

Taharah and Shmirah: An Introduction and Overview



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Taharah & Shmirah – Where to Begin...

- These are central rituals performed by the *Chevrah Kadisha* to provide *kavod hameit* (honor for the dead)
- *Shmirah* is the ritual accompaniment of the dead between death and burial
- *Taharah* is the ritual means through which Jewish bodies are prepared for burial

What is a Ritual?

- A ritual is a sequence of activities involving gestures, words, actions, or objects, performed according to a set sequence.
- Religious rituals include sacred intent, specific liturgy related to tradition, accompanied by specific actions that lead to a desired outcome or benefit.
- *Taharah* and *shmirah* are rituals intended to benefit the soul of the deceased, while comforting the family left behind.

Taharah & Shmirah – Where to Begin...

- ▶ Every action, every reading is based in respect:
 - ▶ Respect for God and holiness
 - ▶ Respect for the deceased body
 - ▶ Respect for the holy soul in transition
 - ▶ Respect for the family of the deceased
 - ▶ Respect for the *chevrah* team members
 - ▶ Respect for Jewish tradition

What is *Shmirah*?

- ▶ *Shmirah*, a definition:

- ▶ We believe the soul is present between death and burial as it navigates its journey between realms
- ▶ We keep the soul company – we “accompany” it, to comfort it during this time
- ▶ Communities often arrange for a number of people to do this, usually for a few hours at a time, for the time between death and burial
 - ▶ Some communities pay *shomrim*, others use volunteers

What is *Shmirah*?

- *Shmirah*, a definition:
 - *Shomrim* (plural of *shomer*, one who accompanies) usually sit at the funeral home; during covid, some communities do this online
 - It is traditional for those who “sit *shmirah*” to read Psalms or other meaningful readings, perhaps things loved by the deceased
 - Some communities have a “*shmirah* box” of reading materials
 - When it cannot be arranged for people to sit, some communities light a candle to connect with the soul and let it know we care

What is *Shmirah*?

Shmirah is quintessentially a process of soul-guiding. Kabbalistic sources tell us that in the hours and days after a death, the spirit of the deceased hovers near the body. Reading of Psalms during the time of *shmirah* is designed to help the soul move on. But what does that mean? How can a person reading Psalms in the presence of a dead body help the soul in the transition? It's actually quite simple: Think of soul-guiding as a contemplative nonverbal communication between the world of the living and the realm of the discarnate soul. Sitting in front of the deceased, reciting Psalms, one should hold an attitude of loving connection with the person who has died. In the heart and mind, imagine sending a message that says, "It's OK to leave behind the world and move on." The task requires trusting intuition and one's inner voices, listening inwardly for a response, and being attentive to synchronistic meaningful experiences. Soul-guiding is not a science; it's an art.

– Reb Simcha Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*

What is *Taharah*?

➤ *Taharah*, a definition:

- A ritual performed by a group of Jews to prepare a body for burial and in the process midwife the soul of the deceased from this world to the next
 - Members of the community under the umbrella of the *Chevrah Kadisha*, with *kavanah* (holy intention) and a liturgy, lovingly and gently wash, purify, and dress the body of the deceased as preparation for burial
- The ritual includes physical actions accompanied by a liturgy
- The team performing the ritual is usually 3-5 people of the same gender as the deceased (to honor modesty and dignity of the deceased)
- This ritual usually takes 45 to 90 minutes to perform
- The ritual is usually performed in a funeral home preparation room, but could be created at home

The *Taharah* Ritual Procedure

- ▶ Order of events during the taharah ritual
 1. **Pre-briefing** – mental, emotional preparation
 2. **Preparation** – laying out equipment; setting intentions
 3. **Washing the deceased** – physical cleansing – like a sponge bath
 4. **Taharah** – spiritual cleansing – pouring water in a ritual way
 5. **Dressing the deceased** – dressing in burial garments
 6. **Placing the deceased into the *aron*** (casket) – plain wooden box
 7. **Cleaning up** – straightening the room, putting equipment away
 8. **Debriefing** – emotional support; improvements for future rituals

Readings from the taharah liturgy are recited during each phase of action, events 2 through 6 above.

