

**Practices and Policies of the
Peninsula Masorati *Chevra Kadisha***

Introduction

This handbook was compiled in summer 2019, to offer practical guidelines to the Peninsula Masorati *Chevra Kadisha* (CK) during its initial year, to be the year 5780 by the Jewish counting. It includes such immediately relevant information as the names and roles of particular individuals, as well as guidelines for more unusual situations the CK might encounter. We expect this document to be revised in future years, as our practices evolve and as leadership rotates.

The basic structure and much of the language in this document was borrowed from “Practices and Policies of the *Chevra Kadisha* of Northern New Mexico” composed by Rick Light. Using the New Mexico document as a starting point, the rabbis of the Peninsula CK revised and added new sections to fit the needs of our community.

We are grateful to David Habib, Sam Salkin, and all the folks at Sinai Memorial for their expert guidance and partnership, and to Rabbi Stuart Kelman, Dan Fendel, HollyBlue Hawkins, David Zinner, and all the folks of Kavod v’Nichum for their mentorship as we launch our new *Chevra Kadisha*. We commend the pioneer members of the CK, who have already volunteered many hours to study the wisdom of our people on the most mysterious transition, death. *Lo ha’midrash ha’ikar, elah ha’ma’aseh* (The study is not the essence, but rather the action – Pirkei Avot 1:17). As we embrace the *mitzvot* of *shmirah* and *taharah*, the doing will bring the deeper understanding. We especially acknowledge our lay leaders, Len Lehman, Sandy Greene and Stuart Soffer, who have taken on themselves the greatest *mitzvah* of enabling the *mitzvah* of others.

Above all, we are filled with gratitude to *Ado-nai* who has, after many years of our desires and efforts, finally blessed this community to come together to form our own *Chevra Kadisha*.

History and Scope of the Peninsula Masorati CK

The *Chevra Kadisha* (CK) of the SF Peninsula Masorati Synagogues was founded in 2019 by the rabbis and members of three synagogues on the Northern to Mid-Peninsula of the San Francisco Bay:

- Peninsula Sinai Congregation of Foster City, under the leadership of Rabbi Corey Helfand
- Congregation Beth Jacob of Redwood City, under the leadership of Rabbis Nat Ezray and Ilana Goldhaber-Gordon
- Congregation Kol Emeth of Palo Alto, under the leadership of Rabbis David Booth and Sarah Graff.

The *Chevra Kadisha* was founded in close collaboration with Sinai Memorial, under the leadership of David Habib, who renovated their Redwood City facility for the explicit purpose of enabling Peninsula-based *Chevra Kadisha(s)*.

In Sinai Memorial, our communities are blessed with a funeral home that is guided by respect for the individual and respect for Jewish tradition. Prior to the founding of the Peninsula CK, the deceased of our community were cared for by Sinai Memorial at their San Francisco facility. Sinai's care is done in accordance with Jewish law and practice, unless contraindicated by the family's request.

So why the need for a community-based *Chevra Kadisha*? The strength of a community comes from its ability to care for its own. The family is comforted by knowing that their relative was lovingly tended to by people whose emotional investments extend beyond the moment of care. And the caregivers themselves are strengthened immeasurably in their relationships to each other and to their community.

Our CK is committed to caring for the members of our three synagogues. Any individual for whom the rabbi of one of the three synagogues would perform the funeral should be cared for by the Peninsula CK (unless, of course, the family declines). This includes all members of the three congregations, and in some cases also close relatives of members. **In each case, the rabbi of the synagogue with whom an affiliation is claimed will decide whether the individual should be cared for by the Peninsula CK or should be referred to Sinai for care.** For the purposes of this document, we will use the term "congregant" to refer to any individual whom a rabbi of one of the three participating congregations refers to the Peninsula CK for care.

The Jewish population of the Peninsula is large and diverse. Our volunteer-based CK cannot tend to the needs of the entire local Jewish community. Individuals who did not, in life, choose to establish a connection with one of our synagogues will be referred to Sinai in good conscience, knowing that Sinai will care for them to the highest standards.

Likewise, our *Chevra Kadisha* does not have the training to do *Taharah* for bodies that have suffered extreme damage, such as organ donors or violent death. In each case, the funeral director will make the decision as to whether a *meit* or *meitah* can be cared for by our volunteer CK, or whether professionals at Sinai Memorial should do the *Taharah*.

