

The Orthodox Jewish Woman and Ritual

Chesed Shel Emet: Women and Chevra Kadisha By Dr. Sharon Penkower Kaplan

Achevra 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 participants 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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