Typical Taharah Room



What is the *Taharah* Ritual Procedure?

► Detail of events during the taharah ritual

1. **Pre-briefing** – mental, emotional preparation

The team meets in a side room to ensure emotional/mental readiness

2. **Preparation** – laying out equipment; setting intentions

The team sets intentions together, dons protective equipment, washes hands (like *netiyat yadayyim* without a blessing), lays out *tachrichim* (burial garments), arranges towels, sheets, other equipment; team greets deceased

3. **Washing the deceased** – physical cleansing – like a sponge bath

The deceased is given a physical washing, gently with cotton batting or towels, cleaning the entire body, trimming nails as needed, removing medical devices as needed

4. ***Taharah*** – spiritual cleansing – pouring water in a ritual way

Water is poured in a continuous flow over the body, or the body is immersed in a mikvah bath

What is the *Taharah* Ritual Procedure?

➤ Detail of events during the *taharah* ritual

5. Dressing the deceased – dressing in burial garments

The body is dried thoroughly along with the table; then it is dressed in *tachrichim* (burial garments)

6. Placing the deceased into the *aron* (casket) – plain wooden box

The *sovev* (burial sheet) is draped into/over the open casket diagonally, the *tallit* (prayer shawl, if used) is placed on top of this, then the body is laid gently into the casket; earth from Israel is sprinkled inside, the *tallit* and *sovev* are wrapped around the body, and the casket is closed; the team asks for forgiveness from the deceased for anything that did not show respect

7. Cleaning up – straightening the room, putting equipment away

Casket is moved out of the preparation room; often a candle is placed on top

8. Debriefing – emotional support; improvements for future rituals

Team meets in a side room to ensure emotional/mental health, review what just happened, discuss as needed

Physical Washing



Spiritual Washing



Asking for Forgiveness



Kavanah – Sacred Intention

- ▶ Central to this holy work is maintaining a presence, the awareness of the sacred, while infusing intention into the work
 - ▶ The intention is to honor a Jew who has died – *Kavod HaMeit* – showing respect and dignity to the dead
 - ▶ The intention is to uplift the soul of the deceased – help them move between worlds of existence (from *olam hazeh* to *olam haba'ah*)
- ▶ The team can do no wrong if they approach *taharah* with the right *kavanah*