The three participating synagogues are *Masorati*, or traditional. We all identify, to varying degrees, with the Conservative movement. Our rabbis strive to lead our communities in accordance with traditional Jewish practice, or *Halachah*, while remaining flexible to the changing needs of modern Jews. These same principles guide the practices of our *Chevra Kadisha*. If at a future time another synagogue wishes to join our *Chevra Kadisha*, we would welcome them if their core vision of modern Jewish practice aligns reasonably with ours.

In some communities, the responsibilities of the *Chevra Kadisha* start before death and end a year after death, encompassing all phases of Jewish death practice. In the case of the Peninsula CK, the mitzvahs of visiting the sick (*bikkur holim*), final prayers (*vidui*), funeral (*levayah*), *shiva*, and all subsequent stages of mourning are attended to by the individual synagogues. Our collective CK takes on the more limited roles of:

- Providing *shomrim* for *Shmira*, from the time of death until the funeral.

- Providing *Tahara*
- Providing education to the Jewish community about Jewish death practices, including visiting the sick, death in the home, working with a funeral home, the *Tahara* procedure, *Shmira*, in-ground burial, phases of mourning, *Yizkor*, and other related topics.

Guiding Principles

Kavod HaMet

The underlying principle of everything we do during *shmirah* and *taharah* is *Kavod HaMet*, or respect for the dead. At the core is the classic Jewish belief that each individual is composed of both physical and non-physical elements – a body and a soul – where the soul is the eternal spiritual aspect of each human being, living on after death. The body that housed the human soul during its time on earth is a holy vessel, and is treated with the utmost respect. Moreover, until the body is buried the soul is believed to hover nearby, in need of comfort during a tenuous time. The soul is present in the *taharah* room, and the *taharah* ritual helps to midwife the soul from this world into the next.

Nichum Aveilim

Respect for the dead must be tightly coupled to the *mitzvah* of comforting the mourners. When a family understands the underlying principles that guide our work, they usually take comfort knowing the level of respect their loved one will receive. However, it may occur that a family strongly desires for the body to be prepared in a manner that is at odds with the practices of our CK. The rabbi closest to the family will discuss with them. The legal next of kin has the final say on all questions relating to the *meit/meitah*. However, on occasion it may not be possible for Peninsula CK to meet the requests of the family, the family may be referred back to Sinai to prepare the body.

One Community

Though we are three participating synagogues, we are one community. **All members of our *Chevra Kadisha* of the appropriate gender are invited to participate in any *taharah*, regardless of specific synagogue membership.** *Shmira* requests will particularly target the synagogue of the deceased, as individuals who are not members of the CK are also invited to participate in *shmirah*. However, we of course welcome individuals from other synagogues to perform *shmirah* should they feel moved to do so.

Secrecy and Anonymity

Historically, the work of the *Chevra Kadisha* has been shrouded in secrecy. Part of this comes from the hidden desire not to talk about death-related activities, and part of this comes from the idea that *kavod hameit* (honoring the dead) includes not talking about who participated or what happened in any given circumstance. Hence, most *chevrot* have a policy that we just don't talk about these things. In keeping with this sentiment, Peninsula CK has chosen to not divulge who participated in the *Shmira* or *Tahara* for a given death to the public or to the family involved. This information may be discussed among those who participated, and possibly with a rabbi or other leader for counseling of those involved, but

not with anyone else. To be clear, our policy is not to be secret about who in general is a member of Peninsula CK. It is considered an honor to be serving the community through this work, and it is appropriate to honor those who do it by letting the community know who participates. However, if a family member asks who to thank for a *Tahara*, our response is that Peninsula CK was honored to care for their family member, and that we respect the privacy of their loved one by not discussing details. Thus we are not secret about who does this work, but we are private about the details of each death we serve.

Likewise, we do not share information about the medical or physical condition of the person who died. The rare exception to this practice might be if the *taharah* team learned information that could be useful to the family or might improve conditions at a health care facility. For example, if the team finds that a *meit/meitah* had extreme bed sores and believed that the family would want to know that information, we would inform them. We make no disclosure to the family or outside the CK without consulting with the deceased's rabbi and the funeral director at Sinai Memorial.

Finally, we do not allow observers of *taharah*. If someone wishes to observe, they must participate as a part of the team. That's often how new members in the *chevra* learn the basics – through “on the job training”.

