

The Orthodox
Jewish Woman
and Ritual:

*Options and
Opportunities*

*D*eath &
*M*ourning

THIS BOOKLET IS DEDICATED IN LOVING MEMORY OF
SALLY FOX ON THE OCCASION OF HER 15TH *Yahrzeit*
BY HER DAUGHTER, DR. AMY FOX GRIFFEL
AND DR. MARTIN GRIFFEL

THE CHANCE TO HEAL

Jewish law dictates that both men and women must observe the ritual practices of mourning. The requirements for *aninut* and *aveilut*; for *shiva*, *shloshim* and year long mourning are generally the same for both sexes. While women are not obligated to recite *kaddish*, there were always women who recited this prayer at home, and there are now increasing numbers of women who recite the *kaddish* in synagogue. It is hard to imagine a woman writing the far ranging work that Leon Wieseltier authored on the *kaddish*; complete with scholarly notes on the purpose and content of the prayer. A book authored by a woman would be less concerned with the symbolism of the *kaddish*, and mainly occupied with the logistics of saying *kaddish* in different synagogues, and the relative degrees of hospitality and inhospitality afforded.

Discouraged from assuming public roles in the Jewish community, for centuries women entrusted their fathers, husbands and sons with the rituals of public mourning. Today, as women step increasingly closer to the center of Jewish life and practice, the role of women as public mourners deserves exploration. This issue looks at some of the ways that women have confronted death and mourning in the past, and considers the changing role of women in public mourning today.

While experiencing loss is very difficult, we find comfort in the rituals of our tradition which allow us to grieve and then heal. Women experiencing loss should not be denied access to these important rituals.

The Editors



פודה י"ל נפש עבדיו ולא יאשמו כל החוסי'
 Salmo 34 V 23- 21

Imre Lev: Preghiere d'un Cuore Israelita by Mario Tedeschi, Asti 1852. Lithograph by A. Hoening. Deathbed scene showing family members, including women holding prayerbooks. This prayerbook was intended primarily for the use of women. Courtesy of Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

TWO FUNERALS: A LOOK AT HOW TIMES HAVE CHANGED

by Belda Kaufman Lindenbaum
and Carol Kaufman Newman

Twenty three years ago, when our father died, his funeral took place in the main sanctuary of Congregation Kehillat Jeshurun Synagogue in New York City. There was no problem with the arrangements, our father having been a longtime and active member of the congregation. The logical person to deliver the eulogy on behalf of the family would have been our eldest sister, Judy, a gifted writer and speaker. But the idea of a woman assuming such a function at an Orthodox funeral, of giving a *hesped*, especially from the pulpit of a synagogue, was too outrageous to be considered at the time. And so, our brother spoke for all of us. Twenty three years ago our father's three daughters toyed with the idea of saying *kaddish*, went on occasion, but gave it up. We did, however, organize a *yahrzeit* dinner each year and learned for the occasion, attending services to say *kaddish*.

Today, as we write these words, it is remarkable to see how far we have come. Today we are not easily deterred and we are ready to challenge the status quo where *halacha* allows. Our mother, Rita Kaufman, died recently. There was no question that we wanted her funeral to take place in the same sanctuary from which our father had been eulogized. She was a learned, devout and longtime member of the synagogue. Twenty three years ago we only knew of one woman who had had her funeral in a synagogue, and this was not permitted in the main sanctuary, but only in the auditorium. At the time, this was considered a significant honor.

At our mother's funeral this year, among those who eulogized her was a daughter-in-law and a daughter. Her granddaughters participated by reciting *tehillim*, singing along with her grandsons in an unusual tribute, and accompanying the coffin as it left the shul. At the cemetery, a place where women are still often unwelcome, another granddaughter spoke. We all participated with the men in shovelling and covering the coffin and filling the grave.

Shiva, too, was a different experience this time. We were not relegat-

ed to a separate room for daily services. Because we were told that a *mechitza* was unnecessary in a private home, we were able to sit and pray in the main room with a small separation from the men. Female as well as male family members learned *mishnayot* and led study sessions between *mincha* and *maariv*. It all seemed perfectly natural.

Today, we, our mother's daughters, along with her son, say *kaddish* every morning and afternoon. We are welcomed into the congegation, for the most part graciously. There are some occasions where we have asked for some changes to be more comfortable, and we are not afraid to ask. It is comforting to participate in these rituals and to deal with our mother's death as part of the community. We think our mother would have been proud to see the *kavod* she is being given, and to see her daughters engaging in the tradition which she loved and passed on to us.