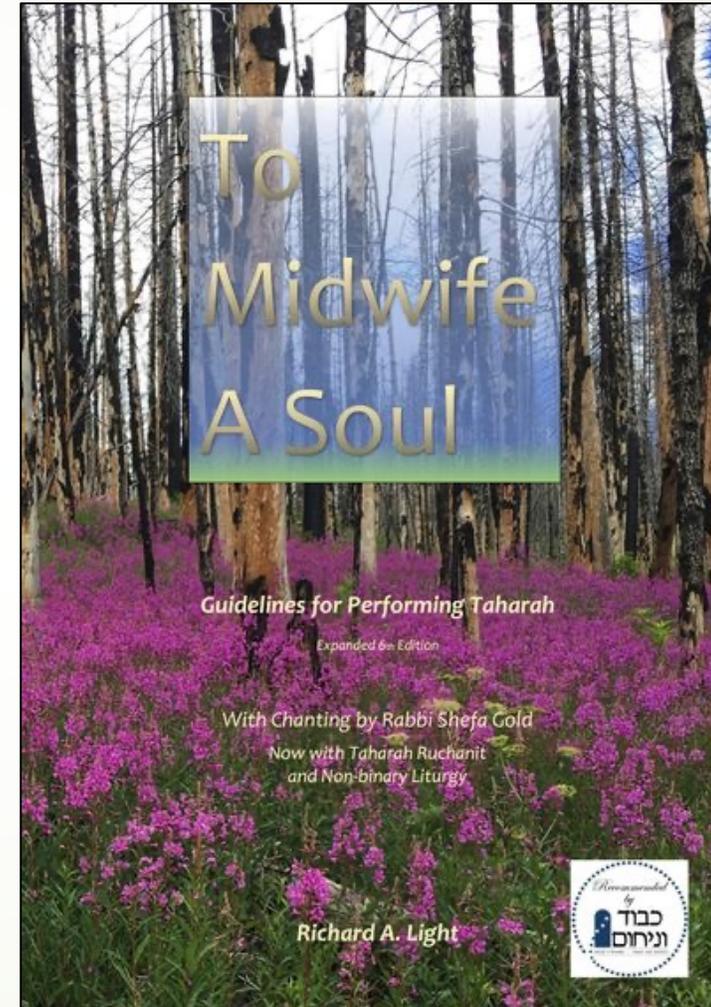
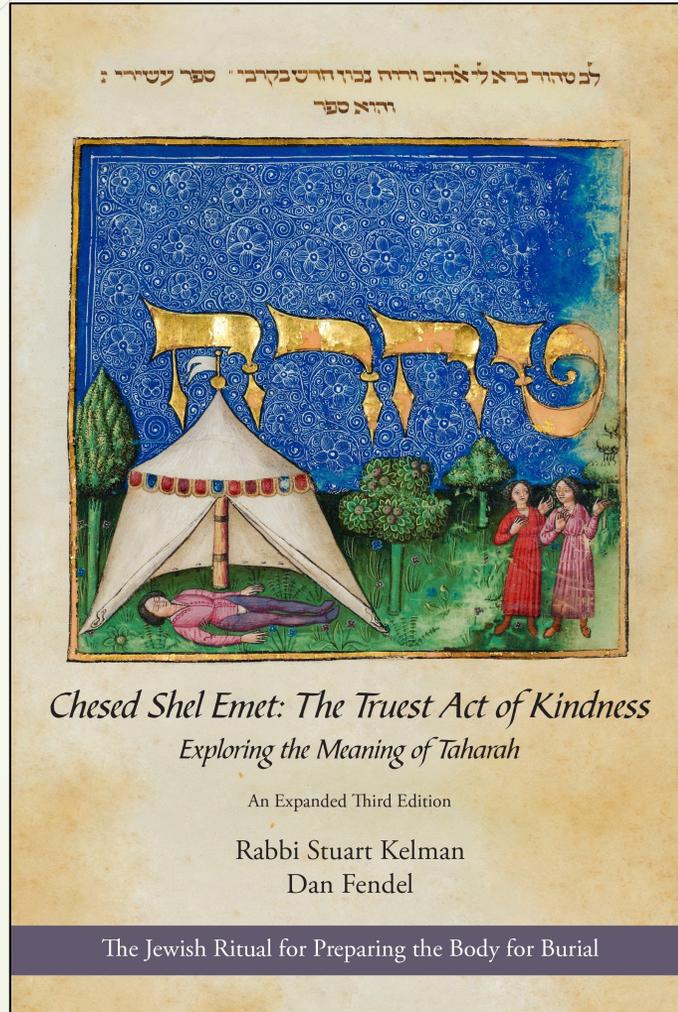
The Taharah Liturgy

- The liturgy is what makes taharah work
- The liturgy includes readings from Song of Songs, Zechariah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Talmud, and other sources
- It infuses the ritual with *kavanah* (holy intention), and gives order to the procedure
- The taharah liturgy works on many levels
- It puts forth the intentions to honor God, uplift and honor the holy soul in transition, protect and guide the taharah team along with the soul of the deceased, and to remind us of the holiness of life and of death

Taharah Manuals

- Modern manuals give the order of procedures, the written liturgy in Hebrew and English (and possibly other languages), and often some guidance
- This liturgy supports the order of events in the ritual, and ensures what we do supports the soul in transition
- Most teams assign one person to be the main “reader” who leads the liturgical readings – either reading alone or leading others to read together as a group
 - Reading can be in Hebrew, in English, or both – it’s nice if everyone in the room understands what is being read
 - Some groups chant the Hebrew softly while English is read simultaneously
- Each physical action of the ritual has an accompanying reading

Some Modern *Taharah* Manuals



Sacred Undertaking

- ▶ How I got involved in *Chevrah Kadisha* work
 - ▶ There I was, 46 years old, dead ...
- ▶ Sacred Undertaking – How important is this work?
- ▶ Sometimes it's so hard ...

