rabbi who is a staunch supporter of the Chevra. We met in May and developed a list of 23 men and 22 women we thought might be interested in volunteering. We drafted a letter (also attached to the email), signed by the rabbi, the head of the women’s Chevra, and myself, inviting each person to an orientation/training session on June 19, 2014. To enhance the formality of the invitation, we sent it via “snail mail.”

Since I was out of the country until June 17, I used Rick Light’s video instead of doing an actual demonstration with Chevra members. Interestingly, of the 45 people we invited, 13 women attended, but none of the men showed up. Instead, three women get their husbands to attend. With a question-and-answer period following the video, the session lasted over two hours, and every attendee volunteered to join the Chevra. Counting some volunteers who responded individually, the men’s Chevra now has 15 members and the women’s Chevra has 19.

Both my rabbi and I are perplexed by the lack of response from the men we invited to the training/orientation session. We thought we had identified congregants who would be inclined to at least investigate the Chevra Kadisha, and the fact that the
three husbands who accompanied their wives to the session all volunteered to join makes us feel confident we can convince men to volunteer if we can introduce them to the Chevra and Taharah. Assuming that summer might not have been the best time to conduct the orientation session – people being away on vacation, and synagogue attendance being lower once school ends – we plan to hold another session after school starts in the Fall. We also plan to do a lot of face-to-face recruiting.

Ideally, we want to build membership in the Chevra to about 25 men and 25 women. To maintain that level of participation we will conduct annual training/orientation sessions, and encourage Chevra members to participate in Gamliel Institute programs. Until this year, our last training session had been conducted in the mid-1990s. I think that was a major factor in the diminution of membership and the lack of spiritually fulfilling Taharahs. Equally important has to be the emphasis on training successors for the heads of the men’s, and women’s Chevras. The way our program is set up, the head of either Chevra is also the chair of the cemetery committee, and provides the “logistical” interface with the funeral home, assisting the family in obtaining a cemetery plot, ensuring that a tallis is available if needed, or arranging to pick one up from the family, and being present at the funeral to assist the rabbi. Therefore, at least one member of the men’s, and one member of the women’s Chevra needs to be trained to step into the shoes of the cemetery chair when he or she leaves, resigns or dies. This training has to be conducted by the current cemetery chair on a continuing basis.