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Final Project – Gamliel Institute Course #3: Organizing a Hevra Kadisha

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If You Were a Chevrah Kadisha, What Type Would You Be?

Criteria to Consider

When Choosing an Organizational Structure Chevrah Kadisha

That is Best for Your Community

If you're reading this, you're already interested in forming a *Chevrah kadisha*. This article will help you learn a bit about the organizational structures of *Chevrai kadisha* and will suggest some questions to consider to help you determine the type of *Chevrah kadisha* that makes the most sense for your community.

According to the Gamliel Institute, *Chevrai kadisha* come in three varieties: community-based, synagogue-based, and facility-based. Variations exist within these three varieties, as well, and there are examples of hybrid models, which will be addressed after the three primary models are described.

Community-based Chevrai Kadisha

These *Chevrai kadisha* are based on the model of the old *landsmanschaften*, community groups that were created to meet new immigrants' needs. They were organized by the community from which the particular immigrants originated, so the immigrants essentially transferred their community organization services from "the old country" to the U.S. and Canada. These *landsmanschaften* provided burial services to members, and this was often the first service set up in the new country.

While the *landsmanschaften* of the late 19th and early 20th centuries haven't survived into the 21st century, there are still community-based *chevrai kadisha* in operation, with new ones forming all the time. The community may come together as a group of Jews interested in reviving Jewish burial practices in an area where there is no *Chevrah kadisha*, or it may come together with the goal of forming a "progressive" alternative to the primarily Orthodox *chevrai kadisha* available in an area.

Community-based *chevrai kadisha* may operate with the cooperation of one or more funeral homes in the area, where the *taharot*, and if included, the *shmirot* will be performed. Some are starting to perform *tahara* and *shmira* in individuals' homes. The

community-based *chevrah kadisha* may sew its own *tachrichim* and make its own caskets; it may create its own prayers and its own procedures; and it trains its own members.

Community-based *chevrai kadisha* may hold information and education sessions in the community.

Typically, a steering committee composed of those starting up the *Chevrah* is formed at the outset. This group will make the decisions for the *Chevrah* and will also organize the educational and outreach efforts for the group.

Synagogue-based Chevrai Kadisha

Within the past twenty or thirty years, increasing numbers of non-Orthodox synagogues have been forming *chevrai kadisha*. These groups may offer services to their members including liaising with the family from the moment of death through the funeral arrangements, *tahara*, *shmira* and supporting the family after interment and *shloshim*. Some synagogue-based *chevrai kadisha* send all of the congregation's members a form for facilitating the care of the deceased members that is kept on file at the synagogue, so the team can move into action as soon as the death of a congregant occurs. These *chevrai kadisha* members are frequently the first people contacted after death occurs, and they work closely with the congregational rabbi, relieving her/him of some of the work the rabbi tends to do when a *chevrah kadisha* isn't involved, such as liaising with the funeral home and cemetery. In some cases, small congregations have formed *chevrai kadisha* together, availing each congregation's members of its services.

Synagogue-based *chevrai kadisha* often hold information and education sessions for congregants.

Facility-based Chevrai Kadisha

Some synagogues and some community *chevrah kadisha* groups have decided to operate a funeral home. Some Jewish funeral homes have a close working relationship with a single *chevrah kaddisha*.

Facility-based *chevrai kadisha* may hold information and education sessions in the community. Decisions will most likely be made by the owners of the property and practitioners of the *taharot*.

Hybrid Models

In small communities where there may only be one synagogue in the area, the synagogue may offer *taharah* not only to its members but also to those Jews living in the

area who are unaffiliated with it. The synagogue might then consider a differentiated fee structure or request a donation to the *chevrah* or to the synagogue for those who are not members.

Another hybrid is the community- and synagogue-based model. The Community Hevra Kadisha of Greater Boston, for example, describes itself as “an independent, non-denominational organization of individuals, synagogues, Hebrew College and other Jewish Institutions committed to making the full range of burial rituals accessible and available to the entire Jewish Community.”

What Kind of Chevrah Kadisha Is Right for Your Population?

What follows is a list of considerations for deciding what kind of *chevrah kadisha* makes sense in your situation.