Where Do These Come From?

- ▶ Jews have honored our dead since the time of Abraham
- ▶ Our death rites have changed and evolved like all Jewish practice
- ▶ By the 1300's we know there were dedicated organizations to take care of the dead; By 1516, there was a well- developed organization called the *Hebrat Gemilut Hasadim* in Modena
- ▶ In Prague in the 1500's we have details of the formation of a formal *Chevrah Kadisha* for the first time; the **Prague Act of 1564** creates the Prague *Chevrah Kadisha*
- ▶ In Italy a book published in 1626 detailed the exact liturgy and rites for honoring the dead (*Ma'avar Yabbok* by Rabbi Aaron Berechia)
 - ▶ This is the foundation for today's *taharah* manuals
- ▶ The placards painted in 1772 in Prague document the full spectrum of care
 - ▶ This is the model we follow today, caring from illness through death, burial, mourning and *yahrzeit*

Prague Placards Show Scope of CK Work



Paintings Documenting the *Chevrah Kadisha Gomle Chasadim* (The Holy Brotherhood of Those Who Perform Charitable Deeds) of Prague

Introduction

The Prague Burial Society, formally called the *Chevrah Kadisha Gomle Chasadim*, was established in 1564, and the Holy Society of Benevolent Women, caring for deceased women, was formally acknowledged in 1692. With over 10,000 Jews, Prague had the largest Jewish population of any European city at the end of the 17th century.

Fifteen of these paintings were created about 1772, with an additional four produced some years later. The paintings are of actual people living at that time, and show the spectrum of functions undertaken by the Burial Society, from visiting the sick, through the cycle of prayers, preparation of the body, memorialization and burial of the deceased, to comforting the mourners. According to the Talmud, no person may profit from the death of another, so all the profits and donations raised by the Society's work went for the good of the Jewish community, including a hospital and orphanage, contributions to Talmudic schools, support for the poor, and overseeing the cemeteries. The iconic cemetery depicted in the original series served the Jewish community of Prague for three centuries beginning in the 1400s. Due to lack of space, soil was added according to Jewish law, so that there are layers upon layers of people buried, creating a mound. As each layer was added, the old headstones were removed and placed on top along with the new ones, giving the cemetery its unusual number of *matzevot* (tombstones) close to one another.

At the time the paintings were created, the influences of both Christian authorities and the growing popularity of the Enlightenment among Jews had brought criticism of traditional Jewish burial practices. These paintings show that even in the short time between death and burial, each deceased is treated with great dignity, and attention is given to many details that express long-standing values of the Jewish community. As the expression of feelings in the paintings attests, these traditions were not just rote exercises. The paintings were created to honor those volunteers who held the prestige and respect of being part of the Burial Society, to educate those questioning the value of the traditional ways as well as potential future members and recipients of the services of the *Chevrah*.

The paintings depict death as part of the cycle of life, and provide an invaluable window into the traditions of the time, traditions that are once again increasing in acceptance as we seek meaning, community, and care at the end of life.

The introduction is based on information from "Jewish Homes and Society in Modern Europe," by Richard J. Cohen, and "The Cycle of Prayers of the Prague Burial Society," from the Jewish Museum in Prague.



1 Visiting the Sick Man

Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/1



The first painting in the series is a tribute to an esteemed physician of the Prague Jewish community. His presence and the bottle he holds may depict the Society's respect for science and medicine.

2 Prayers at the Deathbed

Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/2



The *Chevrah Kadisha* prays with the *goses* (dying man), perhaps the final *vidui* (prayer of forgiveness), including the *goses*, there are ten men — a *minyán*. It is a *mitzvah* (holy deed or commandment) to be present with someone at the moment of death.

3 Taking Custody of the Dead Man

Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/3



The deceased has been covered with a sheet and moved to the floor according to custom, perhaps with his feet pointing toward Jerusalem. The man at the table may be a *shomer* (guard or companion) of the deceased, reading Psalms to comfort his *neshamah* (soul).

