

## The Orthodox Jewish Woman and Ritual

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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*.