

What Shmirah Means to Shomrim

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Lately the general culture is becoming more “death positive” on many fronts. More and more, people are opting for hospice care once it’s clear that additional treatments would be futile; there’s a trend toward natural or green burial; and you can even participate in a death café, an event where people get together to drink tea, eat cake, and discuss death, for the purpose of becoming more comfortable with this natural process. As a long-time shomeret and Area Coordinator of Austin Shmirah, I find the Jewish traditions surrounding death to be emotionally, spiritually, and environmentally positive as well.

The Hebrew word *shmirah* means guarding, protecting, or watching. The word is related to the first word in the prayer “Ve**Sh**a**MR**u b’nei Israel et ha-Shabbat” (“The children of Israel shall *observe* or *keep* the Sabbath”). Through *shmirah*, from death to burial, the Jewish *meit*, or deceased person, is prayerfully or mindfully accompanied by *shomrim*, or watchers/protectors. With *taharah* (ritual body wash) and *shmirah*, even after death we remain connected with the Jewish community and can die knowing we’ll be lovingly and respectfully cared for when we can no longer look after ourselves. Traditionally, *shomrim* recite Psalms; some read other appropriate texts, meditate, or simply “be there” for the *meit* on his or her journey.

In the Words of Those Who Serve

I asked the members of Austin Shmirah what this practice means to them, and their very moving responses touched on a number of different aspects of the mitzvah.

The custom of not being thanked: Because the dead can’t speak, *shomrim* are not thanked. Many *shomrim* commented that they *like* not being thanked for their service.

But several challenged the idea that they receive no reward. They described themselves as grateful for “the opportunity to be present at such a monumental time in the life of a fellow Jew.” One shomeret wrote,

When you say it's doing a mitzvah for a person who can't give it back, I don't think that's true. I've learned more about Judaism because of these deceased that I've sat with They're still teaching, or fostering a teachable moment. So I can also say that I'm giving *them* one last chance to do a mitzvah as they pass on.

This person feels it's the *meit* who's doing the mitzvah and the *shomer* who can't express gratitude for the kindness. Along the same lines, another shomeret commented:

I feel so grateful afterwards. I feel a sense of awe that we live and die, and that we choose to sit with our people, whether we knew them or not, and pray.

Shmirah is usually done anonymously. One shomer compared it to one of the highest levels of tzedakah.

Just as there are eight levels of tzedakah, with the second highest being when the giver does not know who the recipient is and vice versa, sitting there with someone I've probably never met makes me feel human, and that I have done something for the person, their family, and Judaism.

Comforting mourners: Some serve for the sake of the mourners. One shomer wrote that after his mother died, “a team of shomrim whom my brothers and I didn't even know immediately stepped up.” He now serves in order to “pay that gift forward.” Another shomeret expressed a similar sentiment as follows.

When my mother was dying, my sister was amazed that there were people who would sit with our mom after she died. She told me that this is the best volunteer work I do. I now serve as a shomeret in my mom's memory.

Honoring/comforting the *meit*: Many shomrim sense the presence of the *meit* and “value the ability to provide some comfort to the remaining aspects of the Jewish soul that linger before burial.”

Some shomrim talk to the *meit*.

I say the initial prayer and then introduce myself, explain that I am here to pray for them, but that actually praying with them helps me ... among other things, to be a better parent and friend.

Anticipating one's own mortality: There are also those who are looking ahead to their own deaths. Over the past twenty years, quite a few shomrim and taharah caregivers have told me that being involved in shmirah, taharah, or other end-of-life rituals has made them less fearful of their own mortality. Not a single person has ever told me the experience increased their fear of death.

Someday, it will be me who is the subject, and hopefully there will be a community of shomrim still thriving.

[I am motivated to do shmirah by] the peace it brings to me about my own death in the future. It has also improved my ability to discuss death with people who have such fear.

Even if I don't know them, I'm talking to them and communicating with them and helping them along their journey. It feels very powerful. I hope someone will do the same for me one day. It's the final taking-care-of that no one can repay, which makes me very happy.

One first-generation Jew from a Christian background put it this way:

When I die, if my spirit is lingering, I don't want to be left alone. So when I go in for a shift, and after I say the Shema, I quietly introduce myself and tell the deceased that I hope everything is comforting to them. I don't expect an answer, and that is not why I do that. I'm just doing that in case that person *can* hear people. I would want this for myself when my time comes. I don't have a family member that will care that I not be left alone. I'm doing what I would also want.

Quality personal time: Another reason people do shmirah is to carve out a small bit of time for quiet reflection in their overscheduled lives.

Whatever religious/spiritual book I read, I can totally concentrate and I almost feel like the window to the other side of "heaven/the beyond/HaShem/eternity" is open and near. It is a time for my own personal reflection, and I learn a lot and gain perspective. I'm not a reader, so this is a time I don't typically make for myself.

This next quote was submitted by a hero of mine who routinely volunteers for the shifts that are hardest to fill.

I hate to admit this, but it is one of the very FEW breaks I take from the everyday worries and work. I know that is one purpose of Shabbat: to take a break from the secular to observe the sacred. But I take that break far too rarely. I cannot seem to manage weekly, but I can manage a couple hours when it has an urgency. So ... it's a miniature Shabbat for me, just quiet and good reading that is unrelated to work or current events.

