

## Respect for a Sacred Society

By Rabbi Elchonon Zohn

An elite club existed in the European shtetl, the membership of which was handed down from father to son like the most precious heritage. Often its members were chosen by lot or by secret vote. The “Chevra Kadisha”, the “Sacred Society” was generally the first group to be organized in the founding of any Jewish community. The Chevra was responsible for the entire spectrum of burial service, from pronouncing death to plot allotment and cemetery maintenance.

This unique specialty originates in part from the Talmudic passage: “Rabbi Simlai lectured: Torah begins and ends with acts of kindness... It concludes with an act of kindness, as is written (Deut. 34:6); ‘And He buried him (Moses) in the valley.’” (Sotah 14A). Thus, the act of burial and its preparation is seen as an emulation of G-d, fulfilling the commandment to “walk in His ways.” It is for this reason that the day of the birth and death of Moses, Zayin Adar, the seventh day of the month of Adar, is the traditional celebration of the Chevra Kadisha, underscoring that on that day G-d performed the work of the Chevra, thereby giving it its special status.

What happened in this country that for many years the Chevra was less than respected, often ridiculed and largely ignored? Why was the Chevra generally perceived by the funeral director as an outside group to be called in at a time of necessity, only when insisted upon by the family, the Rabbi, the Society, or the cemetery? Respect for the Chevra Kadisha as an institution, appreciation for the beauty of its customs, interest in its meaning to the Jewish community declined to a great extent. I dare say that even within the most traditional quarters of the Jewish community, there was a loss of respect and appreciation for the work of the Chevra, whose members often downplayed and denied their participation. Why?

The loss of prestige for the work of the Chevra would be more understandable and less painful if the customs and traditions were not so beautiful and full of meaning. However, Tahara is very rich in its significance, its every ritual a reflection of the most basic concepts of our faith. Proper performance of the Tahara and Shmira are a unique expression of the ultimate respect for the dignity and the specialty of man.

There is no place in this article to explain each minute custom and its origin and significance. However, as an example, let me cite two main themes: The first is that Judaism is predicated on the belief in an after-life where man and woman will receive their ultimate eternal reward after appearing before G-d for their final judgment; in essence their final Yom Kippur. Is it not then fascinating to know that the traditional burial shroud is designed to be exactly like the clothing worn by the High Priest for

his Yom Kippur service, before G-d, in the Bais Hamikdosh, our holy Temple? Doesn't it make sense to carefully wash and clean, and yes, ritually purify, all Jews before their final Yom Kippur, when they are soon to appear before the heavenly court?

A second accepted Jewish belief is that while the soul departs from the body upon death, it nevertheless remains nearby, fully aware of what transpires to the body and around it. This contradicts the oft-cited belief that funerals are for the living. In fact, the dead are very much "present" at their funeral. An excellent essay on this subject was written by Aryeh Kaplan and published in a pamphlet by the National Conference of Synagogue Youth (NCSY) of the Orthodox Union, entitled "Immortality and the Soul."

With this understanding, the care with which the body is treated in the washing and dressing process, the prohibition against unnecessary talk at the Tahara, the need for someone to watch and stay by the body, and the beautiful tradition of asking the deceased for forgiveness if anything was lacking in the respect given them, are not simply ancient rituals, but rather the logical consequence of the Jewish perception of death and burial. Certainly all of this transcends the issue of whether one had been a practicing Jew or not. Nor does it much matter if one was affiliated with an Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform congregation, or not affiliated at all. As a Jew, one is deserving of a burial reflecting the richness and the beauty of Jewish tradition and belief.

I think the lack of respect and appreciation for the Chevra during the middle decades of the last century has many reasons. The underlying cause is probably an outgrowth of the way in which European Jews settled in this country. They were generally individuals seeking to better their economic or family situation in a land of opportunity, not people coming to build a Jewish community. Most often they were seeking to become Americans. When Jews with a deep commitment to Orthodoxy arrived, they often felt this existing secular American-Jewish community to be a threat to their beliefs.

What therefore developed was a Chevra Kadisha of two kinds. On the one hand were the devout, sincerely religious Jews who, in America, perceived themselves to be in an atmosphere dangerous to the maintenance of almost every facet of their chosen way of life. They came to the Jewish funeral home to do battle with the director in a holy war where every compromise was perceived as territory lost. These Chevros, representing societies of congregations, had little understanding of the practical and economic needs and problems of the funeral director, nor were they willing to learn. They were satisfied with the knowledge that when one of their own passed on, they could pressure the funeral home into doing the funeral their way.

Prevalent in many other communities was the Chevra comprised of those people who could not make it in the business world, who found a way of making a dollar by doing a job no one else would do. They commercialized the Chevra. Their motivation was not really the respect for the work they were doing, and if necessitated by time or convenience, the Tahara would be done quickly, without sensitivity, without any real standard of excellence. Their purpose was served as long as it was done and they were paid, and the service was provided to the basic satisfaction of all.

This continued through the 50's and 60's as the Holocaust survivors came to this country, as separate individuals, without roots or community identification. Interestingly, where entire communities came together, like the German Jewish community and some of the Hassidic sects that settled in this country, this phenomenon didn't occur. They just transplanted their Chevra to this country, maintaining the respect and the integrity of its work.

Thank G-d, this situation is turning around. As the children of the Holocaust generation are forming communities of their own, their concern for this important facet of the Jewish life-cycle has come back into focus. Chevros of young, educated and sincere people, men and women committed to maintaining the beauty and the uniqueness of our heritage have sprung up all across this country. Many of these Chevros will act as the legal agents of the family regarding all funeral arrangements, thus sparing the family that difficulty, while speeding up the process of burial. These groups have the respect of the funeral directors they deal with and the confidence of the communities they serve. I know because I have lectured to many of them.

I am fortunate and proud to be at the head of the Chevra in Queens and Long Island under the auspices of the Vaad Harabonim of Queens, a group of Rabbis representing over 60 congregations. In our area, the percentage of Jewish people having Tahara has increased from 2-3% to almost 50% in the last 35 years. Respect for the work we do continues to grow, as we strive to maintain the highest standards of excellence and efficiency. Aware of and sensitive to the complexities of the Jewish funeral home, we have developed a wonderful working relationship based on mutual respect. We have invited the funeral directors to our annual Zayin Adar dinner, where they have expanded their appreciation for and knowledge of the work of the Chevra. Our Chevra is always willing to assist in obtaining a quick release from a hospital or medical examiner. We are careful to maintain the cleanliness of the funeral home, work within the time frame the director is comfortable with, while, never compromising what is required by our beautiful and special customs and traditions. It is my conviction that this trend will continue to grow and spread, so that every Jew will be privileged to be buried with the special beauty that is a Tahara, by caring, sensitive and special people who make up the Chevra Kadisha. As Jews it is their birthright and heritage.