Prague Placards Show Scope of CK Work



Paintings Documenting the *Chevrah Kadisha Gomle Chasadim* (The Holy Brotherhood of Those Who Perform Charitable Deeds) of Prague

4 Making the Shroud
Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/4



The number and type of *tachrichim* (burial garments) vary from place to place. They are meant to be like the garments worn by the High Priest on Yom Kippur in the Temple in Jerusalem, for the one who died needs to be adorned in such a way as to be prepared to meet the Holy One.

5 Making the Coffin
Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/11



The *aron* (coffin) was (and still is), by tradition, very simple, to demonstrate the equality of all persons in death. The depiction of this task in the series of paintings suggests that each coffin was made for the given individual.

6 Digging the Grave
Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/7



According to *halachah* (Jewish law), a grave must be dug at least two cubits deep (a cubit being a measure of the forearm from the tip of the middle finger to the bottom of the elbow).

7 Carrying out the Body
Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/6



The body of the deceased is taken to the cemetery. The *tzedakah* (charity) box is a central feature in the painting, showing the value of giving charity in honor of the one who has died. As in several other pictures, there is weeping.

Prague Placards Show Scope of CK Work

כבוד וניחום
 Paintings Documenting the *Chevrah Kadisha Gomle Chasadim*
 (The Holy Brotherhood of Those Who Perform Charitable Deeds) of Prague

8 **Washing of the Body**
 Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/5



The body of the deceased is washed with reverence as the liturgy is recited in preparation for the *taharah* (purification through pouring water over the body). The *Vaya'an Vayomer* prayer is visible on the wall, reminding the Chevrah Kadisha to show the *meit* (deceased) the same dignity that God's angels showed to Joshua in preparing him to be *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest).

10 **The Oration over the Dead Man**
 Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/9



The Orator may be giving the *hesped* (eulogy) and chanting *El Malei Rachamim* (God Full of Compassion), a central prayer in the liturgy releasing the *neshamah* into the arms of God.

9 **The Entrance of the Burial Procession into the Cemetery**
 Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/8



It is customary to stop seven times on the way to the grave, each stop causing the individuals in the procession to reflect on death and its teaching on how to live.

11 **Carrying the Body to the Grave**
 Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/10



As in other paintings we see the *tzedakah* box. An older man is being supported by two younger men.

Prague Placards Show Scope of CK Work

כבוד וניחום
 Paintings Documenting the *Chevrah Kadisha Gomle Chasadim*
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12 Lowering the Coffin into the Grave
 Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/12

The absence of women mourners in the cemetery is notable. We see the *tallit* (prayer shawl) of the deceased covering his shroud.

14 Washing Hands upon Leaving the Cemetery
 Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/14

This is a custom of spiritual purification that continues into the present day. Note the date above the pump handle – 1607.

13 Consoling the Relatives of the Dead
 Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/13

The work of the Chevrah Kadisha does not end with the burial of the deceased, but includes the *mitzvah* of *nichum aveilim* (consoling the mourners) as well as helping the family financially if the deceased had been the breadwinner.

15 Burial Society Board Members
 Prague ca 1772, oil on canvas, 55 x 110 cm, Inv no 12.843/15

As mentioned before, these paintings are based on actual communities. This is the final painting of the original series. The varied styles of their hats, clothing, shoes, and beards may indicate their origins in different Jewish communities.

Why Do These Rituals?

- **Respect** – these are part of how we honor our dead
- **Comfort** – for the soul of the deceased, for the family left behind, for the community
- **Spirituality** – helping a soul move on
- **Life** – these rituals teach us how to live – with humility, respect, joy, and honor for the sacredness of each moment
 - Near death experiences help us appreciate life more
- **History/tradition** – this is what has been done for centuries by Jews for Jews
 - Some context – consider the larger continuum of care from Prague

Chevrah Work and Life Priorities

- *Setting Aside the Super Bowl, Just Once, for a Holy Act ,*
by Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz

What's Really Important in *Taharah*?

