

# **Soul and Body**

A Transformational Approach to  
*Chevra Kadisha* Participation and Daily Life

A Project Designed by Rick Light  
as part of the Gamliel Institute's  
Course 3: Educating, Organizing, and Training

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## Overview

This project includes two 2-hour workshops in which students learn to change and re-energize their perspectives on life, death, personal relationships, and self-understanding. The focus of the course is to awaken awareness in students to include the realm of soul, thereby transforming life. Emphasis is placed on *Chevra Kadisha* work, but students do not need to have prior involvement in *Tahara* or other Jewish death practices.

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## Goals of the Project

- To educate about the “circle of life” that includes death and life together. To transform interactions, deepen awareness, and expand our depth of understanding in all aspects of life and death.
- To inspire people to be unafraid to face, talk about, and engage the reality of death and the beauty of Jewish death practices. To replace dread with respectful enthusiasm towards death and the dead, *Tahara*, and each other. Wonder should always be present, nothing done by rote.
- To encourage members of the community to participate in *Chevra Kadisha* work (or at least to choose *Tahara* for themselves and their family members) because *Tahara* is:
  - transcendentally beautiful “soul work,”
  - something exciting and amazing to participate in,
  - one of the most transformative experiences of a lifetime,
  - a special mitzvah that cannot be repaid,
  - a profound ritual that helps the soul of the deceased,
  - “holy work” that elevates all of life.
- To help students become enthusiastic “champions” for Jewish death practices, who will then be invigorated and share experiences, educate the community, participate in and support *Chevra Kadisha* activities.
- To add a new dimension to life, and specifically to *Chevra Kadisha* work, by recognizing the tradition that souls are part of the conversation. We will attempt to inspire students to develop an expanded awareness of life’s many dimensions as they look through the lens of “soul awareness”. (See below for definition and understanding of “soul awareness”.)
  - For *Tahara*: This viewpoint hopes to transform each *Tahara*, which is an occasion to help the deceased move between realms of existence, into “an opportunity of a lifetime” to do holy work.
  - For daily life: This viewpoint hopes to enhance the students’ respect for and recognition of the amazing limitless characteristic of life, particularly the non-physical aspect whose nature is so elusive.
  - For both, this viewpoint hopes to transform how students live their lives, view others, and treat other people on a daily basis.

## Basic Premises

- One of the major underlying principles that supports and guides the work of the *Chevra Kadisha* is the Jewish belief that each individual is composed of both physical and non-physical elements – a body and a soul – where the soul (*neshama*) is the eternal, non-physical, spiritual aspect of each human being, that is aware during life and lives on after death of the body.
- “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.” – Pierre Teilhard de Chardin
- Each of us is worthy of the respect, compassion, kindness, attention, and response appropriate for someone who contains within them a holy soul that is an extension of the Divine.
- When we recognize that a person has a soul, and look at them as more than just flesh and blood, being aware that the soul within them is holy, it changes how we interact, and it changes the results of our actions. Soul awareness expands our consciousness of what is holy in *Tahara* and in everyday activities and serves to bring out the best in us. It infuses respect into all we do as we treat both the living and the dead as a reflection of the *Divine*. It minimizes judgment of others while it reminds us how connected we all are in the web of life.