Shmirah

One of the most important mitzvot that we can perform as an act of *Kavod LaMet*, giving honor and dignity to the deceased, is the mitzvah of *shmirah*, sitting with the deceased before burial. Traditionally, we use this time to recite Psalms, other prayers or just sit quietly as a way of bringing God's presence and our own into the sacred space and asking God to watch over and protect the soul of the deceased.

Shmirah will be done at Sinai Memorial's facility in Redwood City. A few important notes:

- Members of the CK will not be given keys to the facility. Rather, the first *shomer* should arrive during business hours, and should plan to open the door for the next *shomer* at the end of their shift.
- Multiple bodies may be stored at the facility at any given time. *Shomrim* should be aware that staff may arrive at any time, even in the middle of the night, to bring another body into the facility.
- It is **NOT permitted** for the *shomer* to enter the cold room where the bodies are stored, nor should he or she spend much time in the *taharah* room. There is a comfortable sitting room in the building and the *shomer* can direct his or her thoughts to the soul of the deceased which may be nearby.
- The *shomer* should recite a *kavanah*, a statement of intention, at the beginning of his or her shift, to focus their minds on the purpose of this time. Suggested wording of a *kavanah* will be provided on a laminated instruction sheet in the sitting room.
- The *shomer* should not use the time to catch-up on work or engage in worldly matters. Reading and studying religious literature is encouraged. Use of electronics is strongly discouraged.

- *Shmirah* shifts are two hours during the day, and four hours at night. Priority should be given to filling the night time shifts, as Sinai staff can more easily fill the daytime shifts if necessary.
- *Shmirah* shifts may be filled by any willing individual. We encourage all members of our community to volunteer for the *mitzvah* of *shmirah*.
- A single person may serve as *shomer* for multiple *metim*. It is a matter of directing one's *kavanah*, or intention, towards the soul or souls of the deceased.

Communications

The healthy functioning of our CK depends on frequent, clear communications between the funeral director at Sinai Memorial (usually David Habib), the rabbi who is officiating the funeral and attending to the mourners, and the CK lead from the relevant synagogue (see below). Here we outline recommended standards for communication. However, we trust that all three parties – funeral director, rabbi, and lay lead -- will be responsive as situations vary and will be sure to keep in close contact with one another.

When death of a congregant is imminent, the rabbi will endeavor to inform Sinai, or to ask the family to inform Sinai, that this individual is a congregant. Sometimes, advance warning is not possible, for example if the death is sudden or if the family chooses not to involve the rabbi until the last minute. In order to ensure such congregants also have the opportunity to be cared for by the Peninsula CK, the funeral director will include as part of his intake interview a query about synagogue affiliation. If a client mentions one of the three participating synagogues, Sinai will first reach out to the rabbi of that synagogue to confirm and THEN will offer the care of the Peninsula CK.

Once it is confirmed that the deceased is a congregant, Sinai will contact the lead from the relevant synagogue. The rabbi will be included on this initial communication. For the year 5780, we are grateful to these three individuals for serving as our leads:

- Sandy Greene, Peninsula Sinai Congregation
- Stuart Soffer, Congregation Beth Jacob
- Len Lehman, Congregation Kol Emeth

If death occurs in the middle of the night, Sinai will care for the body until morning, and then will contact the lead.

The synagogue lead will immediately move to coordinate both *shmirah* and *taharah*, as follows:

Shmira

1. The lead will create a sign-up form, divvying the time between death and burial into 2-hour shifts by day and 4-hour shifts by night. (If the time of burial is yet unknown, an initial sign-up can be created to cover 24 hours, and then added to later if necessary.) We recommend Sign-Up Genius for this purpose, but the lead can choose the technological tool.

2. The lead will immediately send the sign-up form to the Executive Director (or other appropriate staff contact) and rabbi(s) of their synagogue, as well as to the CK list to begin recruiting *shomrim*.
3. When a condolence note goes out to the synagogue, the synagogue staff will be sure to include the link to the sign-up form.
4. The lead will monitor the list, and actively recruit more volunteers if necessary. The lead will email all *shomrim* with: (i) Address and instructions for the Sinai facility (see above), (ii) The *shmirah* intentions sheet prepared by the rabbis, and (iii) The Hebrew name of the deceased.
5. If multiple deaths occur close together, several sign-up forms may go out at the same time. The leads will coordinate with one another. There is nothing wrong with asking a volunteer who has offered to serve as *shomer* for a particular *meit/meitah* if that person would be willing to serve for a second *meit/meitah* simultaneously.
6. Family members may want to sit *shmirah*, and should be given priority.
7. If we are unable to fill all *shmirah* shifts, if absolutely necessary the lead may ask volunteers to shift their times, to create a single open block that we can ask Sinai staff to fill.