1. Emotional and physical health of the *Chevrah Kadisha* team
2. *Kavod hameit* – honoring the deceased, midwifing a soul
 - ▶ Remember: Why are you doing this?
3. *Kavanah* (sacred intentions) of everyone involved – this is holy work
4. Patience and kindness – “we do the best we can”
 - ▶ You can do no wrong if you are there to honor the dead
 - ▶ You can always ask for help, get answers to questions
 - ▶ There is no right or wrong in holy work when you embody love

One Last Thought: The Evolving *Taharah* Liturgy

- ▶ Today's *taharah* procedures have been greatly affected by COVID-19
 - ▶ New liturgy adaptations have emerged
 - ▶ *Taharah Ruchanit* – non-physical, spiritual ritual to midwife a soul without being present with the physical body
 - ▶ Post-burial grave-side rituals to honor those who could not have in-person *taharah*
 - ▶ Hybrid rituals with *ruchanit*-like aspects with accompanying in-funeral-home personnel doing actions in coordination with online liturgy recitation
- ▶ Questions emerging as to changes to the liturgy – how should it evolve?
 - ▶ How to preserve essence of the ritual, adapt to the times, not lose Kabbalistic power and depth of ancient ritual
 - ▶ What happens next? What's coming to meet post-pandemic needs?

Who Benefits from these Rituals?

- The **soul** of the deceased – comfort, honor, and midwifing
- The **family** of the deceased – comfort and honor; practical help
- The ***chevrah* team** members – opportunity to work in liminal space between death and life; heightened awareness of life as a gift; mitzvah of helping
- The **community** at large – comfort in knowing someone cares – my family will be taken care of; spiritual connections; continuity of tradition

Some Questions to Consider

- Who should get involved in this work?
- Do I really need to touch dead bodies?
- What do we do next, now that we've had this intro?

Resources

- Finding help and learning more:
 - [*Taharah and Shmirah Overview*](#)
 - [*Jewish-Funerals.org*](#)
 - [*Gamliel Institute courses*](#) – especially Core Course 2: *Taharah* and *Shmirah*
 - [*Kavod v'Nichum local trainings*](#)
 - [*Kavod v'Nichum annual conference*](#)
 - [*Books, books, books*](#)
 - [*Jewish Rites of Death, Stories of Beauty and Transformation*](#)
 - [*Chesed Shel Emet*](#)
 - [*To Midwife a Soul*](#)
 - [*Health and Safety Precautions for Taharah*](#)
- Learn from other *chevrah* members, leaders, teachers, clergy

Questions?



Epilogue – Some Historical Context

- ▶ For a detailed history of *Chevrah Kadisha* in the context of world history, please see a historical overview including a timeline and PowerPoint presentation [here](#).
- ▶ The following slides give a summary of the main events that led us to today's *taharah* ritual liturgy and practice.

Big Picture – Biblical Context

Jewish values relating to the end of life start in the Torah:

- ▶ Burial at Machpelah: Gen 23
- ▶ Joseph's (false) death: Gen 37: 29-35
- ▶ Jacob's burial: Gen 47:28-31, Gen 50:1-14
- ▶ Aaron's death: Num 20:24-29
- ▶ Miriam's death: Num 20:1
- ▶ Moses' death: Deut 34:1-8
- ▶ Same-day burial: Deut 21:23
- ▶ Shiva: Job 2:13
- ▶ Parah Aduma: Num 19
- ▶ Eglah Arufah Deut 21:1-9

Big Picture – Talmudic Context

Jewish death practices are discussed in the Talmud and Mishnah in various places. To begin with, consider:

- ▶ Sotah 14a
- ▶ Moed Katan 27a and 27b

Big Picture – Context

Jewish death practices are discussed in the Talmud and Mishnah in various places. To begin with, consider:

- Sot
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- First mention of Jewish death practices since Biblical times
 - *Sotah 14a* – requirement to bury
 - *S'machot 7:5* – societies to visit sick
 - *Baba Batra 8a, Moed Katan 27b* – public associations to bury the dead
 - Rabban Gamliel established equality and simplicity for Jewish burial – *Moed Katan 27a, 27b*

Big Picture – Context

Jewish deo
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➤ Sotah

➤ Moed

Sotah 14a:

Rabbi Hama son of Rabbi Hanina further said: What does the text mean: You shall walk after the Adonai your God? (Deut. 13:5) Is it, then, possible for a human being to walk after the Shechinah; for has it not been said: For Adonai your God is a devouring fire? (Deut. 4:24). But [the meaning is] to walk after the qualities of character (midot) of the Holy One, blessed be God.

