

From Tahor Who to Taharah Why:

What Motivates Us to Participate in this Holy Work?

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Introduction

Why would someone choose to walk into a room with a dead body? We live in a society where most people are death-phobic and avoid conversations about the inevitable. Recently, there has been increasing attention given to end-of-life and death issues. And still, in our communities, it is not easy to speak about death, much less preparing for the end of life. People recoil from the thought of buying a cemetery plot, not to mention delaying writing their will or medical directive and considering organ donations. They avoid others who talk about death.

How can we motivate people to be willing to touch, wash, dress, and lovingly tend to a cold, dead body? How can we motivate people to feel comfortable confronting their fears of being with the deceased to participate in *Tahara*? The richness of Jewish customs and rituals have addressed end-of-life and death issues for centuries. In *Tanhuma Vayehi 107A*, we read:

The Highest act of gemilut chesed—acts of loving kindness—is that which is done for the dead, for there can never be any thought of repayment.

There are two parts to giving respect to and caring for a deceased body; namely, *Shmira*, watching or guarding the body and *Tahara*, cleansing or purifying the body.

Tahara is not only about the 'dead body', it is about *kedushah*, holiness. It is about a caring, compassionate community coming together to prepare a *neshamah*, a Soul, and its bodily home for the journey to *Olam haBa*, the World to

Come. It is about tending to a deceased body with *kavannah*, *kavod* and love. Motivation is a factor in people doing what they didn't think they would be doing. We believe it is important for *Chevra Kadisha* organizers and leaders to understand what motivates someone to volunteer to be on a *Tahara* team or sit *Shmirah*. Leaders must understand and feel motivated themselves, as they demonstrate their passion and commitment to teach, organize, recruit, train and retain membership in the *Chevra Kadisha*.

In May, 1995, Rabbi Mel Glazer wrote a thesis as part of his DMin requirements investigating what motivated members to participate in a *Tahara*. His project consisted of personally interviewing 11 men and 11 women of his *Chevra Kadisha* in London, Ontario. Rabbi Glazer concluded that each person had his/her own motivation for participating in *Tahara*. Members spoke about accepting the covenant between God and the Jewish people, valuing the sense of equality in death, performing a pure act of compassion without any expectation of reward, and following and preserving the age-old Jewish tradition of *Chevra Kadisha*. Everyone stated that it gave their life meaning and was one of the most fulfilling tasks they could ever assume.

Six years later, Lynne Greenhough completed her master's thesis on the historical and ethnographic study of *Chevrei Kadisha* in the U.S. and Canada. Her study included an examination of the practices and motivations of people who perform *Tahara*.

Using these studies as our launching pad, we determined that we would create a survey that identified what motivated people *today* to do *Tahara*, in the hopes that this data would be useful to leaders in the *Chevra Kadisha* movement, as well as to clergy for recruiting and retaining membership in this Holy Society. We included questions used by Rabbi Glazer and Lynn Greenhough, supplementing them with our own inquiries to gain a greater understanding of the participants' feelings and practices. Whereas Rabbi Glazer conducted his interviews in person at the participants' homes and Ms. Greenhough interviewed her group on the phone, we presented our multiple-choice survey in electronic

format, with an opportunity for the respondents to contribute additional comments.

Our initial curiosity was to learn whether or not motivations to participate on a *Chevra Kadisha* had changed over time, and if so, how? We subsequently focused on gathering data at this time for this study, as well as to be used in a future comparative study.

Our goal was to provide a current archival document for people wanting to recruit, train and retain *chevra* volunteers.

Our objective was to identify universal sentiments that would apply to any *Chevra Kaddisha* member, including developing a greater awareness of their own emotions regarding participating on a *Chevra Kadisha*.

Demographics

It is our expectation that the findings of this survey will reveal reasons why people become involved, and remain involved in *Tahara*. Our intention was to share data and comments regarding *Tahara* motivation.

