

## ELEVATOR SPEECH

Why is it that the number of traditional Jewish burials is so much lower in proportion to the populations of Alameda and Contra Costa counties? In management, when we observe that something is not working, we look at three possible causes: knowledge deficit, systems problem or compliance problem. When it comes to traditional Jewish burials, all three might factor into this situation.

Our intention is to bring together representatives of various groups, organizations, and related activities to plan curricula that will best impart information about Jewish practices around death and mourning to their populations. At the end of one year, the group will have developed a pamphlet describing a comprehensive educational program for the East Bay Community.

Why are we doing this? In short, we are doing this because no one else is. A survey of large-scale education on Jewish End of Life Practices has come up pretty much empty. As one leading Jewish educator said, "no one wants to teach it, and no one wants to talk about it." We want to teach it, and we want to get as many people as we can to talk about it. That is why we have called out plan The Elephant in the Room."

Some of the groups we would like to include are: the Dean of the Gamliel Institute, Exec. Director of the East Bay Chevra Kadisha Consortium, a representative from Jewish Family Services, the founder of Midrasha, which is an educational program for Jewish teenagers, the CEO of Sinai Memorial Chapel, a representative from Mandel Foundation's Teacher Education Institute, a faculty member from GTU, a Rabbi of a Jewish Orthodox congregation, and a local Jewish Chaplain. This is but a sample of the groups we identified that we think would benefit from having a focused curriculum developed to be used for each individual group.

Recently, residents of some Oakland neighborhoods around Piedmont and Lake Merritt received a flier from "Smart Cremation" offering their free Cremation Planning Guide. They advertise, among other things, affordable services. Unfortunately, there are many Jews who choose cremation for exactly that reason, not understanding that our Jewish Mortuary will

provide financial assistance for a Jewish burial if it is needed. Our local Chevra Kadisha leaders of the aforementioned Consortium share the experience of having to educate Jewish families after the death has occurred, during this acute time of need for mourners. We know that we cannot force compliance, but we can educate. If we continue to have Jewish families choosing cremation and non-Jewish burials, how will their children and grandchildren learn about this essential part of Jewish life and culture?

Edna Stewart  
8/14

**THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM VS. PRESERVING JEWISH HERITAGE**  
**A PLAN FOR COMMUNITY EDUCATION ABOUT**  
**JEWISH END OF LIFE PRACTICES**

Caring for those in need is not necessarily a monetary issue. When a loved one dies, and there have been no arrangements previously made, people must make important decisions when they are most vulnerable, decisions that will have an emotional and financial impact for many years to come. Because of the complexity of options that they may be offered, the need for education becomes more relevant when the mourners are Jewish.

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There have been several offerings at various Limmud Conferences in the United States and Canada. The classes and/or discussion groups tend to be well attended, but reach the limited audience of attendees at a Jewish Conference. The Minnesota Coalition for Death Education Support sponsors a yearly conference that is well attended. It is aimed at professionals and volunteers who work to support

caregivers. This is general end-of-life education and does not include Jewish practices nor is it sponsored by any Jewish agency. In the Shenandoah Valley area in Virginia, several synagogue chevrei kadisha joined together to deliver classes on Jewish practices around death and burial. It was poorly attended despite extensive publicity and support from the rabbis. When they later recruited, from the local university, a physician ethicist and an attorney involved in advance directives to give a presentation, it was very well attended (50-75 people.) The presentation did not involve any information about Jewish culture. To our knowledge, there has been no wide-scale offering to the general Jewish public in this country or in Canada. To quote one well-known distributor of Jewish learning materials for children and adults, "No one wants to teach it and no one wants to talk about it."<sup>1</sup>

### **OUR EAST BAY COMMUNITY**

To the best of our knowledge, there have never been any comprehensive goals for education about Jewish end-of-life practices and traditions in the East Bay. Our goal is to establish a plan that will not only develop a series of targeted curricula, but will establish a plan to reach both affiliated, but primarily unaffiliated, Jewish populations in Alameda and Contra Costa counties. Our proposed planning program, will help our organization to meet a special one-time need. This need is one-time because once a comprehensive program is in place, it can be used for many years to come.

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Grishover: Torah Aura Productions

## WHY BURY OUR DEAD?

There is a decided lack of cultural competence when it comes to Jewish practices related to death and burial. This may be evidenced by the number of Jewish families choosing cremation rather than the Jewish practices of tahara, shmira, burial, and the subsequent customs of mourning including shiva and shloshim. These practices are an essential part of Jewish life and culture.