As God clothes the naked, for it is written (Gen.3:21):

And Adonai God made Adam and his wife coats of skin, and clothed them, so do you also clothe the naked.

The Holy One, blessed be God, visited the sick, for it is written (Gen.18:1):

And Adonai appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, so do you also visit the sick.

The Holy One, blessed be God, comforted mourners, for it is written (Gen. 25:11):

And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son, so do you also comfort mourners.

The Holy one, blessed be God, buried the dead, for it is written (Deut. 34:6):

And God buried him in the valley, so do you also bury the dead.

Big Picture – Context

Jewish dec

Sotah 14a:

From this we learn that caring for the sick, comforting the mourning, and tending to the dead are high priorities in God's eyes.

These are central to the work of the *Chevrah Kadisha*.

What does the text mean: You shall walk after
possible for a human being to walk after
nai your God is a devouring fire? (Deut. 4:24).
of character (midot) of the Holy One, blessed

8:21):
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The Holy One, blessed be God, visited the sick, for it is written (Gen.18:1):
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The Holy One, blessed be God, comforted mourners, for it is written (Gen. 25:11):
And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son,
so do you also comfort mourners.

The Holy one, blessed be God, buried the dead, for it is written (Deut. 34:6):
And God buried him in the valley, so do you also bury the dead.

Respect

- Jewish community life revolves around family life cycle events
- Life cycle events show respect for our lives and our family members
- Death is considered part of the Jewish life cycle
- *Chevrah Kadisha* plays an important role in Jewish community life

Respect

Moed Katan 27b

- Jew The Gemara relates that when **Rav Hamnuna** once happened to come to a place called
- Life Darumata, he heard the sound of a shofar announcing that a person had died in the town.
- Dec When he saw some people doing work, he said to them:
- Che Let these people be under an excommunication. Is there not a dead person in town?

They said to him:

There are separate groups in the town, each one responsible for its own dead. Knowing that the deceased was not from our group, we continued our work.

He said to them:

If so, it is permitted to you, and he revoked his excommunication.

Respect

Moed Katan 27b

From this we know there existed community groups dedicated to care of the dead in the 2nd century CE.

These are the ancestors of today's *Chevrot Kadisha*.

...nuna once happened to come to a place called
...ofar announcing that a person had died in the town.

... he said to them:

...ommunication. Is there not a dead person in town?

...town, each one responsible for its own dead.

...knowing that the deceased was not from our group, we continued our work.

He said to them:

If so, it is permitted to you, and he revoked his excommunication.

Big Picture – Context Continued

Jewish dec
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➤ Sotah

➤ Moed

Moed Katan 27a-b:

At first ... The wealthy would bring the meal in baskets of silver and gold, and the poor would bring it in baskets of peeled willow branches. And the poor were embarrassed, as everyone would see that they were poor. The Sages instituted that everyone should bring the meal in baskets of peeled willow branches, due to the honor of the poor.

At first, they would serve wine in the house of the mourner during the first meal after the burial; the wealthy would do so in cups made from white glass, and the poor would serve this wine in cups of colored glass. And the poor were embarrassed, as everyone would see that they were poor. The Sages instituted that all should serve drinks in the house of the mourner in colored glass cups, due to the honor of the poor.