Connections across time and space: Some people use shmirah as a way to connect with other Jews from across the generations. I love the next quote for its frankness and practicality.

I don't think I have anything profound or moving to say about why I serve as a shomer. I'm not sure I even believe in the importance of the whole process. I do it because our people have been shomrim for centuries, if not millennia. When I serve as a shomer, I feel connected with the Jewish people and our past.

Simplicity: Finally, shmirah is easy.

I do this because it is not onerous, so even if a given occasion is not particularly rewarding, it's a small gift I can perform for my community. Someone did it for my father, grandfather, grandmother, and other relatives and friends, and I can *complete the circle* [emphasis mine] by doing the same for someone else.

But I must take issue with the term "complete the circle." One peculiar fact about all end-of-life mitzvot is that no two people can do them for each other. There is no possibility of creating a "buddy system" to eliminate the need to reach out beyond one chosen partner. In this sense, the mitzvah of shmirah is not a completed circle, but rather a spiral that passes beyond the immediate circle of friends, from generation to generation, always in need of new caregivers to tend to those who came before them.

Attracting New People to Shmirah

Austin Shmirah is a city-wide network of members of all Jewish congregations, Chabad, plus unaffiliated individuals, who sit with deceased from across the entire community. I'm told we're the most successful large-community shmirah program in the country, and for

that I credit the interactive, cooperative, partnering character of the Jewish community of Austin, Texas.

In Austin Shmirah, every congregation sets its own standards for who may serve, and every shomer chooses which congregations to partner with—as long as they meet each congregation's criteria. Each shomer chooses when to serve and how often.

As the leader of Austin Shmirah, I'm on a constant campaign to encourage community members to give shmirah a try. Following is a list of my talking points, one or another of which seems to hit home for a wide range of individuals.

- * You can do this mitzvah just once and then cross it off your own bucket list
- * You can serve while you're in mourning yourself, as an opportunity to process your own grief
- * You can honor the memory of a loved one by serving once a year around the time of their yorzeit
- * Or—and this is my all-time favorite—you can serve every chance you get for decades on end! Many members of Austin Shmirah do just that.
- * As a general rule, if you can pray, read, meditate, or just hold good intentions for a couple of hours, then you can be a shomer. That said, nobody is expected to maintain perfect *kavanah* (heart-felt intention) and non-stop concentration the whole time! So don't count yourself out just because you're not the Dalai Lama.
- * All Austin Shmirah coordinators use a common online scheduling system, so we all know when any congregation has shmirah going on. If we have the misfortune of experiencing multiple deaths at once at a given funeral home, all congregations can pool their shomrim.

My dream is that each member of the Austin Jewish community will consider serving as a shomer at least once in their lifetime. However, I extend a special invitation to people in

the following categories, because I think the mitzvah of shmirah could be an especially good fit for them.

- ✳ Night owls: Overnight shifts tend to be hard to fill, so the more night owls we have in the pool, the less likely they are to burn out.
- ✳ Lone wolves and introverts: Shmirah is perfect for people who want to feel the warm, fuzzy feeling and the camaraderie of bonding with other Jews for a noble cause, but aren't particularly inclined to actually interact with them for a prolonged period of time. In the hours between relieving the person before you, and quietly greeting the person who relieves you, you have your alone time.
- ✳ At the opposite extreme of the lone wolves are the caring nurturers, who so willingly sacrifice for others but sometimes neglect their own basic needs. Shmirah offers caring nurturers the best of both worlds: two hours performing an urgent, "thankless" mitzvah for an utterly helpless person—which, as it turns out, involves sitting comfortably, breathing deeply, and quietly reading or meditating. All without feeling the least bit self-indulgent!
- ✳ The hearing impaired and people with other physical limitations: A while back, I noticed that a hearing-impaired shomeret was taking all shifts from 10:00 PM to 5:30 AM, which was just wonderful. She later confided in me that when she lost her hearing, she found that many of the ways she'd volunteered for Jewish causes were no longer feasible or even possible. Shmirah, on the other hand, is still perfectly accessible to her. For safety, she brings her dogs, which can alert her if they hear noises during the night. Shmirah could also be a lovely mitzvah for people with other impairments, who can spend the entire shift sitting or lying on a couch.
- ✳ Young people, which, in Chevrah Kadishah terms, means anyone under the age of 60. End-of-life mitzvot tend to attract older people, but every generation needs a younger generation to handle its final needs. Younger people are also better at staying awake at night. They can also play an invaluable role in taharah, which involves some heavy lifting.

- * People with erratic schedules: *You* never know when you're going to be free; *we* never know when we're going to need you! When it works out, it's a perfect match. When your schedule doesn't allow it, simply delete the "Shomrim Needed" notification.
- * People with flexible schedules, such as retirees and some homemakers. Often the *meit* arrives at the funeral home before the coordinator even knows of the death. When that happens, the first shift must be filled by someone who can afford to head to the funeral home at the drop of a hat. That said, having a flexible schedule does not obligate anyone to take an urgent shift at any particular time. It's just good to have a lot of folks with flexible schedules in the pool.

Whenever one or another of these considerations strikes home for someone in my community, I'm happy to help them become one of the last people on earth to perform an act of *chesed* (lovingkindness) for a fellow Jew.