Our survey was sent out to over 100 members between November, 2014 and November, 2015. The respondents were members of *chevrei kaddisha* across North American communities, including Richmond, VA; Atlanta, GA; New York City; Albuquerque, NM; Berkeley and Oakland, CA., in addition to a few Canadian cities. The participants represented a spectrum of Jewish denominational affiliations. Of the 78 respondents who completed the questionnaire, more than half identified as Conservative. In descending order, the others were Reform, Orthodox, Independent, and Renewal. About ten percent responded that they were involved in a community-based *chevra*. A few identified themselves as having affiliations with at least two denominational communities.

There were 60% females compared to 40% males who participated in this survey. 33% of the respondents were between the ages of 65-74; followed by those in the 55-64 age bracket (27%); 45-54 years (20%), over 74 years (16%),

and between 35-44 years old (4%). No one below the age of 34 participated in this survey.

Those who completed the survey represented a range of years of experience serving on a *chevra*. Almost half of those who responded stated that they had been involved for 4 to 10 years. Another 27% said they served for 11 to 20 years; 14% served for over 20 years; followed by 10% who had served for one to three years. Only 3 persons of those surveyed had participated for less than one year.

Of the 78 survey participants who completed the survey, 30 had done fewer than 11 *Taharas*; 12 had done 11-20; 24 had done between 21-50; and 11 people had participated in more than 50 *Taharas*.

What Motivates People to Join and Remain on a Chevra?

We were curious about how people learned about *Tahara* and what motivated people to participate in a *Chevra Kadisha*.

Over one-third of the respondents first learned about *Tahara* through their synagogue (38.6%). This was particularly pertinent to those over the age of 55. Most others in all age ranges were personally invited to participate. Very few people responded that they joined because a friend or family member had a *Tahara*. Almost no one learned about it through literature or on the internet. The role of the clergy and other key figures in the synagogue who reached out to the members of a congregation was a critical motivator for people to learn about and join a *Chevra Kadisha*. In particular, many people expressed that they were drawn into participating because they were personally invited by a member of the clergy. For example, we received comments such as:

"The rabbi suggested that doing a Tahara might help me to process the fact that I was not at my uncle's funeral . . . in another state."

"A member of the clergy approached me."

"Our rabbi invited a group of men to come to the office to learn about Tahara."

"Before conversion I had made known my interest in participating in Tahara, The Chevra leader called me and with conversion, I learned that it was a great mitzvah."

"I heard about it from a drash the rabbi gave at Yamim Nora'im one year. I immediately felt compelled, for reasons I cannot articulate well, to participate."

In addition, a few people had commented that they learned about *Tahara* through family and friends and for some, it was a family tradition. In response to our question about how a parent-child relationship might be affected by their joint participation in a *Tahara*, we received three revealing responses.

"It gave more clarity to my son as to what I do and why."

"It has committed me to this mitzvah. If the metah is someone we both knew, it can be very touching, meaningful, and sometimes, emotional."

"We focus on the metah. Our personal relationship has been taken to a higher level, with even greater respect and admiration for each other. . . I believe our shared experience will ease her mourning after my death. She sees I have no fear, only gratitude."

Members of a *chevra* indicated multiple reasons for participating in *Tahara*. No data was collected on how much time transpired between when someone first learned about *Tahara* in their respective community and when they actually joined a *Chevra Kadisha*. We were primarily interested in learning why the members joined a team.

A majority of the respondents stated that they joined a *chevra* because it is the *ultimate act of kindness* and they wanted to continue the ancient Jewish tradition of properly burying the deceased. Other popular responses included those who felt inclined because they were able to participate; performing *Tahara* gave more meaning to their lives and that it reminded them of the fragility of life. Almost a quarter of the respondents expressed that this is where they feel a

'spiritual presence', while others said they participated in order to support and have contact with the Jewish community.

