

Shedding Light on the Darkest Hour

Rabbi Elchonon Zohn, Founder of National Association of Chevra Kadisha, Speaks about End-of-Life Issues



Rabbi Zohn, this week's parsha, Parshas Vayechi, has been designated as TEAM Shabbos. Can you tell us more about TEAM Shabbos?

TEAM is an acronym for Traditional End-of-life Movement. The Shabbos of Parshas Vayechi is dedicated to spreading and articulating the important topics surrounding end-of-life to the broader Jewish community through sermons, articles, lectures and events on, before and after this Shabbos.

Why was there a need to dedicate a Shabbos to this topic?

Because these are sensitive and uncomfortable topics to discuss, even for rabbonim, particularly in a large group, yet it is extremely important and responsible for everyone to know and understand the significance of these issues and to be prepared to face them when they arise, often when least expected. Having a national Shabbos dedicated to these concepts makes it easier

for everyone to “open the discussion” and address them.

300 shuls from across the nation will be participating. What topics will they be focusing on?

First of all, it will be well over 400 participating shuls. We have identified 13 topics of focus. Our website, www.teamshabbos.org, lists them and provides many resources regarding each one. In brief, the subjects range widely. We

begin with an appreciation of the sanctity and value of every minute of life from the Torah's perspective contrasted with the secular/medical ethics view and conclude with appreciating the work of the chevra kadisha. In between are issues dealing with preparing ourselves with halachic wills – living wills, estate wills and ethical wills – all defined by halacha; taking responsibility for parents' medical and after-life needs; being prepared by buying

kevarim and making pre-need funeral arrangements; reaching out to unaffiliated, secular Jews and encouraging their choice of traditional Jewish burial practices; etc. All of these are reflected in the short slogan we chose for this Shabbos: “Respect Life – Here and Hereafter.”

Rabbi Zohn, you are the Founder and Director of the National Association of Chevra Kadisha. Please tell us about your organization.

The National Association of Chevra Kadisha (NASCK), founded in 1996, was created to assist affiliated *chevros kadisha* in defining, establishing, and achieving the highest degree of *kavod ha'mes* (respect for the deceased) as defined by Jewish law. NASCK also creates and advances programs and initiatives to promote traditional Jewish end-of-life values. That is our short mission statement. We offer a 24/6 hotline to *chevros kadisha* for practical and *halachic* questions. We

are a resource on end-of-life issues and *halacha* serving *chevros, rabbonim*, professionals and individuals.

When did you become involved in the chevra kadisha?

I observed my first *tahara* at age 17 when I was acting as a *shomer* for a *rebbe* in our yeshiva. A couple of years later, when the Vaad Harabonim of Queens was seeking to form a *chevra kadisha* with a group of *talmidim* at Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim, I was asked to join because I had “experience.”

What prompted you to devote yourself to this mitzvah?

After being a member of the Vaad Chevra Kadisha in Queens for over 10 years and just after receiving *smichah* (rabbinic ordination) I was asked to head the Chevra. I agreed to do so until I found a job in *rabbanus* or *chinuch*, which was the direction I was looking to pur-

sue. When I did finally get an offer for the position I wanted, I resigned from the Chevra. The Vaad asked me to discuss my decision with a *gadol* since, *be”H*, I had been very successful in raising the standards of *kavod ha'mes* and *k'vurah k'halacha* (traditional Jewish burial) in the two years of my tenure. After a lengthy discussion with *Harav Yaakov Kaminitzky, zt”l*, I was convinced that unless I could find someone willing to take the job who would equally dedicate themselves to its growth and success, I could not leave what was a communal responsibility. The rest, as they say, “is history.”

What does being part of the Chevra Kadisha entail?

It means being ready at all times to help take care of and prepare every Jewish person, for whom your *chevra kadisha* is responsible, with proper Jewish burial in the quickest possible time with the greatest

possible *kavod* (respect), as defined by our tradition. It might also entail advocating for families with hospitals, medical examiners, and other entities to ensure proper *kavod* is achieved. Some *chevros* also get involved with setting up a *shivah* home, ensuring *minyanim*, etc.

Speaking about death is sometimes an uncomfortable and sensitive topic. How can we explain to our not-yet-religious brothers and sisters about the beauty of tahara and the laws surrounding a niftar?

Opening the conversation is indeed difficult. However, we must and there are ample opportunities. Every *rabbi* must use 2-3 minutes of every funeral where non-*frum* Jews are present to extol the beauty and the meaning of the *minhagim* and traditions that we follow. Focus on the respect for the body that housed a holy *neshama*; closure and comfort to the family; reflection of our beliefs in the afterlife and *t'chi-*

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yas hameisim; etc. We should never waste that “teachable moment” when those in attendance are listening attentively. Anyone can speak to those not-yet-religious Jews when someone in their circle passes on or even when a well-known Jewish person – like Joan Rivers – chooses cremation one can raise the question why would any Jew make that choice?

Can you relate two stories that you found extremely powerful in all your years of being part of the Chevra Kadisha?

The first story happened thousands of times. The *hashgachah pratis* that is clearly visible in the day-to-day operation of a Chevra Kadisha is inspiring. It is clear that *the* Ribbono Shel Olam only gives us that which we can handle. On a day that we struggle to get out one group of people to do a *tahara* (every *tahara* needs four participants), we only need one group. The next day we may need five groups and they are readily available. This applies to every facet of the Chevra process. Sometimes I will get a phone number or make a new contact who will make it possible the very next day (or hour) to get a release from a hospital, medical examiner or a cemetery to open late, etc.