There are two Torah portions that directly command us to bury our dead:

*"By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread,*

*Until you return to the soil, for from it you were taken*

*For you are dust, and to dust shall you return"<sup>2</sup>*

and

*"...give me title to a burial holding among you,*

*So that I may bury my dead from my presence."<sup>3</sup>*

There are many Jews who might not be swayed toward burial as a result of biblical references.

## THE QUESTION OF CREMATION

There are two common reasons cremation is chosen over in-ground burial.

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 3:19 Everett Fox

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 23:4 Everett Fox

The first are environmental issues. In-ground burial simply takes up too much real estate that is, in essence, wasted. Cremation, on the other hand, is kinder to the environment.

It should be remembered that the heating of crematoria chambers to very high temperatures is accomplished through the use of fossil fuel. This alone can hardly be considered an environmentally sound practice.

Many environmentalists remain skeptical about the environmental impact of cremation. There have been several studies demonstrating the consequences of the pollutants emitted from the crematoria smokestacks.<sup>4</sup> Carbon monoxide as a by-product of combustion, sulfur dioxide and trace metals are all released into the atmosphere.

"Of all emissions, however, mercury poses the biggest threat to the health of the living."<sup>5</sup> Mercury is found in dental fillings, and once combusted and released into the atmosphere, it is blown by winds into bodies of water where it is taken up by fish and eventually consumed by humans. Mercury is extremely toxic, especially to children, resulting in state and local agencies imposing strict pollution caps on crematoria.

Any metal from medical implants or jewelry often survive cremation intact and must be removed from the ashes manually. Batteries, such as those in pacemakers and other devices can explode and are extremely dangerous to crematorium staff.

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<sup>4</sup> Kornbluth, Doron: *Cremation or Burial*, Mosaica Press, 2012

<sup>5</sup> Harris, Mark: *Grave Matters*, Scribner, 2007

As with the practice of embalming, utilized to make the dead appear as in life, cremation is marketed as clean and safe and avoids "rotting in a grave." If an actual description of exactly what happens to the human body when it is being incinerated is conveyed to a family, one would think twice about disposing of a loved one in this manner. It is not necessary, for the purpose of this proposal, to go into that detail. One would like the readers of this report to be able to sleep without nightmares. Still, the reality of the purity of the cremated remains is so suspect the State of California requires crematoriums to provide clients with the following disclosure: "Nearly all of the contents of the cremation chamber, consisting of the cremated remains, disintegrated chamber material, and small amounts of residue from previous cremations are removed together and crushed, pulverized, or ground to facilitate inurnment or scattering. Some residue remains in the cracks...of the chamber."<sup>6</sup>

## **THE CASE FOR IN-GROUND BURIAL**

Burial in the earth is an environmentally sound practice. That is especially true of traditional Jewish burials where embalming and metals are not used for the burial. It is even truer if one uses a "green" cemetery, such as Gan Yarok in Mill Valley, CA. In these cemeteries, vaults, embalming, metal caskets and grave lining is prohibited. Bodies are buried either in shrouds, or completely decomposable coffins. Grave markers are made of rocks or boulders found on the property. There is no "tending"

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<sup>6</sup> Op. Cit., Kornbluth

of the ground, and wildlife flourishes without interference from humans. The human remains naturally fertilize the soils promoting the growth of vegetation that nourishes wildlife. Green burial may very well be an idea whose time has come as the current generation, know as the Baby Boomers, are generally more environmentally concerned and educated than have been previous generations.

The second most common deciding factor between burial and cremation is cost.

The cost of cremation in this country ranges from about \$1,200 to 2,100, the average being about \$1,800. Costs depend on whether or not various services are used, such as picking up of the remains from place of death to crematorium, viewing of the body, use of the chapel for a funeral, and type of container used during the cremation, and an urn or burial plot.

Funerals, on the other hand, can cost up to \$10,000 depending on factors noted above, although the coffin will be considerably more expensive. Included in this cost would also be the embalming of the remains and a headstone.

Jewish funerals cost considerably less; usually about \$4,000 to \$6,000 again, depending upon services used. None of these costs include the cemetery plot., which can be several thousand dollars more.

It is obvious, therefore, that if Jewish practice is not a priority, families may very well choose cremation based on cost alone.