## Methodology

- Meet with the local Board of Rabbis asking them to include a *drasha* about *Chevra Kadisha* on *Yom Kippur* and at *Shabbat* gatherings to plant the seeds for future participation in workshops. The *drasha* may be given by clergy or by a well-informed layperson.
- Schedule several offerings of two 2-hour workshops open to the community as follows (more details shown in lesson plans):
  - First 2-hour session:
    - Humorous tales about death.
    - Spiritual tales about death from the *Chassidim*.
    - *Kabbalistic* concepts about survival of the soul after death.
  - Second 2-hour session:
    - Personal experiences and stories of telepathy, near death experiences, and soul communication.
    - How to relate to the “living” soul in the room. (The body of the deceased is dead, but their soul is alive and aware, and, although it is not in the body it is thought to be in the room.)
    - Understanding what “holy work” means to each of us.
    - The transformative power of looking at life through the lens of soul.
    - Sharing our passion through stories, enthusiasm, ethical wills, *Shabbat* letters, sharing evenings, teaching and mentoring.
    - *Chevra Kadisha* work as the opportunity of a lifetime.
- Target audience: adult members of the community, especially, but not limited to, those interested in *Chevra Kadisha*. The lessons apply to all people, but become even more powerful when used in *chevra* work.
- Student assessment will be conducted through journaling of changes in feelings, attitudes, fears, and experiences toward and during *Tahara*, dealing with the dead, death in the community, relationships to the non-physical, and how we view and treat other people in our lives.
- These workshops could be taught by one instructor, but preferably should be presented by a team of instructors who share the common thread of life after death, and the wonder of what it means to include soul awareness in our lives.

## Implementation Planning

- Preliminary planning:
  - Group meeting with all involved to choose and finalize:
    - The venue for each class
    - Dates, times for each class, when teachers are available
    - How to publicize and who should champion publicity
    - Set stage for detailed planning – who is responsible for what
    - Finalize schedule of workshop deployment
- Detailed planning (not done in a meeting; rather, completed in parallel by instructors according to guidelines and timelines decided in preliminary planning meeting) – create lesson plans for workshops:
  - Who should teach which topics
  - Common thread of “life after death” connects topics
  - Specific texts to study
  - Specific stories to share
  - Specifics of other items to present
  - How to assess progress, specifics on how to follow each student’s growth
- Specific lesson plans for each aspect of the workshops should be developed during the detailed planning element of the project implementation. (See sample lesson plans at the end of this project plan.) These should include details of:
  - how much time to spend on each aspect,
  - exactly what topics taught by which teacher(s) are to be included,
  - exactly what texts and other resources will be used,
  - which stories and personal accounts will be included,
  - what handouts and other supportive elements will be used,
  - specific timelines and materials needed for deployment of the topics within the workshops and for the workshops themselves,
  - what logistical support is needed for each workshop.
- Presentation should include interactive adult learning practices along with appropriate handouts that help students relate to the texts being studied and the concepts presented.
- Teachers and associates who present the workshops should take detailed notes during the sessions, and then meet to discuss:
  - student reactions, participation, and enthusiasm during the workshops;
  - student participation, attitudes, and enthusiasm in *Tahara* and other *chevra* work since the workshops;
  - community reactions and feedback over the last year (during and after the workshops);
  - personal thoughts and stories about the success of this approach.

## Implementation Schedule

- Rabbis give *drashot* on *Yom Kippur* and on *Shabbat* in September and October.
- Preliminary planning completed by November 1<sup>st</sup>.
- Teachers committed by December 1<sup>st</sup>.
- Class dates & venues set and reserved by December 1<sup>st</sup>.
- Detailed planning completed by January 1<sup>st</sup>.
- Classes begin in February.
- Project post-mortem and student assessment in July.

## Definition of Soul

Soul is hard to define . It has been described variously as the essence of our Being, an individual extension of God, the Divine Spark that animates us, the non-physical aspect of us that connects us to the Whole of Life, our inner Self, and the inner core within us that harbors our awareness.. The common threads in these descriptions include the ideas that soul is intangible, eternal, not physically measurable, connected with our being alive and breathing, and has Divine characteristics. In Jewish mystical tradition, the soul also connects us directly to the Source of creation. Rabbi Elie Kaplan Spitz writes:

Characterizing soul as an extension of God helps me appreciate why soul is so hard to define. God is *other*, neither object nor person. To experience God and soul entails some detachment from our own self-involvement, our “I.” The image of soul as breath helps convey a paradox. Although we don’t normally see our breath, if we take a mirror, breathe in deeply, and exhale, we can see our breath as film on the mirror. The more breath we see, the less reflection we see of ourselves. To define objects is to grasp them with our senses, which requires an awareness of ourselves. The more fully we encounter soul, the more our “I” of self-awareness and attachment recedes. We engage soul with the aid of our imagination.<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Spitz goes on to recount near-death-experiences that describe deceased relatives waiting on the other side – relatives seemingly “alive and well” in a non-physical form – and the experience of awareness outside of the body that was independent of the body, observing what happened while they were “dead”.<sup>2</sup> And, in well-known mystical writings there are descriptions of deceased masters or relatives who speak to the living after the master or relative has died. Even in our modern age there are psychics who channel the dead describing in great detail personal accounts that the psychic could not have known.<sup>3</sup> All of these point to the existence of and acknowledgement of life beyond the physical. In Jewish terms, these experiences describe the soul living on after death and remembering its previous life and the people involved in that life. The premise in this endeavor expects the soul not only to survive death, but to be present and aware in life as well.

The soul we seek in this work can be thought of as the “inner Self” of each individual: The Divine Essence within each human being that lives on after we die and is fully aware while we are alive. This inner Self is not separate from “who we are”. So to see this inner Self, we view others as being physical humans right in front of us who have some kind of essence within them that is holy. And, that is what the soul is – the part inside that is holy – the eternal, nonphysical, simple aware Self.

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<sup>1</sup> Spitz, Elie Kaplan, “Does the Soul Survive? A Jewish Journey to Belief in Afterlife, Past Lives, and Living with Purpose”, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011, page 24.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pages 13-21, 65-80.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pages 103-109.



## Sample Lesson Plans

(For more on student learning assessment, see note below this plan.)

### First 2-hour class session:

- **Topic 1:** Humorous tales about death, 30 minutes.

**Goal:** To open the discussion of death in a non-threatening way, and ease students into exploring a topic they may fear or deny.

**Objectives:** To get students to relax and to entice interest in exploring the topic of death. (Cognitive: Learner will be able to (LWBAT) talk about death comfortably.)

**Methods:** Watching funny excerpts of movies related to death and dying.

Example movies to watch (all or part of):

- *Nora's Will* (2008, No Rating) This comedic drama from Mexico begins with Jose finding out that Nora, the woman he'd been married to for 30 years and then divorced, has committed suicide. The film provides insights into Jewish funeral and burial traditions.
- *My Mexican Shiva* (2007) This Mexican comedy also provides insights into Jewish funeral and mourning rituals, featuring some very traditional observances.
- *Departures* (2008, PG-13) Japanese film that focuses on a newly unemployed cellist who takes a job preparing the dead for funerals. A beautiful film about showing respect to the dead.
- *Chaos & Cadavers* (2003, No Rating) This British film features a newlywed couple honeymooning at a remote manor house that's also hosting a convention of funeral directors. The groom is afraid of death.
- *The Loved One* (1965, No Rating) This satire of the funeral business follows Jessica Mitford's industry-shaking book *The American Way of Death*. It's a great film to discuss funeral consumer issues.

**Assessment:** Teacher should note the student's ability to engage in these topics in a relaxed way through informal discussion about death, personal experiences, reactions to the movie excerpts, and posing of questions:

- What is it about death that is intriguing?
- Why is it feared and denied in our society?
- How do different people, religions, societies, and regions on Earth view death?

- **Topic 2:** Spiritual tales about death and soul and life after death, 50 minutes.

**Goal:** To focus the discussion on the concept of soul, open students to the non-physical aspects of death and life.

**Objectives:** To define soul. To connect the concept of soul to the larger arena of Jewish tradition. To show precedence in discussing these matters, and lend credence to the idea that souls are here before and after we die. (Cognitive: LWBAT talk at a basic level about the soul existing in life and after death.)

**Methods:** Discuss the definition of soul, and the concept of souls existing with us in our daily lives and after we die. Share stories and teachings from noted authors as well as Jewish historical writings such as “Tales of the Chassidim” and “Does the Soul Survive?” along with appropriate stories from the Talmud or other major sources (as deemed appropriate by the instructor). Discuss each story with students after reading the story aloud in class.