24% of those who responded reported that they started to participate on a *chevra* because they wanted to do a mitzvah in the community. Only 12% stated that a member of the clergy had personally invited them to join, and another 11% wrote that they responded to a plea from the pulpit. Less than 10% stated that they joined because a *chevra* leader or friend who is a member of their local *chevra* approached them. Four people joined after a loved one's death, as it helped them to deal with that passing.

The motivation to participate on a *Chevra Kadisha* and perform *Tahara* deeply touched the spiritual core of many people. For example, the following quotes describe some of the personal sentiments received on the survey:

"It is the holiest experience of serving for me."

"It is needed by the community."

"Performing Tahara gives more meaning to my life."

"It is a loving mitzvah and something I would want to be done for my family members and myself."

"This is where I feel a spiritual presence."

"It reminds me of the fragility of life."

"I find participating in this mitzvah to be deeply meaningful AND I know there are many who are uncomfortable helping with Tahara, so it just makes sense to me and feels important to fill this role in/for my community."

"It provides a unique opportunity to engage in a theologically motivated pragmatic act (i.e. mitzvah) that is performed by a close community of individuals who share the experience of Tahara."

"I want it done for me, so I do it for others."

"Doing Tahara adds an incredible depth to my life."

"I feel it is an important mitzvah that I can do. It gives me a closeness to the people on the team, that are still with us, and a respect for the person who I may not have known, but who I am providing a special service for."

"I do from the heart, not for the recognition. I'm glad that I can be one of the last women to assist these people transitioning to the after life, where they cannot say thank you to me in return."

"After losing loved ones and understanding the pain associated with that kind of loss, I wanted to do something that could provide solace to mourners and that would give honor and gentle care to the deceased."

"Now that I am older myself, and know how loving and tender the process is, I am somewhat less fearful of what's next...if anything."

"I feel like I am in a holy place when I do it. I am ushering the metah to the next life, except she is going on through and I am stopped at the door. I have also been rendered speechless with the beauty and solemnity and importance of it."

"I joined after a loved one's death; it helped me to deal with the death."

"A close friend went with me for the first time. It was a Tahara for someone I knew well."

"I wanted to become more comfortable with death."

"My grandmother passed away 6 months before I joined. I wanted to emulate the care which was provided for her."

Two-thirds of the people who completed the questionnaire stated that they only participated in the same group while almost one-third said that they participated in more than one *Chevra Kadisha*. Members of a congregational *chevra* tended to remain on that team while they were affiliated with that congregation. Many of the people commented that when a local synagogue or community *chevra* is in need of another person to assist, they readily volunteered and made themselves available. More than half of the members of a *Chevra Kadisha* socialized with other members on their team. (55.2% socialize and 44.7% do not).

Almost every group had someone who can read the prayers and blessings in Hebrew. A few of the groups read the transliteration, and only one person responded that no one on their team can read Hebrew. The participants commented that they would like to learn to read and understand the prayers read during the *Tahara*.

Safety precautions were fairly consistent among the participants. Everyone reported that they always use gloves and 96% always wore a gown throughout the *Tahara*. About 50% of the respondents wear a mask and fewer wear goggles during the procedure.

The participants were asked if they canceled plans when called upon to participate in a *Tahara*. Over one-third stated that they usually canceled plans, while another third said they were willing to change plans if there were not enough volunteers to make a team. Only a few people responded that they did not usually change their plans, explaining that their teams are large enough to gather an optimal number of volunteers on short notice.

One person stated that as of yet, they had not needed to cancel personal plans; however, "*the time sensitive nature of this mitzvah requires a willingness to rearrange one's schedule. I would do so in almost any situation.*" This was more difficult for some people who responded that they do not have work flexibility.

Some of the respondents said they would change their plans if they knew the deceased.

The chair of one *Chevra Kadisha* believed that it is important for her to participate as much as possible, and that she almost always makes herself available.