- *Are you a member of a Jewish congregation?*

If you are a member of a Jewish congregation, it will be important to explore the synagogue-based model. Begin a conversation with the spiritual leader—rabbi, cantor or lay leader—to ascertain the leader’s interest. It will also be important to begin conversations with other interested parties, such as the Board, Chairs of such committees as Religious Practices, Caring and, if applicable, Cemetery. It may be easiest to draw from existing structures in place in the congregation, rather than starting from scratch. There is also the benefit of working within the Jewish spiritual year to do teaching about Jewish death practices, such as giving *divrei* Torah, using Shabbat “lunch and learn” times to educate, and the rabbi may choose to speak about Jewish death practices at the High Holidays.

The synagogue-based model already assumes that the congregational community will take care of its own. For example, most synagogues will provide siddurim and other support for *shiva minyanim*. So, it may not be a huge leap for the synagogue to consider including *chevrah kadisha* services.

- *Are there other chevrai kadisha in the area?*

If you are in an area in which *chevrai kadisha* are already operating, it would be important to learn what they are doing, who they are serving, and whether or not your community might join with an existing group, both as service consumers and to be trained in *tahara* and *shmira*. If you are starting a *chevrah kadisha* where other *chevrai* exist, determine what will differentiate your *chevrah kadisha* from those already

available. Recognize, too, that starting your own group may ruffle feathers of established *chevrah kadisha* groups, so prepare for that.

It seems that until recently, most *chevrai kadisha* worked within a very traditional framework. That framework may work just fine for your group, or your group may want to expand beyond the traditional framework. For example, many traditional *chevrai kadisha* will not prepare bodies for eventual cremation; some progressive *chevrai* may choose to do so.

- *Is there a building available, will you work with a funeral home, or will you do in-home tahara and shmira?*

If your group has access to its own space, you may need to make alterations in the space for it to work best. Visit funeral homes to see what you might want to replicate and what you might want to alter. Find out what the local and state laws are pertaining to the care of bodies after death. Learn about caring for the health of the *tahara* and *shmira* team.

If you are going to work with an existing funeral home, be sure to meet with the owners/directors to let them know your needs and to learn theirs. Can you leave your equipment in the space; will there be a designated space; what kinds of accommodations, such as outdoor lighting and after-hours accessibility, are available to *shmira* teams, etc?

If you are going to do in-home *tahara* and *shmira*, you'll need to learn the local laws for caring for a body after death. This may be challenging.

- *How many taharot/shmirot do you anticipate doing in a year?*

Some communities perform hundreds, some dozens, and some a handful of *taharot* in a given year. If you anticipate dozens or just a handful, it may make sense to team up with other groups in your area.

- *Age of community members.*

Is your community young, healthy and strong, aging, or a combination? There is a significant amount of physical work involved with *tahara*, and while communities have made accommodations in how they perform *taharot* so that their less physically able members can participate, a traditional *tahara* takes some strength on the part of the team members. Your facility may have access to lifts, which helps, but there is still physical exertion involved.

In some communities, only the elder members are performing *taharot*. You will have to ascertain availability of a core group of men and women before moving forward with starting a *chevrah kadisha*.

Chevrai kadisha based in synagogues will have the advantage of ready-made populations of potential *tahara* team members; these will have to be recruited if you go with a community-based model, but there may be a much wider pool from which to draw.

- *What's the demand in the community?*

Have you surveyed the population in the area to ascertain that *chevrah kadisha* services are understood and desired? It's likely that you'll need to do education and outreach before you create your group to discover how desirable the service is to potential users, and that you will need to continue this after the group's formation. In many progressive communities, very few people may even know what a *chevrah kadisha* is, let alone that they want to have a *tahara* themselves. Often, however, once people learn about this tradition, they choose it for themselves and loved ones. Education will be key to attracting people to be trained for *tahara* teams and recruiting consumers for *tahara* and *shmira*.

- *What is your fund generating capacity?*

There are some costs involved with *tahara*, such as the purchase of *tachrichim*, the shrouds in which the *tahara* team dress the deceased or the raw materials for sewing them yourself. Perhaps larger costs will be for educating and outreach, as well as sending members to conferences.

