

Ohr Kodesh Chevra Kaddisha and COVID-19

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Dear Chevra Kaddisha Coordinators and Volunteers,

Hopefully this message finds you well during this strange time. I hope you and yours are and remain healthy. I am writing you to inform you about our current plan for when deaths occur in our community during this period of social distancing. **PLEASE read at least the section that pertains to your participation.** Of course, as you are well aware, the guidance and information available change regularly, as does the situation on the ground. I will keep you informed as best I can in a timely manner. Our aim is to keep us safe while also treating our metim/ot with honor and respect, and providing whatever support we can to their mourners.

So far, I have worked with the healthcare team at OK, with experts at NIH, and am also receiving information from the CDC, as well as from Hines-Rinaldi, the Jewish Funeral Practices Committee of Greater Washington, and other relevant professionals. I have distilled the information below and sorted it as best I was able to.

If there are issues I overlooked, please let me know and I will adjust whatever needs adjusting. This is an iterative project if ever I've seen one. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me. If you prefer to contact me by phone, call me at 202-476-0124.

Thank you for your service to our congregation, especially at a difficult time like this. We don't do this for the recognition or gratitude, but I hope that you all know that both those feelings are amply present among those who benefit from your efforts in carrying out these sacred tasks.

May you and yours remain healthy, may our situation soon return to normalcy, and may this be a time when the Chevra Kaddisha is called on very little,

Gidon

### **Shmira**

Shmira can take place as usual, as long as Hines-Rinaldi remains open for business. However, we will ONLY arrange for shmira if there is not going to be another shomer in the shmira room at the same time. This is for reasons of social distancing. Shmira coordinators should check first with Hines-Rinaldi to see whether another shomer will be present simultaneously. If there is no other shomer present at the time we need coverage, we can send shomrim. Please notify citywide shmira when we will have a presence at Hines-Rinaldi.

### **Funerals at Ohr Kodesh**

According to the latest [guidance of the CDC](#) and the White House, gatherings over 10 people should be avoided for the next 8 weeks (through May 10th). In practice, this means the following:

- Funerals will be private, with only invited attendees present.
- Funerals will be held at the graveside. We urge families that wish to allow larger participation in a funeral to consider livestreaming the funeral on Facebook, Zoom or other such platforms.
- *Shiv'a* and condolence visits should be conducted by phone or virtually. We will endeavor to ensure that every Nichumim-Condolence message includes a phone number and an email address where the family can be contacted to express condolences.

### **Meal of Condolence**

A Meal of Condolence may be brought. Please drop off any meals at the door with appropriate expressions of sympathy. If no meal is likely to be brought, the General Coordinators will ensure that an appropriate platter is delivered from one of the kosher venues in the area.

Meal trains will be extra important during this period! If you would like to coordinate one, please contact the General Coordinators for the month.

### **Shiv'a**

As stated, the [CDC](#) has indicated that, for the next 8 weeks, gatherings over 10 people should be avoided (that is, through May 10th). Thus, we strongly urge that no in-person shiv'a be held, and that attendance be discouraged. A "prayer in lieu of kaddish" has been included in the daily virtual eOK gatherings at 8pm. We can, of course, provide shiv'a chairs, siddurim and a yahrzeit candle as needed.

Of course, especially during a time of mourning, we look to our community and friends for comfort and strength, and we know that it must be terribly hard to forego even that solace during the shiv'a period - it adds insult to injury. We will try to include other contact information in the community announcements, so that visits can be conducted by phone, and perhaps by Facetime, Skype, Zoom etc.

### **Tahara - General**

This is the most complicated area, so please bear with me as I attempt to present this chaotic situation in an organized manner.

I am numbering this section purely for ease of reference, not for importance or chronology.

1. First and foremost: we will continue to honor our metim/ot, deceased, through regular Tahara, as long as we don't receive guidance to the contrary. After that point, we will carry out dry Taharas. We will continue to carry out this mitzva to the best of our ability in a manner that is safe for us and honors the *met(a)*.
2. Coronavirus 2019 is mostly spread through respiratory pathways/particles. That said, much remains unknown about the virus, including its ability to survive on a surface outside of a host. The following instructions are based on consultations with various authorities, both medical and rabbinic, about the current situation. This will likely continue to evolve, and I will adjust the information accordingly. In the case of a Tahara, the concern is about contamination between team members, and about possible aerosolization of the virus in the air due to water splashing. That is what we tried to remedy in these guidelines.