The participants of this survey were asked about the types of rituals that are specific to their *chevra*. Again, it was difficult to delineate percentages, as many of them noted multiple answers. Most of the participants asked *mechilah* (forgiveness) of the *met(ah)*. Also, many of the *Chevrei Kadisha* began their work together with an opening and closing ritual. This may have included an initial gathering of prayer and sharing something about the deceased and concluding by debriefing immediately afterwards before the group disbands (20%) such as going out for coffee or sitting in a private room to speak. One person stated that her group recites the *Sh'ma* together. Bonding through initial hugs and concluding with a group hug is a common practice among at least a third of those who responded.

Other groups have adopted *minhagim* to include chanting with words, singing *niggunim*, setting a communal *kavannah*, blessing one another and meditating. One person commented that she had introduced peaceful instrumental music to be played during *Tahara*.

A couple of comments indicated that women were more inclined to process and spend time debriefing after the *Tahara*. As one man indicated, "*We are men. So we do the holy task, we say good-bye, and we go home. Our women are much more sociable, both before and after.*"

One of the women commented, "*We have a 'Tahara Huddle' where someone always says something nice about the deceased regardless of knowing her or not. We say the Shema as well. We always say the 23rd Psalm out loud as we roll the deceased out of the Tahara room.*"

A few return to work or home and were able to leave the *Tahara* behind. Although one may have return to obligations, they continued to have the *Tahara* in their minds for a while. Others returned home and took a long shower. One person had prepared a ritual washing at home by having a pitcher of water placed on her porch followed by taking a bath.

One woman stated that she read psalms and another commented that she needs quiet time alone to "come down" and re-enter the ordinary world. She had

only performed *Taharas* in the evenings, and preferred to walk home alone after the debriefing.

We were interested in knowing if and how G-d was present during *Tahara*.

Forty-nine people stated that they felt a sense of holiness in their actions and another twenty-five responded that they sense a spiritual presence during *Tahara*. A third of the respondents felt reassured from asking G-d for strength and courage and that because they were performing a *mitzvah*, they wanted to move to a higher level of spirituality. Twenty of those who completed the survey said that they do not know if G-d is present while others felt a godly presence in the room. A few believed that their actions were guided by feeling the presence of G-d in the room. Only 3 people answered that they do not believe that Gd is present.

One male commented, *"G-d is reflected, if not directly present, in our relationships with the living (each other in the chevra) and the deceased who we have come to serve."*

A female commented, *"It is something I feel in the room. I sense a spiritual presence. I feel holiness in our actions. It is a mitzvah and I want to move to a higher level of spirituality. We have asked G-d for strength and courage, and I believe our actions are guided."* Another shared the same comments, concluding, "Gd is everywhere in spirit."

Another woman commented, *"I don't think a lot about Gd during [Tahara], at least not a personal G-d. But if G-d is a spirit and a unity or bridge from this world to the next, then G-d is present."*

One persons admitted, *"Sometimes a Tahara is not spiritual, and is harrowing or extremely difficult. At those times, I may forget to ask G-d for stamina. Perhaps I will try to remember that for the next time."*

Other comments included: *"[I have] enormous gratitude for this opportunity that my synagogue has taught me."*

"The rituals of the Tahara should be monitored from each group to make sure they are being followed."

"Being on the chevra is one of the most important aspects of my life. I am currently an art student and I intend to create paintings based on my experiences."

When one is immersed in the actual process of the *Tahara* ritual, it is inevitable that their thoughts wander from thinking about the life of the *met(ah)* to ruminating on the deeper questions of life and what death means to them. We asked the respondents, *"What do you think about as you perform the required rituals?"* The most common answers were *"I hope that we perform the Tahara with kavod"* (55) followed by *"I am reminded that we are all equal in death"* (48). Many responded that they thought about the beauty of the Jewish tradition as well as acknowledging that they were the last one to touch this person. Some of the respondents focused on the life of the *met(ah)* by hoping to provide comfort to their soul and not making a mistake, wondering about the life they lived, how they spent their final days and how the person died. 17 persons stated that performing a *Tahara* made them imagine what their own *Tahara* might be like.