**Assessment:** Determine if students can discuss the concept of soul existing in life and after death from a Jewish perspective by observing their participation in class discussions.

- **Topic 3:** Kabbalistic concepts about soul and what happens after death, 40 minutes.

**Goal:** To deepen understanding about the Jewish concept of soul and its role in our lives and our deaths.

**Objectives:** To give specific and concrete examples of Jewish masters’ experiences of soul and their understandings about what happens after we die. (Cognitive: LWBAT talk about levels of soul existence and their roles in our lives and deaths, according to *Kabbalah* and Jewish mysticism.)

**Methods:** Sharing of specific teachings and stories from Jewish mystical writings about soul. More readings from “Does the Soul Survive?” along with teachings from “Jewish Views of the Afterlife” and potentially other mystical writings. (May wish to include the 5 levels of soul and how they relate to our daily lives and after we die. Also perhaps mystical stories that support these ideas.)

**Assessment:** Determine if students understand the mystical teachings of soul by their participation in class discussions and the answers to questions like:

- What is the Jewish definition of soul?
- When people talk of the *neshama*, to what do they refer?
- Is the Jewish idea of soul related to the Jewish concept of God, and if so, how?

Second 2-hour class session:

- **Topic 1:** How do people experience souls after death and in their daily lives? How do students recognize, understand and then verbalize their experience with another’s soul? 15 minutes

**Goal:** For students to have a greater appreciation of the soul aspect of life.

**Objectives:** Students will hear concrete examples of souls from the teacher's personal experience and from Jewish texts, which show soul interaction with living people. Students will then be asked to share their own experiences. (Cognitive: LWBAT talk about real experiences of soul.)

**Methods:** Sharing of personal experiences and stories of, near death experiences, and direct communication with the dead. Use known books as sources (like "Does the Soul Survive?" and historical accounts such as stories of Chassidic masters' experiences, see References below) along with live presentations by people who have had such experiences. Discussion within class follows each sharing so students can relate to and question what they hear and feel.

**Assessment:** Determine if students understand the concepts of near death experiences and channeling of the dead, especially in relation to the concept of soul. This is probably best done through observing discussion participation, as there is no right or wrong here, just opening to the concepts.

- **Topic 2:** Relating to the "living" soul in the *Tahara* room, and what "holy work" really means, 65 minutes.

**Goal:** To define what "holy work" means, to understand how to relate to the soul of a deceased person, and know how to apply these when participating in *Tahara*.

**Objectives:** To explore the movement of a soul from this world to the next. To understand various approaches to what it means to be holy. To apply the concept of "holy work" to the ritual of *Tahara* in the context of midwifing a soul between worlds. (Cognitive: LWBAT perform *Tahara* with awareness of and appreciation of the deceased's soul in the room.)

**Methods:** Discussion of what kinds of experiences happen in the *Tahara* room – sharing of personal stories of experiences during *Tahara*. Discussion of what "holy" means to each student and teacher in the classroom. Discussion of definitions of "holy" from textbooks and dictionaries. Discussion of what a midwife does and is, and how this relates to "midwifing a soul" from this world to the next. Lecture and discussion connecting the previous work on the path of the soul after death and the topic of what "holy work" might mean in the context of midwifing a soul after death. Understanding what "including the soul of another" in the conversation (being aware that their soul is active in the conversation as well as their physical presence) does to the interaction. Presentation of who are the players in a *Tahara* – the soul of the deceased, the *Chevra Kadisha* team members, God, angels, demons. Review and discussion of personal stories shared above in the context of who is in the room.

**Assessment:** Observation of students during the discussion of the following questions:

- Who are the participants in the *Tahara*?
- What are the relationships between these players?
- What is the role of each?

- **Topic 3:** *Chevra Kadisha* work as the “opportunity of a lifetime” to do soul work, 40 minutes.