3. So far, there has been no need in the DC area to perform a Tahara on anyone who was known to be infected with or exposed to the Coronavirus. We may be called upon to do so in the next weeks/months. Hines-Rinaldi and the other area funeral homes involved in Jewish funerals, have been in touch with a team from Adas Israel, with the Jewish Funeral Practices Committee of Greater Washington and with the citywide Chevra Kaddisha, and have reassured them that they will maintain fully stocked supplies.
4. Hines-Rinaldi will do the following:
  1. The Tahara room will be sanitized/disinfected after each Tahara.
  2. Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs - masks, gowns, gloves, booties.) will now be stored outside the Tahara room in the hall outside the room for shomrim. M'taharim/ot will don their gear before entering the tahara room.
  3. The bin for discarding PPEs is now located just inside the door of the Tahara room so that we can disrobe and discard of them there.
  4. Heavy-duty gloves and hair coverings are now available as part of the PPE.
  5. Hines-Rinaldi will also stock masks and face shields, which should be used in all cases. While the risk of respiratory infection from a met(a) is considered limited, the team members are in close proximity to one another. The masks will help prevent spreading the virus from one team member to another.
  6. The desk in the Tahara room will be marked as "clean space" and should not be touched with "contaminated" gloves. Hand sanitizer is available on the desk to be used after disrobing. Then hands can be washed again in the Shomrim bathroom (rather than washing at the "contaminated" sink in the Tahara room).
5. I understand that you are all volunteers, and that you have to take care of your own safety and well-being first. My goal is to keep everyone safe, but your well-being is your own to monitor. You make your own choices according to your level of confidence and comfort, and I - and we all - understand that different people make differing decisions during this sort of time. So **with the most respect for your choices, I ask the following:**
  1. If you are uncomfortable carrying out Tahara during this time for any reason, please **let me know** and I will note this so you are not called on until the current restrictions are lifted.
  2. If you are ill or exhibit any of the symptoms of illness (cough, fever, etc.), do not carry out a Tahara.
  3. If you are in an at-risk population, due to age, a chronic condition or immuno-compromised, do not carry out a Tahara.
  4. If you wish to perform Tahara only for individuals that have not knowingly been infected with or exposed to COVID-19, you don't need to take any action.
  5. In case we are faced with a met(a) who was known to be infected with/exposed to COVID-19, we will specifically indicate that in our requests for m'taharim/ot, so you will have an opportunity then to decide whether to perform the Tahara or not. More experienced m'taharim/ot will be approached first.

6. Please carefully consider your decisions in this matter, and speak with your families. Rabbi Fishman is available to discuss this matter, as am I.

### ***Tahara Precautions***

Please consider the following guidelines for use during the Tahara. They have been compiled by me from guidance from the [CDC](#), NIH professionals, the Jewish Funeral Practices Committee of Greater Washington, and Rabbi Elchonon Zohn of the National Association of Chevra Kadisha. (I have already shared some of those resources with relevant coordinators, and will share all of them with anyone upon request.)

1. We always use the usual universal precautions:
  1. Gloves
  2. Disposable gowns that cover the arms to the wrist
  3. Booties
  4. Head Covers
  5. Face Masks and goggles. Face shields may be preferable in case the mask causes glasses to fog up or cannot work correctly due to facial hair.
2. The team will ensure that they have instructions for donning and removing PPE with them at the Tahara venue.
3. Before going into the room, the team would take a "PPE Time Out". One team member will be designated as the equipment checker, or "scrub nurse": this person will demonstrate putting on their own PPE, and then oversee the donning for the other team members, ensuring that this is done correctly. The same will happen for the removing of the PPE after the Tahara is done.
4. All supplies that might be needed for the Tahara, should be prepared in advance: Q-tips, scissors, nail-polish remover and other solutions, towels, tachrichin, water, etc.
5. Discard all supplies that you had prepared but did not use. Do not simply restock them. That would defeat the purpose of the room cleaning in between Taharot.
6. Please follow Hines-Rinaldi's guidelines and instructions. They have our safety in mind. If their instructions impact the Tahara and you are worried about this, please call Rabbi Fishman, myself, or the Tahara consultants listed in the roster.

### ***Tahara Procedure in cases where the met(a) was known to have been infected with COVID-19:***

- We will ask the Hines-Rinaldi staff to casket the met(a).
- We will send in a minimal team (1 or 2 people, to minimize contamination between them).
- The Tahara team will carry out a "dry Tahara", i.e. they say the appropriate texts, lay the tachrichin (and tallit) on top of the body, add the earth and shards, close the coffin and leave.
- In case of a met(a) who was infected with/exposed to COVID-19:
  1. Use N-95 masks and goggles (I am still on the hunt for some of those), or the plexiglass facial shields.
  2. The Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is crucial. Help each other ensure that you are putting them on correctly, and assist one another verbally in the disrobing too! If you need a reminder on how to don or remove the tools, [check here](#), and ask your team mates before entering the room.

3. The Personal Protective Equipment should, as always, be disposed of as a biohazard.
4. Body bags should be disposed of as a biohazard, and only handled with PPE in place.  
(There shouldn't be any body bags to handle if the Hines-Rinaldi staff puts the met(a) in the body.)

***Tahara Procedure in cases where the met(a) was NOT known to have been infected with COVID-19:***

- For the initial washing, we will wash the met(a) with cloths rather than pouring water.
- No pouring water for the tahara itself. Simply say the texts, then dress the met(a) in tachrichin and continue as usual.

***Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Training***

The OK healthcare team suggested that we make sure that those doing Tahara at this time are properly trained in the donning and doffing (putting on and removing) of the Personal Protective Equipment. Especially after the Tahara, it is crucial that the equipment be removed in a manner that ensures that the wearer remains free from contaminants.

If you are to participate in a Tahara during this time, please read/do the following:

1) Please watch the following video (2.5inutes):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnJcjbgsSN74>

2) Similar content is available in poster and slide format at:

<https://www.cdc.gov/hai/pdfs/ppe/ppe-sequence.pdf> and

<https://www.slideserve.com/dutch/donning-and-doffing-of-ppe>

3) We are considering organizing an in-person (yeah, you read that right) PPE training for all m'taharim/ot who will be involved in the next weeks. This will depend on the availability of the gear for training. We would practice the correct technique for donning and doffing the PPE, while of course maintaining our social distance. Details will follow.