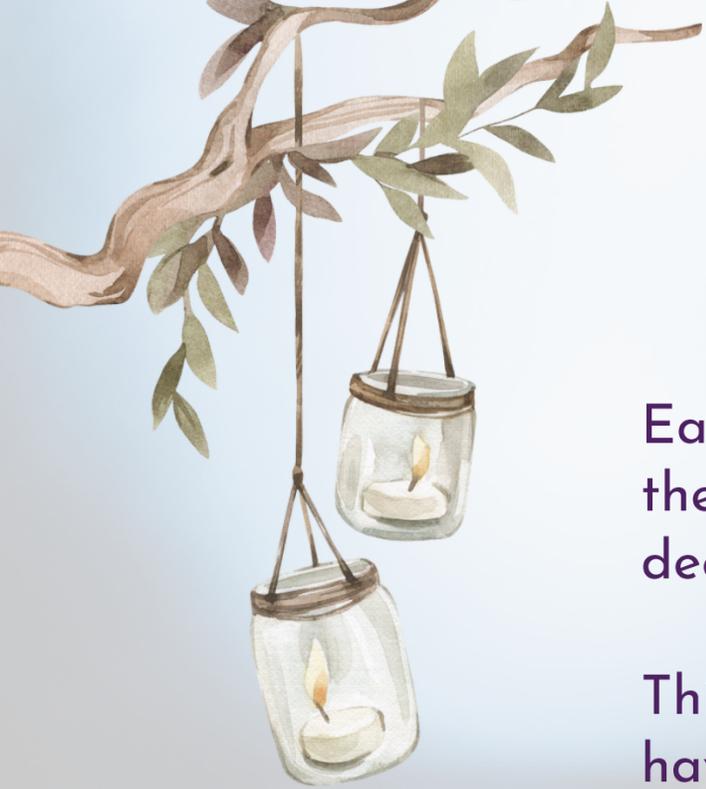


Orot HaChevra

A Collective
Reflection for
Zayin Adar



Each year on Zayin Adar, we pause to honor the sacred work of the Chevra Kadisha. This work is often unseen, yet it shines with deep meaning.

This year, members of Chevra Kadisha from around the world have shared their stories, illuminating our shared path.

"Orot HaChevra" is a collective reflection from across our network, a gathering of voices, memories, and wisdom – a gift we give to one another, woven from the stories and insights of those who know this work best.

May you see yourself, your experiences, and your wishes for others in these stories.

May your path be full of light.



O God of lovingkindness and compassion, all of Whose ways are lovingkindness and truth, You have commanded us to practice lovingkindness and truth with the dead, and to attend to their burial, as it is written, “You shall surely bury him” (Deut. 21:23).

*From “Toward a Gender-Inclusive Hevra Kadisha”
(c) 2020 The Community Hevra Kadisha of Greater Boston*



“When I find myself in a world leaning toward isolation and divisiveness; my time with my Chevra Kadisha, reminds me I have the opportunity to inhabit sacred community in a safe space, populated by others focusing on caring for those in life’s transition. It reminds me that I belong and that every moment of every day is precious, that those around me are precious and I remember I am precious as well.”

*Nina Rubin
Fort Collins Community Chevra
Fort Collins, CO*

“I am deeply moved by every part of this work. The care, compassion and respect for the metx, the beautiful liturgy, the ritual, the idea that I am part of this ancient practice can move me to tears. I often feel overwhelming love for this person, this soul, so pure and vulnerable – almost like I feel for a baby. Touching so gently, taking such care, not wanting to inflict any harm – it's all incredibly moving.”

*Judy Yacker
Progressive Chevra Kadisha
Chicago, IL*



“Zayin Adar is a time to honor our lineage, our community rituals and to connect with our ancestors who have been doing this work.”

*Kohenet Pleasance Silicki
New Synagogue Project Community
Chevra Kadisha
Washington, DC*

“Our work is "service to others" to fulfill their last wish, something they can no longer do for themselves.”

*Dominique Tomasov Blinder
Masorti Congregation Atid of Catalunya
Barcelona, Spain*

“The less we understand and comprehend an event, the more we ritualize it and habits that become rituals bind us together as a community.”

*Isaac Pollak
CKJ
New York, NY*



“Zayin Adar holds a unique place in my spiritual being. It always astounded me that the Torah specified that G-d buried Moses. With that action, I grasped that it is for us to also properly bury our kinsmen.”