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WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN FUNERAL AND SHIVA

When death strikes a family it is often men who become the organizers of arrangements. Women often tend to rely on male family members or the Rabbi to organize the funeral, *shiva*, *matzevah*, etc. But death is not a sacrament in Judaism. A woman can organize a funeral and deliver a *hesped* at the service. Additionally, women may carry the coffins of women. While a few decades ago it was not common for women to go to graveside funerals, this is now a common phenomenon.

As women attain leadership positions in synagogues, there is no reason they should not be involved in funerals. A female in a leadership

position in a synagogue may prepare mourners, deliver the eulogy and make necessary arrangements. She may also help arrange the *gilui matzevah*, and compose the text for the tombstone. The only *halachik* problem which may arise is that of the woman serving as *shaliach tzibur*. While a woman may perform a variety of leadership functions at a funeral or *gilui matzevah*, she can not lead the congregation in prayer which requires a *minyán*.

Accordingly, women's roles may be increased in the *shiva* house. When women do not say *kaddish*, they are often publicly invisible during the *shiva*. Women mourners are often asked to leave the room so that male mourners or those assembled can pray. The tendency then is for women to congregate in the kitchen, and not pray at all. Such behavior is disrespectful to the mourners as well as to the dead. A *shiva* room may be set up with an equitable division of space whether or not the woman is reciting *kaddish*. Similarly, the learning of *mishnayot* in memory of the dead during *shiva* can be lead by female mourners or by women who come to comfort.

CHESED SHEL EMET: WOMEN AND CHEVRA KADISHA

by Dr. Sharon Penkower Kaplan

A *chevra kadisha* (burial society) is a group of Jewish men and women, usually community volunteers, responsible for the proper preparation of the dead for burial in accordance with Jewish law and custom. The term originates in the Talmud (*Moed Katan* 27b). The obligation to care for the dead is considered a *chesed shel emet*, a true kindness, since the dead can neither repay the kindness nor even acknowledge it with a thank you.

The Jewish attitude towards a corpse, and the practices of *chevrot* derive from biblical verses, Midrashim, commentary, Talmudic discussion and various evolving customs. The overarching value is the sanctity of the human body as the receptacle in which God places the soul. This yields the concept of *kavod hamet* (dignity of the dead) which guides all *chevra* procedures.

The main task of a *chevra* — with women attending to deceased

females, and men attending to deceased males — is to wash the body of the deceased, carry out a *tahara* (ritual purification) by pouring *tishah kavim* (24 quarts) of water over the body, dress the body in white linen shrouds and place it in a simple wooden coffin. Customs vary widely. Sometimes members of the *chevra* also accompany the bereaved family through the burial.

During the procedures, one member functions as *gabbait*, assigning tasks and making decisions. Telephone communication is available should the need arise to direct a question to the local Rabbi. However, this rarely occurs because so much is custom, and because members become well versed in their knowledge of their responsibilities and turn to their fellow participants when in doubt. Many a Rabbi has told me that we are far more expert in these matters than he. (A complete discussion of *chevra* procedures is available on audio tape from JOFA).

I first became active in *chevra* work in 1974 when Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, then Rabbi of Lincoln Square Synagogue, asked Rachel Newmark Herlands and me to establish and chair a women's division of the *chevra kadisha*. I was totally ignorant of *chevra* practices, and harbored incorrect stereotypes of the women who carried out this *mitzvah*. Nonetheless, Rachel and I accepted the responsibility. We were taught by the Breuer Women's *chevra*, who were most hospitable and supportive once they overcame their shock that women in their twenties were taking on this task. I have been privileged to perform this *mitzvah* since that time, in the company of very diverse women from Manhattan, Teaneck, Englewood, Queens, the Bronx, Williamsburg, Borough Park and Flatbush. I do *chevra* work because I was asked and am able to carry out this rite. I regard it as a *shelichut*, a task that God has designated for me. It is a source of comfort to me, and provides a sense of order regarding life and death.

Even though our tradition holds members of a *chevra* in high regard, the *mitzvah* actually imbues humility in its participants. I have undergone periods where I felt unworthy to serve. Participation keeps me aware of past, present and future, and makes me grateful for my blessings. I warmly embrace the fast and feast of *Zayin Adar*, the anniversary of *Moshe Rabeinu's* death, with the special *mincha* service at which I take the opportunity to atone for any sin of omission of respect or commission of disrespect to the dead that might have occurred while carrying out my duties. I then enjoy a *shuir* in the company of my fellow *chevra* members. Of all the roles in my life, I hold uppermost those of family member and *chevra* member.