## **WILL EDUCATION CHANGE PRACTICE?**

This proposal for the planning of an educational program on Jewish end of life practices will be one important method of teaching the importance of Jewish ritual. We cannot change the importance of cost when making burial decisions for one's self or a loved one. We can attempt to change how people view the importance of Jewish ritual, both historically and in the present. We can also explore how people view the soul and perhaps the afterlife.

The purpose of the Jewish rituals of tahara, shmira, and shiva is to treat the dead with utmost dignity and respect. These rituals are also for the living. They help with grief, build a sense of community because the community is involved, and continue a practice that has been with us for thousands of years. It is our Jewish heritage. Education is not a cure-all, but knowledge is known to influence practice, and a change in practice is the goal of this proposal.

## **WHY COMMUNITY EDUCATION?**

There have been synagogue seminars and classes on the subject of Chevra Kadisha and Jewish customs, but they reach predominantly the affiliated members of that specific synagogue. Most synagogues already have a structure for this type of education in place.

Part of the mission of the Gamliel Institute, and its parent organization Kavod v'Nichum, is to bring this education to Jewish communities in the United States and

Canada. Our goal locally is to develop a plan that will reach specific, targeted groups of unaffiliated Jewish residents.

Both the East Bay Chevra Kadisha Consortium, and this project, student products of the Gamliel Institute, designed to be implemented locally.

The plan will bring together leaders and members of interest groups likely to include unaffiliated Jewish people as well as Jews involved in interfaith marriages. In some cases, young people are included, as they are facing the same issues of needing to make decisions when they are faced with the death of parents or other relatives.

## **THE PLAN**

The proposed one-time plan for developing a program of Alameda and Contra Costa education around end-of-life practices will consist of five meetings of approximately 3 hours each during a one year period. The Planning Committee will consist of carefully chosen Jewish leaders from all walks of Jewish life in these East Bay communities. The following chart illustrates the members we hope to recruit, the populations they represent, and the rationale for inclusion. Many have already expressed interest when they learned we are applying for a grant specifically for this purpose.

POPULATION	RATIONALE
Dean, Gamliel Institute	Author of <i>Chesed Shal Emet</i> and <i>Give Me Your Hand</i> . Dean of the Gamliel Institute
Lead organizer, East Bay Chevra Kadisha Consortium; leader of Chevra Kadisha at Temple Sinai in Oakland	Consortium members are heads of the individual Synagogue based Chevrei Kadisha in the East Bay.
Jewish Family Services	Supports Jewish individuals and families during times of need.
Midrasha: Jewish Teenage population	A 1990 study of Jewish teens in Reform Congregations found that Jewish teenagers know little of Jewish customs related to death.
Geriatric Populations	Usually the group most interested in end of life choices
Reutlinger Assisted Living and Skilled Nursing, a Jewish Home	Senior Community
Sinai Memorial Chapel	Sinai Memorial is a non-profit Jewish mortuary that works with Chevrei Kadisha in the area.

Mandel Foundation's Teacher Education Institute	National experts in Adult Jewish Education
Faculty, Graduate Theological Union	A highly respected graduate education university
Rabbi of a Jewish Orthodox congregation	Represents the Orthodox or Modern Orthodox populations in the East Bay
A local Jewish Chaplain	Represents Chaplaincy services and deals with people who may be dying.
Young adults with young children	Represents the group dealing with aging parents
Senior Educator at Lehrhaus Judaica	Represents one of the primary Jewish Education organizations
Cemetery Administrator	Represents the Jewish Cemeteries used by East Bay Jewish populations
Representative from the Jewish Healing Center	Represents population living with mental and physical illness.
Representative from the LGBT community	There are Jews within this growing population
An Attorney	One who is expert on Advance Directives and advanced medical

	planning
Chair of Chevra Kadisha of Congregation Netivot Shalom in Berkeley. Contact person for this project	Registered nurse and educator working with senior population.

### **OUTCOME MEASUREMENTS**

Outcomes would be measured as follows:

At the end of one year have we will have developed:

- A written plan for reaching target groups,
- Sample or definitive curricula for educating target groups,
- A plan for mounting community awareness and dissemination of information regarding the programs aimed at each group,
- A plan for implementing the program in target groups, including but not limited to, space for meeting, budget for education, and instructors for education.
- A brochure describing the plan for the academic year 2015.

### **PROPOSED BUDGET**

All pieces of the proposed program will be directly supported by grant dollars.