Taharah

The lead will coordinate with the funeral director in scheduling the timing of the *taharah*, as a member of Sinai Memorial's staff must be present in the building during the *taharah*. If at all possible, they should plan to do *taharah* during business hours. Second best is late in the evening, after 8:30pm when traffic dies down, or very early in the morning. *Taharah* should be done close to the funeral, but must plan to leave at least 4 hours between the end of the *taharah* and the funeral. If the funeral is on Sunday morning, the *taharah* should be done on Friday.

The lead will send a note to the entire membership of the Peninsula CK, looking to recruit a *taharah* team. The team is composed of three individuals of the same gender as the deceased. The lead will identify the most experienced of the three and ask that person to serve as *Rosh*.

The leads will also keep records of who performed *Taharah* for each *meit* or *meitah*. These records will be kept confidential, to be viewed only by CK leads, Sinai Memorial staff, and the clergy of our three synagogues.

The Rosh and the Posek(et)

The performance of the *Taharah* is a holy act. Maintaining an atmosphere of respect, dignity, and reverence is paramount during the entire time the *Chevra Kadisha* members are in the *Taharah* room. With this in mind, and considering the many possibilities for variation in custom and details in the performance of these procedures, as well as the variation in experience and knowledge of the members performing the *Taharah*, it is common convention (*minhag*) to appoint a *rosh*, or head, for each *Taharah*. The primary responsibility of the *rosh* is to make all decisions, thereby avoiding possibilities for conflict, confusion, or disrespect during the ritual. If there are disagreements as to if or how something should be performed, such discussions should be held before the group enters

the *taharah* room, never in the presence of the deceased. The *rosh* should decide ahead of time how the *taharah* is to be performed, who is to do what, and if there are special circumstances requiring specific changes to normal procedures, etc. This must be communicated ahead of time to the team performing the *taharah* so everyone understands how the ritual will be performed, and minimize questions and unnecessary talking during the procedure. In general, a briefing of the *taharah* team prior to *taharah*, and a debriefing afterward are recommended.

The *rosh* is the one who will make decisions during the procedure if unexpected situations arise. If a situation arises that the *rosh* is unsure how to proceed, he or she should step out of the *taharah* room and contact the current *posek(et)* (*halachic* authority) of the Peninsula Masorati CK. The role of *posek* will rotate between the rabbis of the three synagogues. For the year 5780, the *poseket* is Rabbi Ilana Goldhaber-Gordon, who can be reached at 650-440-2412. If Rabbi Ilana is unavailable, any of the rabbis of the three participating synagogues may be called.

Support From Sinai Memorial Chapel

Our *Chevra Kadisha* operates entirely through the support of Sinai Memorial chapel, and we are grateful to them for providing both expertise and structure. Sinai Memorial will provide *tachrichim* (shrouds), safety gear, and all basic equipment for each *Taharah*. They will provide the coffin and dust from the land of Israel. A staff member from Sinai Memorial will be present in the building whenever a *Taharah* is happening, and should be called on without hesitation in the *Taharah* team has any uncertainties.

Members of the CK must provide pottery shards, which can be any broken pottery. Ceramic planters, purchased in a garden store, a good source.

Sinai will provide a certificate of *Taharah*, signed preferably by the Funeral Director, or alternatively by the rabbi, or if necessary by the *Rosh*. This certificate is given to the family of the deceased. Out of concerns of anonymity (see above), other members of the *Taharah* team will not sign the certificate.

Family Member Participation in *Tahara*

Our experience has led to a policy of no participation in *Tahara* ritual procedures by family members or relatives close to the deceased. This policy is based on 2 primary concerns:

1. The possibility of emotional trauma to the family member, and possible subsequent disruption of the ritual, and
2. Respect for *chevra* team members who might feel scrutinized by the presence of family members while they do their work.

If a child of a deceased parent or a parent of a deceased child insists on participating, we offer them the opportunity to tie the last knot – they tie the *shin, daled, yud* knot representing the name of God into the belt around the waist that finishes the clothing of the

deceased. For all other relatives of the deceased, they are invited to participate in sitting *shmirah* with the deceased, but are not offered participation in the *taharah*.