Some of the poignant comments received included:

I am reminded of the fragility of life.

I think of comfort given the family [of the deceased] that we take care of their loved one.

I tune into the spirit of the departed, touching her body lovingly and sometimes hold her hand if and when there are difficult moments.

I try to stay focused on the details of the correct performance of the procedures of the mitzvah.

I believe that when we prepare "this" body, we are also "preparing" someone who was dear to us in life, and this Tahara is part of the grief and healing

process for us. In addition, I believe we are preparing ourselves in advance, even as we prepare the met lying before us.

I sometimes am able to obtain clarity about what is important in my own life. I think about how sharply different this person is from a living person. I do not see or feel a corpse, just a person in a very different stage of being.

One person wrote that her primary focus is on "Kavod haMetah and the safety of our workers. I see my Mother on the table."

Although greater than half felt that they were better Jews as a result of serving on the *chevra*, nearly all (95%) believed that they were not better Jews than those who do not serve.

"I don't think of myself as a 'better Jew.' I'm grateful for the opportunity to perform this mitzvah."

"I hope it makes me a better Jew."

"I don't believe that I am a better Jew than those who do not serve. Everyone does what he or she is able to do."

"I think I am more tolerant, more measured because I have close contact with death."

"Do not like this question. No Jew is better than the next; I thought that was why we do Tahara, as Rabbi Gamliel taught."

"I'm not sure how to answer about whether this makes me a "better Jew." It certainly enriches my Jewish life."

Greater than 91 percent of respondents were affected differently when they personally knew the deceased. There was no significant difference between male and female groups. Forty-three of these individuals felt holiness in their actions. Forty-eight persons hoped that they performed the *Tahara* with *kavod*. A plurality was reminded that we are all equal in death, and that they are the last ones to touch this person.

76 percent of those polled said that it made a difference when they know something about the *met(ah)*, especially noted amongst the females. The majority's expressed hope was that they were able to perform the *Tahara* with *kavod*. Almost half were reminded of the equality in death. A common sentiment of this group was the acceptance of death as a part of life. Members of Renewal, Community-based and Independent groups had the highest percentage of positive responses, followed by Reform, Orthodox and Conservative affiliations.

When asked what gives one the most satisfaction in performing a *Tahara*, 20% (47) of the respondents replied that they felt most satisfaction being an anonymous part of an ancient tradition, followed by 16% (40) who felt that being on a *Chevra Kadisha* was the ultimate act of loving-kindness that can never be repaid.

16% (38) stated that their source of satisfaction stemmed from knowing they were serving with love, while another 15% (36) believed that they felt connected by preparing the soul for its journey. 7% (17) people responded that they felt needed, accepted and loved by their *chevra*, and it gave others comfort to know that their bodies would be prepared with love and dignity when their time came. Sixteen people stated that they felt satisfied knowing that they fulfilled their responsibility to the family and community, and were grateful for the chance to touch death in their own aliveness. Seven people stated that although they may not believe in the ritual of *Tahara*, they did it for the community.

The following comments were expressed on the survey:

"Performing this mitzvah because there are people who may want to, but can't for whatever reason. I know when a team leaves the room, we have helped send a body and soul on its journey to its next step in its life cycle to the best of our abilities."

"I have united with death, which is just the next stage of life and together, the world to come is being approached for this person, just not for me, yet."

Sixty-five respondents attempt to maintain silence during the performance of *Tahara*, saying only what is necessary to complete the *Tahara* properly. Twenty-one people reported that they spoke only when it was necessary, so they could focus on the task and insure safety. Three female respondents stated that they did not speak, yet they chanted while performing *Tahara*. Their affiliation was Conservative, Renewal, and Other. Some interviewees spoke to and about the deceased throughout the *Tahara*. Of these four, three are male and one is female. One other male replied, *"We emphatically and by stipulation during the briefing do NOT speak of the deceased."* Additional comments include the following.