Synagogue-based models, particularly if there is a cemetery included and a space for doing *tahara*, sometimes include a set fee charged to all members to include *tahara* and burial of their congregants. Community-based models sometimes charge no fee to individuals or charge a yearly membership fee to the groups included in the *chevrah kadisha*, and they may do fundraising activities in addition to education and outreach.

- *Knowledge and willingness to learn on the part of potential chevrah kadisha members*

Your synagogue may already have a core group of individuals—there will need to be both men and women—who have some knowledge about *tahara* and *shmira* already. Once people begin to learn about *chevrah kadisha* work, they may want to sign up and get trained. You will still need a core group who are at least a few steps ahead in terms of what they know about the process and rituals. For example, will your group pray in Hebrew or English or both? If in Hebrew, reading Hebrew fluently will be a skill you'll

need to find in *tahara* team members. Has anyone in your nascent group performed a *tahara*? Someone will need to take the “head” role, or be the *rosh* for each *tahara*, and this would likely be the most experienced person.

A synagogue model has the potential advantage of having the most people available with the skill sets you’ll need, plus a rabbi on hand to make certain determinations with regard to Jewish legal questions. However, as mentioned earlier, the community-based model has the potential advantage of drawing from a broader pool of people.

Summary

Choosing between community-based, synagogue-based and facility-based models of *Chevrai Kadisha* depends upon the needs and education about *Chevrai Kadisha* of the community you want to serve, what is already available in the community, the anticipated members of the *Chevrah* and the resources you have available to you. In places where the synagogue is the center of Jewish life in the community, it may make sense to work through that institution to form a *Chevrah*. Where there are several synagogues in an area, as well as a known population of unaffiliated Jews, it might be preferable to join together in a community-based *Chevrah*. If there’s an existing building—perhaps on the grounds of the Jewish cemetery, for example—it would be worthwhile to investigate turning that building into a *Chevrah*, essentially creating the *Chevrah* around the building.

If there are only Orthodox *Chevrai Kaddisha* in the area, some Jews won’t be eligible or won’t choose to use them. If there are no *Chevrai* of any kind, plan to do some educating in the community, whether in the synagogue community solely or in the broader Jewish community, before getting started at forming a *Chevrah*. It’s a lot of work, so you want to be sure that there is a need your *Chevrah* will be filling when it’s up and running.



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Marketing Bit

So, you think you want to start a Chevrah Kadisha in your community. Great! Read this article to learn about the different models of Chevrai Kadisha that exist and to find out what you need to know about your community in choosing the right model for you.

Abstract

If you are considering forming a *Chevrah Kadisha*, you have probably begun to learn about what they do and how they function. Yet there's more to forming a *Chevrah* than knowing their purpose or even how to purify, dress, pray for and watch over a deceased person. This article is the next step in your learning, giving you practical tips for determining the kind of *Chevrah* that is right for your community. There are basically three types of *Chevrai kadisha*, as well as hybrid models incorporating elements of each of the types typically functioning in North America today. Each has advantages, and there is probably one best model for your community. The choice of which type is best for your community depends upon the people you intend to serve, other burial services available in your area, and the resources to which your group has access or can eventually access.

Elevator Speech

Did you know that the Jewish burial society is currently being reincarnated? It's very exciting to know that once again, you can have your body and the body of loved ones cared for in a meaningful, spiritual and traditional way instead of leaving it all to an impersonal funeral home. But you want to do some research before you go out and start a *Chevrah Kadisha* yourself. What kind will it be? How do you know which one is right for you? I recommend this article to begin that discovery.

Big Idea

In order to investigate starting a *Chevrah kadisha* in a community where no *Chevrai kadisha* exist, I plan to research existing models. I will consider questions such as working within the local synagogue structure versus working outside of the synagogue; liaising with the local funeral home; the amount of need in the community; the ability to train those interested in becoming part of *taharah* teams; and the costs that the *Chevrah* anticipated. I will also consider the educational and outreach programming that will be necessary in the community, as well as creating an infrastructure for the *Chevrah* that will make decisions guiding the *taharot*.