In general, participation in *chevra* work is limited to *shomrei mitzvot*, those who observe the commandments, usually understood to be *Shabbat*, *Kashrut* and *Taharat Hamishpacha* (family purity). But par-

ticipants do vary in religious practices. Some married women cover their hair, others don't, some *daven* three times a day, others only on *Shabbat* and *Yom Tov*, some wear slacks, others don't. Personality traits also vary, as does the level of both secular and religious education, and marital status and age. Notwithstanding these differences, all share a belief in the dignity due to the deceased, consider it a privilege to be accepted to perform these tasks, and view this endeavor as amongst the most meaningful in their lives.

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A SHORT HISTORY OF CHEVRA KADISHA

The care of the dead has always been considered one of the greatest *mitzvot*. While the Talmud speaks of communal responsibility for the dead, the first references we have to Jewish burial societies date to the end of the eleventh century. By the fourteenth century, formal burial groups existed in Spain, and the first formal Ashkenazi burial society was established in 1564. During the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries there was a proliferation of such societies in Italy. These *chevrot* dealt with the concerns of the dead and dying, but were also involved in other areas of general welfare, such as caring for the sick. It was considered a holy obligation and a matter of great status to be a member of the *chevra kadisha*.

Traditionally, women always performed pre-burial rituals for women. Men were not allowed to attend to the washing and ritual preparation of a woman. However, women usually worked under the men's *chevra* and did not have full membership privileges or the status that came along with such membership. Though there is evidence of separate women's societies in the seventeenth century, by the eighteenth century separate women's burial societies were a widespread phenomenon. Today, most women's *chevrot* function as independent bodies, collaborating as equals with the men's *chevrot*.

RECLAIMING A MOTHER'S NAME

by Sylvia Axelrod Herskowitz

There is a compelling demand today to increase women's visibility in Orthodox Jewish life and decision making - and there are significant areas where this can be accomplished gracefully and almost effortlessly. One way is to increase women's visibility in the cemetery by using the mother's name as well as the father's on *matzevot*, or tombstones.

Most of us have followed the unquestioned tradition of citing only the father's name on the tombstone. Today, with our heightened sensitivities, when we visit the cemeteries we are most familiar with, our past generations confront us in silent reproach. The name of the father has been inscribed, but the mother's name is absent. It is important to correct this inequity and reclaim the name of the mother.

For some reason which I have been unable to trace, and because it is always reckless to generalize, some Jewish communities do inscribe the mother's name on the stone. One example is the large Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn, which used the old Montefiore cemetery in years past, and now has its own Rodfe Sedek section in the Baron de Hirsch cemetery in Staten Island. (My authority for this is Rabbi Zevulun Lieberman, spiritual leader of the Beth Torah congregation in Brooklyn.)

In the Ashkenazic community, examples can be found in the Adas Yeraim section of the Beth Israel Cemetery in New Jersey, where many of the original Viennese emigres of the Second World War are buried. There you can find "*Veshem Imo*" or "*Veshem Ima*" — "and the name of his /her mother is" There are examples in cemeteries in Europe as well. Outside Amsterdam, in the Muiderberg cemetery, and apparently also in the other two cemeteries there, most of the stones carry the mother's name in addition to the father's. Another illustrious example is found on Har Hamenuchot, in Jerusalem, on the *matseva* of Rav Moshe Feinstein, which reads "and the Rabbanit Feya Gitel".

When we mourn the loss of a loved one, we often are not in the mindset to think of correcting the omissions of the past, and sometimes we leave the composition of the text of the tombstone to other members of the family. But think for a moment about who will visit the gravesite and you will realize the appropriateness of inscribing both parents'

names. The past is history, but we have it in our hands to correct the present and the future.

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WOMEN AND KADDISH

by Barbara Gaims-Spiegel

Can women recite the *mourner's kaddish* in Orthodox synagogues? Why would women want to perform this *mitzvah*? All of us will be blessed if, after we die, someone will lovingly remember us by reciting the hauntingly beautiful *mourner's kaddish*. Initially, *kaddish* was not recited for mourners, but was recited in the Temple, following the study of Torah or a scholarly lecture. The recitation of *kaddish* to honor the dead is a relatively late phenomenon. Legend has it that Rabbi Akiva encouraged one of his students who was grieving over the death of his errant father to recite parts of the *kaddish* to redeem his father's soul. Beginning in the sixth century, *kaddish* was recited at the funerals of scholars. Later, so as not to bring shame on those who were less learned, the *kaddish* was recited for all. Finally, in the thirteenth century, the *mourner's kaddish* became an established part of Jewish ritual.

