

Care and Feeding of Volunteers

Nina Rubin, L.C.S.W.
Northern Colorado
Chevra Kadisha



June 2020

A philosophical starting point, what do the Sages say?



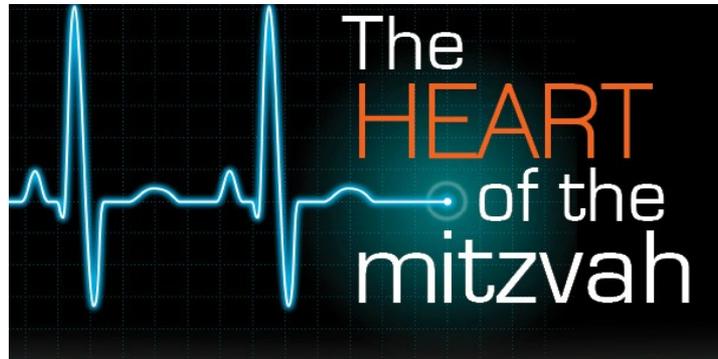
- According to R. Judah Hanasi, “Do not let a stranger carry my bier. Let him who attended me in life attend me in death.”

Moving from obligation to opportunity

- The “*Mitzvah* that can’t be repaid” is the opportunity provided by the deceased to do this holy work.
- Helping a community connect with the opportunity provided through this holy work not only helps the community but the individual as well.
- *Chevra* work has power in healing.
 - September 11, 2001

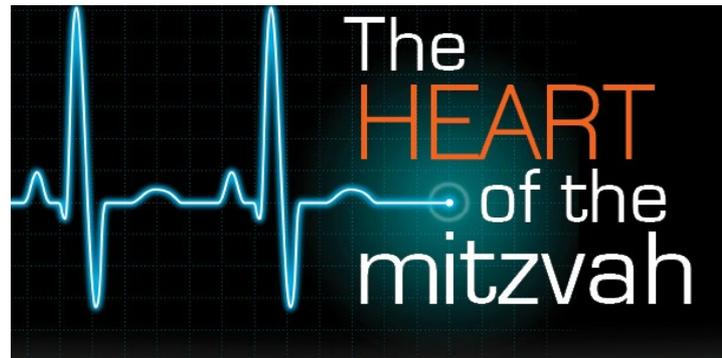


The *mitzvah* that can never be repaid?



- Many of our members report:
 - The *met* in *shmira* or *tahara* has provided the *mitzvah*, not the other way around.
 - A unique, at times transcendent, spiritual experience
 - The opportunity for intense reflection and learning

Or the *mitzvah* that keeps on giving?



- Many of our members feel:
 - A greater purpose and presence
 - A deeper connection, friendship, understanding, and love for one another

What do potential, new, and returning volunteers have in common?

- They want to:
 - Matter
 - Belong
 - Feel Competent
 - Not Feel Judged
 - Feel Their Time Is Respected
 - Commit At Their Comfort Level
- **People will continue to serve with joy when their service meets their needs, and they feel respected.**



Identify people's gifts & talents

- Encouraging members to find their voices in participating in the health and growth of the *Chevra*
- Opportunities:
 - *shmira* & *shiva* boxes
 - caskets
 - shrouds
 - chanters
 - medical device list
 - organizers
 - meals
 - minyans
 - powerpoint



Training as a natural part of participation

- “*Shmira* Box”
 - Psalms
 - Inspirational reading
 - Educational reading on Jewish death and mourning practices
 - Blankets and tissues
 - Brief introduction to the practice of *Shmira*
 - Information about the individual
 - Sometimes a picture is provided



Training as a natural part of participation

- While sitting, people increase their learning in a safe and a private way.
- Sitters are encouraged to share their learning with the deceased.



Care and maintenance of volunteers

- Let volunteers identify what feels safe for them.
- Individuals partner on their own without prompting.
- Space is provided to discuss experiences.
- Power of reframing
- Gratitude and debrief
- Inform & remind of period of spiritual vulnerability



Care and maintenance of volunteers

- Encourage volunteers to contribute to the process.
 - blankets, books, quotes from sacred texts, poems, oral remembrances, songs
- Thank you notes focus on being part of a Holy community.
- Members are honored throughout the year and at the banquet.
- Appreciated volunteers continue participation.



Underutilized volunteers

- Older teens and university students are already up all night.
 - Developmentally they are often curious and thinking about death.
- Very busy people love the opportunity to sit quietly for 2 hours. It is a gift.
- New converts especially appreciate being included as part of the community.



Underutilized volunteers

- Family members who have been served by the *Chevra* in the past.
- Close friends appreciate sitting with the deceased to find closure.
- Recognize every community member is a potential *Chevra* participant, as they are ready.



How do you support grieving families?

- Encouraging families to interact with the *chevra* in a way that is comfortable and comforting for them;
 - Speak with the *chevra*, providing photos and stories
- Providing rituals that are accessible and meaningful
- Opportunity for *genizah*
- Sheloshim minyan



Working with the larger community to form partnerships

- Establish ongoing relationships with outside entities:
 - nursing homes, hospitals, and hospice
 - collaborate for accompaniment & *shmira*-in-place
 - coroner and organ recovery teams
 - receive the body in a timely manner to meet our ritual needs



Increase feeling of competence & community

- Brief focus and *kavanah* prior to *taharah*.
- Buddy system
- Discussion of the processes and traditions
- Meet with family members
- Focus on forgiveness prayer to focus on the Holy work and doing the best we know how.
 - Removes all judgment and puts group at ease.
- Debrief after *tahara*
 - Reminder of spiritual vulnerability
- *Mikvah*