**Goal:** To understand the power of soul work, especially in the context of *Tahara*, and to know how to share the passion for this work effectively.

**Objectives:** To learn how to share one’s passion for *Chevra Kadisha* work. (Cognitive: LWBAT share the role of the soul in the *Chevra Kadisha* effectively and enthusiastically.)

**Methods:** Lecture and discussion on the transformative nature of the act of including another’s soul in your awareness during interactions, and especially during *Tahara*. Lecture and discussion on effective ways to share our passion through stories, enthusiasm, ethical wills, Shabbat letters, sharing evenings, teaching, modeling, and mentoring. Discussion on the power and wonder of what happens when one participates in *chevra* work with “soul awareness”.

**Assessment:** Observation of student enthusiasm and participation in discussions and answers to the following questions:

- Why could *Chevra Kadisha* work be considered an “opportunity of a lifetime” to do soul work?
- What does this mean?

**Note on student learning assessment:**

This topic is not easily quantified. How does one assess a student’s awareness of a non-physical soul, without testing? The students who take this seminar are not attending for a grade. Rather, they are attending to enhance their experience of *Tahara*, expand and reinforce their involvement in *Chevra Kadisha* activities in general, and to deepen their understanding of Jewish death rituals. Hence testing is not recommended. However, careful instructor observations of students before, during, and after classes, along with personal interactions with them, should give the instructor a pretty good understanding of which students are comprehending the material, able to use it, and succeeding in achieving the goals of the class.

## References

For basic background information:

- Lamm, Maurice. *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*. New York, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 2000.

For better understanding about soul:

- Raphael, Simcha Paull. *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*. New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004.
- Spitz, Elie Kaplan. *Does the Soul Survive?*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011.

There are many *Tahara* manuals that give an understanding of *Chevra Kadisha* work. Several good ones for reference are listed below. One is by one of the founders of the Gamliel Institute, Rabbi Stuart Kelman:

- Epstein, Mosha. *Tahara Manual of Practices*. Bridgeport, CT: Chevra Kadisha Zichron Shabtai Leib of Greater Bridgeport, 1995.
- Kelman, Stuart and Fendel, Dan. *Chesed Shel Emet, The Truest Act of Kindness*. Berkeley, CA: EKS Publishing, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 2013.
- Light, Rick. *To Midwife a Soul, Guidelines for Performing Tahara*, NM: Chevra Kadisha of Northern New Mexico, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2013.
- Sandler-Phillips, Regina. *PSJC Hevra Kadisha Tahara Manual*. Brooklyn, NY: Park Slope Jewish Center, 2009.

Additional stories of interactions with souls after death can be found in historical accounts such as are found in these books and websites:

- Buber, Martin. *Tales of the Hasidim*. New York, NY: Schocken Books, Inc., 1947.
- Chabad Stories: [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/421867/jewish/Stories.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/421867/jewish/Stories.htm)
- Hasidic Stories: <http://www.hasidicstories.com/Resources/links1.html>
- Patai, Jozsef. *Souls and Secrets: Hasidic Stories*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc. Publishers, 1995.
- Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman, and Miles-Yepez, Netanel. *A Heart Afire, Stories and Teachings of the Early Hasidic Masters*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2009.

## About the Author

**Rick Light** has been teaching spiritual development in various ways since 1982. In 1996 he organized a local *Chevra Kadisha*, published a *Tahara* manual in 2000, and later co-founded a pluralistic Jewish burial consortium that serves six shuls in Northern New Mexico. As a Vice President of the North American educational organization, [Kavod v'Nichum](#), Rick

teaches and continues to raise awareness about Jewish death and burial practices at the local, state, and national levels. Since this project was created, he has published two new Tahara manuals, [\*To Midwife A Soul, Guidelines for Performing Tahara\*](#), and [\*Final Kindness: Honoring K'rovei Yisrael, Burial Preparation of Non-Jews Who Are Part of the Jewish Community\*](#).