

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 *Taharachs*. 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.