Furthermore, at first, they would uncover the faces of the wealthy who passed away and cover the faces of the poor, because their faces were blackened by famine. And the poor were embarrassed because they were buried in a different manner. The Sages instituted that everyone's face should be covered, due to the honor of the poor. (continued next slide)

Big Picture – Context Continued

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- ▶ Sotah
- ▶ Moed

Moed Katan 27a-b continued:

At first, the wealthy would take the deceased out for burial on a *dargash*, and the poor would take the deceased out on a plain bier made from poles that were strapped together, and the poor were embarrassed. The Sages instituted that everyone should be taken out for burial on a plain bier, due to the honor of the poor.

At first, they would place incense under the beds of those who died with an intestinal disease, because the body emitted an especially unpleasant odor. And those who were alive with an intestinal disease were embarrassed. The Sages instituted that incense should be placed under everyone, due to the honor of those with an intestinal disease who were still living.

(continued next slide)

Big Picture – Context Continued

Jewish dec
various pla

- Sotah
- Moed

Moed Katan 27a-b continued:

At first, they would ritually immerse all the utensils that had been used by women who died while menstruating, and due to this, the living menstruating women were embarrassed. The Sages instituted that the utensils that had been used by all dying women must be immersed, to honor the living menstruating women. And, at first, they would ritually immerse all the utensils that had been used by *zavin*, men suffering from gonorrhea, who died, and due to this the living *zavin* felt embarrassed. The Sages instituted that the utensils that had been used by all men must be immersed, to honor the living *zavin*.

At first, taking the dead out for burial was more difficult for the relatives than the actual death, because it was customary to bury the dead in expensive shrouds, which the poor could not afford. So the poor would sometimes abandon the corpse and run away. This lasted until **Rabban Gamliel** waived his dignity, by leaving instructions that he be taken out for burial in linen garments. And the people adopted this practice after him and had themselves taken out for burial in linen garments. Rav Pappa said: And nowadays, everyone follows the practice of taking out the dead for burial even in plain hemp garments (*tzerada*) that cost only a dinar.

Big Picture – Context Continued

Moed Katan 27a-b continued:

From this we learn that all are equal in death, hence everyone should be treated equally –

- Simple, non-extravagant burial
- Everyone dressed in simple garments
- Funeral costs should be minimal for all

utensils that had been used by women who died during menstruating women were embarrassed. The utensils used by all dying women must be immersed, and at first, they would ritually immerse all the utensils of a woman dying from gonorrhea, who died, and due to this, it was instituted that the utensils that had been used by the living *zavin*.

It was more difficult for the relatives than the actual death, because it was customary to bury the dead in expensive shrouds, which the poor could not afford. So the poor would sometimes abandon the corpse and run away. This lasted until **Rabban Gamliel** waived his dignity, by leaving instructions that he be taken out for burial in linen garments. And the people adopted this practice after him and had themselves taken out for burial in linen garments. Rav Pappa said: And nowadays, everyone follows the practice of taking out the dead for burial even in plain hemp garments (*tzerada*) that cost only a dinar.

Big Picture – Concluded

- ▶ Based on these values, Jewish death practices have evolved for more than two millennia
- ▶ Along the way, various important events colored and tailored this evolution
 - ▶ Emergence of Kabbalah as the major Jewish mystical understanding of death and afterlife

Big Picture – Concluded

- Based on these values, Jewish death practices have evolved for more than two millennia
- Along the way, various important events colored and tailored this evolution
 - Emergence of Kabbalah as the major Jewish mystical understanding of death and afterlife
 - Publication of *Ma'avar Yabok* and several other books finally put in writing what was practiced, and hence, what should be practiced
 - Invention of the printing press helped spread important books and thought
 - Jewish expulsions forced Jews to recreate Jewish community practices, including cemeteries, burial societies, and rituals
 - *Chevrot Kadisha* became the associations within Jewish society to handle death

Where Are We Now?

- ▶ *Chevrot Kadisha* organizations exist throughout the modern world
 - ▶ *Ashkenazi* and *Sephardi* traditions both included
- ▶ The central elements and liturgy of the ritual of taharah are identical (for the most part) through out the world
- ▶ Jews continue include respect for the living and respect for the dead as central to our values
- ▶ The past 50 years in North America have seen a rebirth of the mitzvot around the end of life in non-Orthodox communities