A story that illustrates this common (yet not so common) phenomenon took place in 1981 a few months after I took over as director of the Chevra. In those days we had fewer women volunteers, mostly older people, many of whom didn't drive and who would not do more than two *taharos* consecutively. I called a meeting of the Women's Chevra to introduce myself and to review some *halachos*. To make sure we had a strong turnout for the meeting I spent the night before calling each of the 28-30 women, encouraging them to come and setting up rides for them, etc. The next day the phone kept ringing. By 5PM we had the need to do ten *taharos* for women in six different funeral homes in Queens and Long Island. Because of the meeting (which I cancelled) I had 24 women available to go, all with rides to get there, and with very minor changes we accomplished what

would have been impossible otherwise. I learned that lesson and it has given me the confidence I needed to undertake this tremendous *achrayos* (responsibility).

The second story may be even more frequent. It is the story of the heroic efforts that *klal Yisroel* exhibits on a constant basis to ensure *kavod ha'mes*. It is the boundless efforts to protect people from autopsies, to clean up the blood of Jews who die in accidents and disasters of all kinds. The members of ZAKA, Misaskim, Chesed Shel-Emes and individual *Chevros* who will leave no stone unturned so that any Jew will be given the greatest *kavod* after their *p'tirah*. Organizations like Agudath Israel of America, NASCK, Achiezer and others who will intervene with agencies of all kinds and go to court if necessary to stop an autopsy or cremation. The extraordinary efforts of such groups to identify the remains of *niftarim* after 9/11, TWA flight 800, Lockerbie, and *r"l* in Israel, on a constant basis. Last, but not least, is the story of selfless individual Chevra Kadisha members everywhere who are so careful with the *kavod* of each *Yid* they service at the *taharos* they do. It is not only the time they give, very often at difficult moments, but also the dedicated care and concern to do each *tahara* with sensitivity and perfection. I know because of all the *shailos* I receive before, during and after *taharos*, that make it so clear there is no *chessed* too big or too small. It is a unique privilege to be part of this truest *chessed shel emes*.

What are a few halachos or hashkafos that you find people don't know about but should?

The need to bury people as quickly as possible and the *z'chus* and comfort that provides the *niftar* or *nifteres*. People need to know what is appropriate to speak about at a *levaya* and how to be *menachem aveilim*. NASCK has a very helpful packet we give to *aveilim* at the *levaya* which helps address the last point.

Are there any misconceptions that you feel need to be cleared?

Filling out forms about end-of-

life medical issues or buying a *kever* leads to an *ayin hara*. “I don't need a health care proxy or a *halachic* living will before I turn 60.” “I will get to these things before I need them when I reach 50, 60, 70.” Reaching out to Jews who may choose cremation (these could be relatives, co-workers, neighbors or acquaintances) is not the responsibility of *frum* Jews. We highlighted these in this year's TEAM Shabbos program but there are many others.

What do you do when a family member calls you up and tells you that the niftar wanted a burial that is k'negged halacha, for example, cremation?

The first thing we ask ourselves (sadly) is why they waited to find this out after they died? We will then explore the reasons for their choice and who are the people empowered to make the decisions now. What is the personal relationship between the person calling and the person making decisions? We will then give them some points that they can use in trying to convince the family to bury *k'halacha*. We will offer to speak with the person making the decisions, if they are willing to speak with us. We will not pick up a phone and call that person who just lost a spouse, parent, sibling or, *chas v'shalom*, a child, and begin suggesting what they should or should not do.

If the choice is based on cost, there are many options available to help them get buried. *B"H*, there are organizations like Hebrew Free Burial that will assist. NASCK has just purchased a piece of land in South Florida that when developed will *be"H* become “The South Florida Jewish Cemetery.” When this project is fully financed, it will, *be"H*, allow for the burial of Jews who are indigent or who are choosing cremation because of the high cost of burial. You can learn more about this by visiting www.nasck.org or www.southfloridajewishcemetery.org.

However, if the choice was based on ideological or psychological reasons, the chances are very slim to affect a change after the fact. If we are able to address this topic while the

person is still well, we have a great chance of success. NASCK has a website dedicated to this issue www.peacefulreturn.org which has many resources.

Is there any way to perform an autopsy k'halacha if needed?

There is no way to be *menavel* (desecrate) a *mes k'halacha*. In cases of murder or where there are potential health risks, a *rav* should be consulted. In these extreme cases the medical examiner will generally insist on some form of autopsy in any case. At the request of the late NYC Medical Examiner, Dr. Charles S. Hirsch, NASCK developed a set of protocols to follow when an autopsy must be done. These protocols have been adopted by Agudath Israel of America and by medical examiners across the country, when necessary. The Traditional Jewish Autopsy Procedures can be viewed at our website www.nasck.org. The direct link is: <https://www.nasck.org/guidelines-and-procedures/>

Should we all make sure to have living wills? What is it?

A *halachic* living will is a legal document that appoints someone to be your health care agent (proxy) and directs your agent to make all decisions in accordance with *halacha*. This includes some post-mortem decisions as well. In the event that a question arises regarding the appropriate *halachic* protocol, the form directs the agent to the rabbi of your choice. This gives every Jew the peace of mind that all medical decisions made for them will be in accordance with *halacha* and their wishes. NASCK also offers a card (the EMES card) that contains the contact information of your proxy and the rabbi to be consulted in case of emergency. This card attaches to your driver license or ID in a special sleeve that will be found in the case of emergency. These cards are available free of charge by calling NASCK at 718.847.6280 or by requesting it at www.nasck.org.

Rabbi Zohn, thank you for taking of your time to speak with us. May you continue to be osek for the klal in this very important mitzvah. ▲