Caring for a Non-Jewish *Krov Yisrael*

Jewish tradition demands that every human body be treated with dignity and respect. However, the rituals of *shmirah* and *taharah* were traditionally considered appropriate only for the body of a Jew. Today, our congregations welcome non-Jewish members as *Krovei Yisrael* (people who are close to Israel). The Peninsula CK will offer to perform a *taharah* for a *krov Yisrael* congregant. Potential members of the *taharah* team will be discretely informed of the deceased's non-Jewish status, and they may each choose to pass on participating in that particular *taharah*.

Who May Serve on the Taharah Team?

Any individual who has been trained to do *taharot* may serve on the *taharah* team. An individual who has no prior experience may also serve, if they are doing so for the purpose of gaining experience. A *krov yisrael* (a non-Jew who feels themselves to be part of our community) may serve on the *taharah* team. However, the *rosh* should be a Jew who has specific experience in the *minhagim* (customs) of our particular *Chevra Kadisha*.

Items Buried with the Deceased

The normal practice of Peninsula CK is to dress the deceased in traditional Jewish *tachrichim* – burial shrouds that are simple cotton or linen clothes designed to represent the clothes of the *Kohen Gadol* (the High Priest in the days of the Temple). On occasion there have been requests to dress a deceased person in specific clothes of importance to that person, such as a robe bestowed upon them for an honorary degree, or possibly a jacket that was “always worn” by a deceased teenager. Our policy is to dress the deceased in *tachrichim*, then if the family is particularly insistent about such clothing, we will cut the clothing up the back and drape it over the deceased once they are in the casket (after removing any metal on the garment). If CK team members do not wish to handle such clothes, they may ask the funeral home to perform this part of the procedure.

Many Jews have the custom of including the *tallit* a person wore in life to be buried their body. If we are given a *tallit* to use by the family, then this is draped across or placed around the *meit/meitah*, after one of the *tzitzit* has been removed. Some have the custom of burying the *meit/meitah* with scrolls or books, especially *sifrei kodesh* (books of Torah or other holy writing.) A book or a scroll that is *pasul* (invalid for use in synagogue ritual) may be placed in the *aron* (casket) beneath the body.

Jewelry or other metal items should not be included in the *aron*. If the family insists that a particular metal item must be buried with the body, for example a wedding ring, the rabbi of that family's synagogue will decide whether to approve the request or refer the family to Sinai Memorial for care. If the rabbi approves the request, the ring should be removed during *taharah*, and placed on top of the *tachrichim*.

The *meit/meitah* should be buried with nail clippings and any organic materials that were part of the body. No plastic tags or tubes that might be removable should be included in the *aron*.

Halachah requires that the *aron* be made of plain pine, with no metal parts and without fancy lining. If the family insists on a different type of *aron*, we will refer them to Sinai Memorial in collaboration with the Posek(et) for care.

Sherblach, or broken pottery shards, are traditionally placed over the eyes of the *meit/meitah*. The placement represents the final closing of the eyes, and the shards also represent the brokenness of the body, the vessel that once housed the soul. We also sprinkle dust from the land of Israel on the eyes, above the heart, on the genitals, and around the interior of the *aron*.

Cremation

Jewish tradition does not support cremation. In today's world, however, many Jewish families do choose cremation for their loved ones. If the family insists on cremation, it is the policy of the Peninsula CK that we will indeed still perform *taharah* for the deceased. However, potential members of the *taharah* team will be discretely informed of the planned cremation, and they may each choose to pass on participating in that particular *taharah*. *Shmirah* will be performed up until the time of cremation, but not after cremation.

Gender and *taharah*

Peninsula CK's standard *tahara* policy is for men to perform *taharah* for deceased men, and women to perform *taharah* for deceased women. Under unusual circumstances, a mixed team may perform *taharah*, as long as the modesty and dignity of the deceased is preserved. This may mean guidance from someone outside of the *taharah* room, or possibly a reader standing at the back of the *taharah* room with their back to the *taharah* table, or other such arrangements.

Peninsula CK will perform *taharah* for *meitim* who changed their sex or lived as a different sex from that of their birth. The careful decision as to which gender team should perform the *taharah* procedure must take into account the lived identity of the deceased. This decision should be made with input from family members and close friends of the deceased, and will vary from case to case. The goal is to promote and maintain the dignity and modesty of the deceased to the greatest extent possible. The final decision will be made by the rabbi of the synagogue to which the deceased was affiliated. Peninsula CK members may choose not to participate in such a *taharah*.