Estimate of expenses is as follows:

ITEM	UNIT COST	TOTAL COST	COMMENTS
Honoraria: 15 participants	\$100	\$1500	Token amount
Meeting space: 5 meetings	\$40/hr X 3 hours \$120/mtg., 5 mtgs.	\$600	Based on mtg. room rental fees at local synagogues
Printing of brochure	Unknown	Approximately \$1000	Definitive amount unknown at this time
Administrative support	Approx. \$20/hr. Est. 40/hrs	\$800	Taking of minutes and other clerical duties
Kosher Food/Beverages	Light refreshment for 16 people X5 meetings	\$1000	This is an estimate. Parts may be donated.
Miscellaneous expenses	Unknown	Unknown	Printing, copying, postage; Will aim for electronic communication
TOTAL:		\$4900	Estimate

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## FINAL REPORT

On August 14, 2014, The East Bay Chevra Kadisha Consortium received a grant of \$4,900 in support of our "Elephant in the Room" proposal. The award was granted by the Nutik Zitter Family Philanthropic Fund of The Jewish Community Foundation of the East Bay. The "Lead Professional" for this project is Edna Stewart, MPH, RN.

The two goals identified for this project were:

- Establishing a "planning committee" comprised of leaders of many aspects of Jewish life that would be concerned with sickness, death, burial and mourning.
- Developing a curriculum that would reach the populations identified by this "planning committee."

Edna Stewart, Dr. Dan Fendel, Executive Director of the aforementioned Consortium, and Rabbi Stuart Kelman collaborated on the initial membership of the Committee. Dr. Fendel and Rabbi Kelman provided ongoing involvement, participation, and support of the project. Many thanks also to Dana Sheanin of the Federation for skillfully facilitating our first three meetings and for her ongoing advice and support.

In addition to those mentioned above, the Committee was composed of 16 members from various Jewish organizations in Alameda and Contra Costa counties. A total of five general meetings and two subcommittee meetings were held. \$1702 was spent for catering, and \$2010.57 for administrative supplies and support. \$1186.49 was sent to Lehrhaus Judaica for printing and mailing costs related to the outcome of this project.

As we stated in our grant proposal, to the best of our knowledge, there have never been any comprehensive goals for education about Jewish practices and traditions related to the care of the sick, dying, and those in mourning. Our goal was to establish a plan to develop a series of targeted curricula that will reach both affiliated and, hopefully, non-affiliated Jewish populations. Once a comprehensive program is in place, it can be used for many years to come.

The Committee met in small working groups organized around three potential populations: professionals: e.g., rabbis and physicians; the "sandwich generation": i.e., adults with children and aging parents; and people facing their own mortality. The latter group consisted not only of those with terminal illness, but also those working with people who are seeking information, for whatever reason, about Jewish burial. These working groups



identified key issues they would want discussed with their target groups, and ideas of how best to reach these groups.

After three meetings devoted to these topics, a subcommittee met twice to determine where there was overlap between the groups, and how best to design a curriculum that might reach these groups. Using the Kalsman Model of their Week of Wellness, albeit on a much smaller scale, we called our project "A Year of Focused Learning." The draft of a curriculum was then developed and brought to the fourth meeting of the larger Committee. The idea of a focused year of learning was presented to Lehrhaus Judaica by committee member Rabbi Peretz Wolf-Prusan. Lehrhaus agreed to make this the focus of the 2016-2017 school year, beginning January, 2016. This gives us access to their website, registration system and publicity and provides the pedagogical arm for the program. We consider this to be the primary success of our project.

The final meeting of the Planning Committee took place on June 23, 2015, where those attending the meeting offered suggestions and additions to the curriculum, and chose a name. We had wanted to change the name from "The Elephant in the Room," because one of our primary goals was to change the conversation about death and burial so it would become easier and more comfortable. The new tentative name will be "Walking (Talking) in the Shadow: Integrating Conversations about Illness and Death." The minutes of this meeting will be sent, as has been our practice, to all members of the Committee. We will be soliciting their feedback as to the final version of the curriculum. Suggestions for teachers for the courses were also submitted. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this project was keeping a committee of so many outstanding representatives of the many Jewish populations here in the East Bay focused on the overall goals. Our Committee was comprised of individuals who are busy and committed, and finding times for meetings, when most could attend, was another challenge. In this case we are grateful we live with the convenience of email.

On behalf of the entire project, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Federation and to the Nutik Zitter Family Philanthropic Fund for providing the Grant that allowed us to accomplish so much this year. Now our work is only beginning.

Edna Stewart

## PLANNING COMMITTEE for "The Elephant in the Room"

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