The moving Aramaic words, which praise God, and, surprisingly, abstain from all mention of death, were traditionally recited by a male in the presence of a *minyán*. Young boys, even before the age of *Bar Mitzvah*, were also expected to recite the *kaddish*. The recitation of the *kaddish* was considered so important for the memory of the dead that young boys in Eastern Europe came to be known as “*kaddishls*.”

Halachically, women are exempt from the obligation to recite the *kaddish*. One explanation for the exemption of women draws on the fact that women are exempt from all time-bound commandments. As women's lives were traditionally focused upon raising children and maintaining the home, there was no time to fulfill obligations such as *kaddish*, which must be recited within a defined period of time.

Despite the exemption, as far back as the seventeenth century it is recorded that some women recited *kaddish* at home, and there is anecdotal

dotial mention of some who were known to recite it in synagogue. Rabbi Yair Bachrach (17th century), wrote of a man from Amsterdam with no sons who “commanded” that upon his death ten men study in his home, and that following this study his daughter recite *kaddish* every day for twelve months. In his responsum, Rabbi Bachrach concluded that a daughter’s *kaddish* brings peace and calm to the dead person, but he prohibited the daughter from reciting the *kaddish* out of fear of innovation. Thus Rabbi Bachrach did not assert that it is *halachically* forbidden for women to recite the *kaddish*, but ruled that such an act was not appropriate for his community.

In the early twentieth century, women began to find their own voices as mourners. Henrietta Szold, the founder of Hadassah, declined Hayim Peretz’s offer to say *kaddish* for her mother in 1916. She wrote, “When my father died, my mother would not permit others to take her daughters’ place in saying the *kaddish*, and so I am sure I am acting in her spirit when I move to decline your offer.” It is known that after the Holocaust women all over Europe recited the *kaddish*.

Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik ruled that a woman may recite *kaddish* in a synagogue in the presence of a *minyan* of ten men, whether or not a man is saying *kaddish* along with her. Other authorities have also ruled that a woman may recite the *kaddish* in synagogue. As the recitation of *kaddish* is *halachically* permissible, it is now being taken on by increasing numbers of women.

For me, the recent recitation of *kaddish* in memory of my father, may his memory be blessed, was a rich and powerful experience. It gave me strength and comfort and enabled me to draw closer to God and to my community. When we recite the *mourner’s kaddish*, we praise God and indicate that while we suffer great loss, our faith is undiminished. Taking on the commitment to say *kaddish* meant attending *minyan* daily for eleven months. Thankfully, I was made to feel welcome by Rabbis and congregants alike. I know that other women have not been as fortunate and have found it difficult and sometimes impossible to recite the *mourner’s kaddish* because they have not been welcomed as mourners in their synagogues. For me, the experience of saying *kaddish* in memory of my father has forever changed my life.

Not every Jewish woman wishes or is able to recite the *kaddish*. And the opportunity to recite it has different meaning for different women. Some are comfortable having others recite the *kaddish* for them, but many others feel a deep need to honor their loved ones themselves.

For those of us who, at the time of our grief, have been warmly welcomed, respected, and encouraged, we can only hope that other women, experiencing the pain of loss, will find Rabbis and congregations welcoming them in their midst. Let us pray that when our time comes to

depart that we leave behind those who wish to say *kaddish* for us. And, in the meantime, may we be grateful that we are still “guests” for another day.

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WOMEN AND THE CEMETERY: HISTORICAL NOTES

by Jennifer Breger

The relationship between Jewish women and the cemetery is historically a complex one. The Bible tells us of public women mourners. *Jeremiah* 9:16-19 speaks of *mikonnenot*, skilled women who composed elegies. The *Mishna* in *Moed Katan* 3: 8-9 describes women who led the public display of grief at funerals, and sang dirges and lamentations.

The customs of Jews in Muslim and Oriental lands reflect the public participation of women at funerals. Ashkenazic women traditionally visited the cemetery a great deal. Many *tchinas* were written to be said at the cemetery. The famous book of mourning practices, *Maaneh Lashon* (1615), contains many prayers for women to recite on visits to the cemetery. The second book of the *Personal Guide to Illness, Death, and Mourning* called *Sefer Hahayyim* (1703), is directed specifically at women.