"...we say what is necessary to complete the Tahara properly. We also speak to help teach others."

"Silence is not necessary, but unnecessary chat is inappropriate."

"This can sometimes be tricky. There is the occasional participant who can be "chatty" and it is difficult to establish silence as our norm."

"I prefer to speak as little as possible, using hand signals or facial expressions. IMO, some members of the group speak too much. And while their intentions are well-meant, this detracts from the atmosphere I would like, both for respect for the metah, and for my own peace of mind."

These responses are in contrast with the earlier Glazer study, in which he reported that participants' chatter "allows the rites not to become routinized."

When evaluating what motivated one to participate on a *chevra*, we asked how serving had changed one's feelings about their own death and about death in general. 28% (38) believed that serving on a *chevra* made them more accepting of death as part of life. 24% (33) were comforted to see how their body would be taken care of and watched. Other common attitudes expressed were that serving on a *chevra* enabled people to feel less fearful of death or to think more about their own death and the death of their loved ones. 4% (6)

people admitted that even though they served on the *chevra*, they continued to fear death.

One respondent commented, *"I am more comfortable talking about death. I realize how important it is to care for someone before death (to prevent bed sores, etc.)."*

Another participant wrote, *"I became an adherent to vegetarianism largely due to my participation in Tahara."*

Almost 30% of the respondents stated that they do not wonder who will prepare their body, while almost another 30% said they wanted their own group to prepare them. Some participants thought about who would prepare their body after they died. Others wanted their bodies prepared by members who knew and loved them. Only one person stated that they did not want *Tahara* for themselves.

The range of comments varied, including, *"I know whoever it will be will care for me."*

"I wonder those who take on the responsibility of laying me to rest would even know what Tahara is and ask for it."

"Who knows where you will be when you die? My family knows I want a Tahara, so hopefully it will happen."

Tahara before Cremation remains an elephant in the room. Of those who identified as Orthodox, it was interesting to note that 2 of the 6 persons responding to the question stated that they would do a *Tahara* before cremation. On the spectrum of Jewish affiliation and identity, the more liberal one was, the more apt they were to consider doing a *Tahara* prior to a cremation. 57% of those surveyed responded that they would participate in a *Tahara* before cremation. 22% would not take part. 21% either did not foresee this question, or were unsure of what their choice might be. Of the 57% positive respondents,

more than half had participated in *Tahara* 4 to 10 years; 46% are male, 68% are female. A preponderance of affirmative responses came from ages 55-74.

Our results displayed a consistency with remarks in Lynn Greenhough's 2001 report. Current comments ranged from "*Who am I to judge?*" to "*I strongly believe that Tahara is one part of a holy process of Jewish burial and that the whole effort and energy put into the Tahara by the chevra is de-legitimized if there is a major deviation away from what is considered required as part of the process which includes a standard ritual burial of the prepared met. Cremation, at least as far as I am concerned is a clear and unforgivable deviation from the prescribed process of Jewish burial.*"

These aforementioned divergent remarks were expressed by members of the same Conservative *chevra*. Additional comments included:

"I don't necessarily oppose the practice, but I don't know that I can do it."

"I'd rather not know that cremation was planned, but wouldn't decline to participate."

"Sitting on the fence on this one - My feelings vary on this. I don't believe in cremation. It's too much like the Holocaust where I had family perish. Tahara then cremation defeats the purpose of Tahara. I do believe everyone should have Tahara regardless of affiliation or non affiliation though."

"Prefer not to."

"I don't think I would like to participate, but I don't know for sure what I would do."

"Only after counsel of our Rabbis...I have no other personal issue regarding an individual's choices."

When asked, "What special request would you make for your own *Tahara*?" the most common first choice was to "provide continuous *Shmirah*, from death until my burial."

Those who perform *Tahara* were aware of the practice of *Shmirah*, being present with the *met(ah)* after death. *Shmirah* duration varied, based on individual family

or community customs or circumstances. Some sit with the *met(ah)* only between *Tahara* and burial, some sit only days and/or nights, while others prefer sitting from the time of death until the funeral.