While Ashkenazic women regularly went to the cemetery to pray, they did not attend funerals at the cemetery. One of the reasons given for this abstention is the fear of intermingling of the sexes on the way back from the cemetery. It has also been suggested that women avoided funerals at cemeteries because of the traditional notion that Eve was responsible for bringing death into the world.

Traditionally, women were responsible for preparing the *tachrichim*, the shrouds in which the dead are buried. The custom of *tachrichim* was instituted in the first century so that rich and poor would be buried in the same way. According to the *Zohar*, the *tachrichim* correspond to the *chalukah d'rabbana* — the robe of the sages, woven of a person's *mitzvot* that he or she fulfilled while alive. The shrouds are traditionally sewn by hand, and are made without tying any knots. Some traditions assert that women sew *tachrichim* as a *tikkun* (rectification) for having brought death into the world. There is a German custom that young women sew their own *tachrichim* either upon marriage as part of their trousseau, or during pregnancy. The custom presumably relates to the fact that many women died in childbirth.

It is clear from prayer books and other sources that women traditionally went to the cemetery throughout the year, in times of sickness, hardship, and particularly during the month of *Elul* to ask their ancestors and famous *tzadikim* to plead for them.

A film dating to pre-war Lemberg shows thousands of women converging upon the grave of the seventeenth century Jewish woman known as the *Golden Rose*. Sephardic and Oriental women traditionally go to the grave of *tzadikim* to pray for mercy. Perhaps the most famous gravesite which women visit is *Kever Rachel*.

One of the most interesting rituals of Ashkenazi women was the ceremony of the *laying of wicks*. It was a long established custom for women in time of trouble, and especially between *Rosh Chodesh Elul* and *Yom Kippur* to walk around the cemetery, measuring either the whole cemetery or individual graves with candle wicks. As they walked, the women recited *tchinas*, or prayers. The women then made the wicks into candles for use on *Yom Kippur*, in memory of the dead, or in honor of the living. The candles were lit at home and in the synagogue. The custom is first mentioned by Eliezer of Worms in 1197 and enjoyed great longevity—we have photographs of this ritual which date to the beginning of the twentieth century.

One of the most beautiful eighteenth century *tchinas* centers around this practice of laying wicks. The second gate in the *tchina* of *The Three Gates* by Sarah Bas Tovim is written for the making of candles from cemetery wicks. The *tchina* is very complex, showing how women may connect with the righteous ones of the past. Through this ritual the dead gain merit for having supplied the wicks for the synagogue, and in turn become obligated to help the living and act as intercessors during the holy month of *Elul*. The author of this *tchina* pleads not only with those in the cemetery, but with all the *avot* and *imahot* to intercede on her behalf:

“As we have not forgotten the souls who sleep in their grave — we go to entreat them and measure them — for this may we be measured for good in the heavenly court, so that our sentence may be with great mercy, not with anger.” (Translation courtesy of Chava Weissler)

In this way the woman laying the wicks and making the candles views herself as an active partner in bringing the redemption of *Am Yisrael*.

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KAVOD HAMET

by Jennifer Breger

While it is important to focus on new ways of including women in ritual, we can also look to our past for examples of how women have traditionally been involved in Jewish practice. In rituals surrounding death and burial, Jewish tradition has always emphasized the respect and veneration due to women.

In the same way that the funeral of a scholar proceeds that of a layperson, the funeral of a woman proceeds that of a man. This law is founded upon respect for the modesty of a woman. The preparation of a woman's corpse for burial is always carried out by women for reasons of modesty. Certain communities enacted *takkanot* and fines against men who attended to female corpses, except in cases of dire emergency.

Another mark of respect for women is the inscriptions on tombstones which describe the kindness and good deeds of the woman who is buried. Often women's tombstones have candles carved on the stone, and there are special symbols for women who died in childbirth. For example, tombstones from Italy provide us with a wealth of information about the women of the period and their contribution to the community and to larger society.

Another window into the lives of our mothers is the corpus of eulogies and elegies written by husbands and children in their honor. These *hespedim* give us a great deal of information about the women and show the high esteem in which they were held. Rabbi Eliezer of Worms, the author of the *Rokeach* (12th c.), wrote a beautiful elegy for his wife Dulcie who died a martyr's death together with her two daughters. In the eighteenth century, the *Noda Be'yehudah* wrote a moving elegy for his wife who is buried with him in Prague. There are many more examples of eulogies which attest to the important roles women played in their families and beyond.

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