One individual commented about *Shmirah*, "*That's a hard one for our community, but it is something that I wish we could provide, and something I would like to imagine that I would have for myself.*" Another expressed her humility in saying, "*if possible to have Shmirah, although not if the obstacles are too great.*" However, two people stated that they would not want anyone to sit with them.

Many asked for silence during their own *Tahara*, while some said, "*If talking about me, talk to me,*" and "*Don't whisper messages for me to take to your loved ones.*"

"Treat my body with respect that will allow my soul to continue its journey."

One woman spoke of green burial; another woman planned to make her own shroud. Twelve percent of respondents would request that loved ones be permitted to participate. Seven percent would like damaged holy objects to be buried with them. An interesting observation was that five women asked that their facial hair be removed; there was no male request for one's face to be shaved.

Conclusion

Our objective was to learn what inspires and motivates people to be a part of a *Chevra Kadisha*. Based on the findings of our survey, we believe the following insights will be useful to Jewish clergy and *Chevra Kadisha* leaders in recruiting and maintaining a corps of volunteers.

- 1) Congregants are most influenced when the members of the clergy directly invite them to participate on a *Tahara* team. This may include individual as well as communal conversations to educate and illuminate the meaning of this holy task. Those who are involved in a community-based *chevra* responded that they were inclined to participate because someone on the

team had reached out to them. Our findings indicated that person-to-person contact is the ultimate way to build a *chevra*. Social media and community bulletins serve little purpose in recruiting members; however, they have agency in maintaining communication that a *chevra* exists.

- 2) Many of the respondents expressed their desire to have *shmirah* from the time of their death to the funeral. Based on the information we gathered, we recommend that *shmirah* be available through each *Chevra Kadisha*. It is necessary for the congregants to understand what it is and enlighten people on what it entails. For many people who may not be inclined to participate in a *Tahara*, sitting with the body for a designated duration may be a comfortable way for them to be a part of a compassionate community. It is also an opportunity for young people to learn about *chesed shel emet*, the truest act of kindness, and how they can serve a vital role in honoring the deceased.
- 3) We were surprised to learn that a large percentage of the participants would consider doing a *Tahara* before cremation. This indicates that each community needs to understand what this means for them, and to mindfully create minhagim, customs, that reflect their philosophy and practices.
- 4) *Chevra Kadisha* participation is recognized as the highest *mitzvah*, for one offers service from the heart with no expectation that they will be thanked or rewarded. Thus, most of the respondents affirmed that being involved in *Tahara* inevitably reaps more rewards than can be expressed. This includes feeling a spiritual presence and connecting with like-hearted members in a sacred service.

Glossary of Hebrew Terms

Chesed shel Emet: the truest Act of Kindness.

Chevra: Hebrew word for 'society' or 'close-knit' group.

Chevra Kadisha, Chevrei Kadisha: (s.; m.) an organized group of Jewish men and women who prepare and tend to the body of a deceased Jew prior to burial. Also known as a "Sacred Society."

Drash: A method of interpreting Biblical text or a sermon.

Gemilut Chesed: Acts of loving kindness.

Kavannah: Intention or 'direction of the heart.'

Kavod: Honor.

Kedushah: sanctity or holiness.

Mechilah: Asking for forgiveness.

Met, Metah: Male/female Hebrew for deceased.

Mitzvah: A good deed.

Neshama: The Jewish notion of the Soul or Spirit.

Olam haBa: The World to Come, aka: the afterlife.

Shomer, Shomrim: Singular/Plural Hebrew: watchmen/guardians. Those who are present with the met(ah) after death. Psalms are traditionally read by the shomer(et).

Tahara: The ritual purification and dressing of a deceased Jewish body.

Yamim Nora'im: Jewish High Holidays; can refer to *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year and *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, or the entire season associated with these holidays.