*Laurie Kurs
Mercer Community Women's Chevra
Hightstown, NJ*

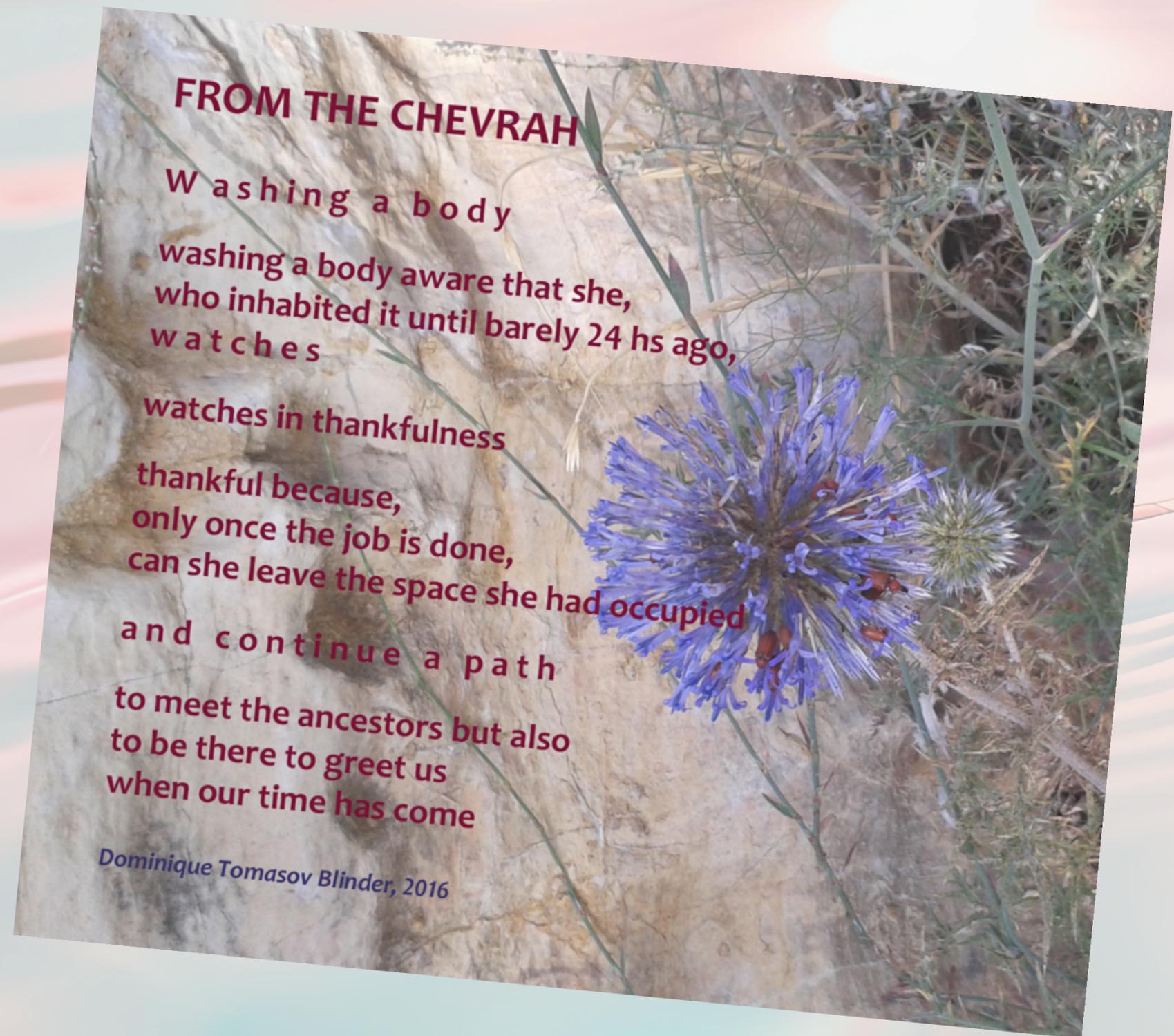
“I feel enriched by this work as I have learned about people and their varied lives, the people who have died but also their circle of family and friends. The process of dealing with death and its aftermath has allowed me to get closer to people, some I have known before and many that I had not known.”

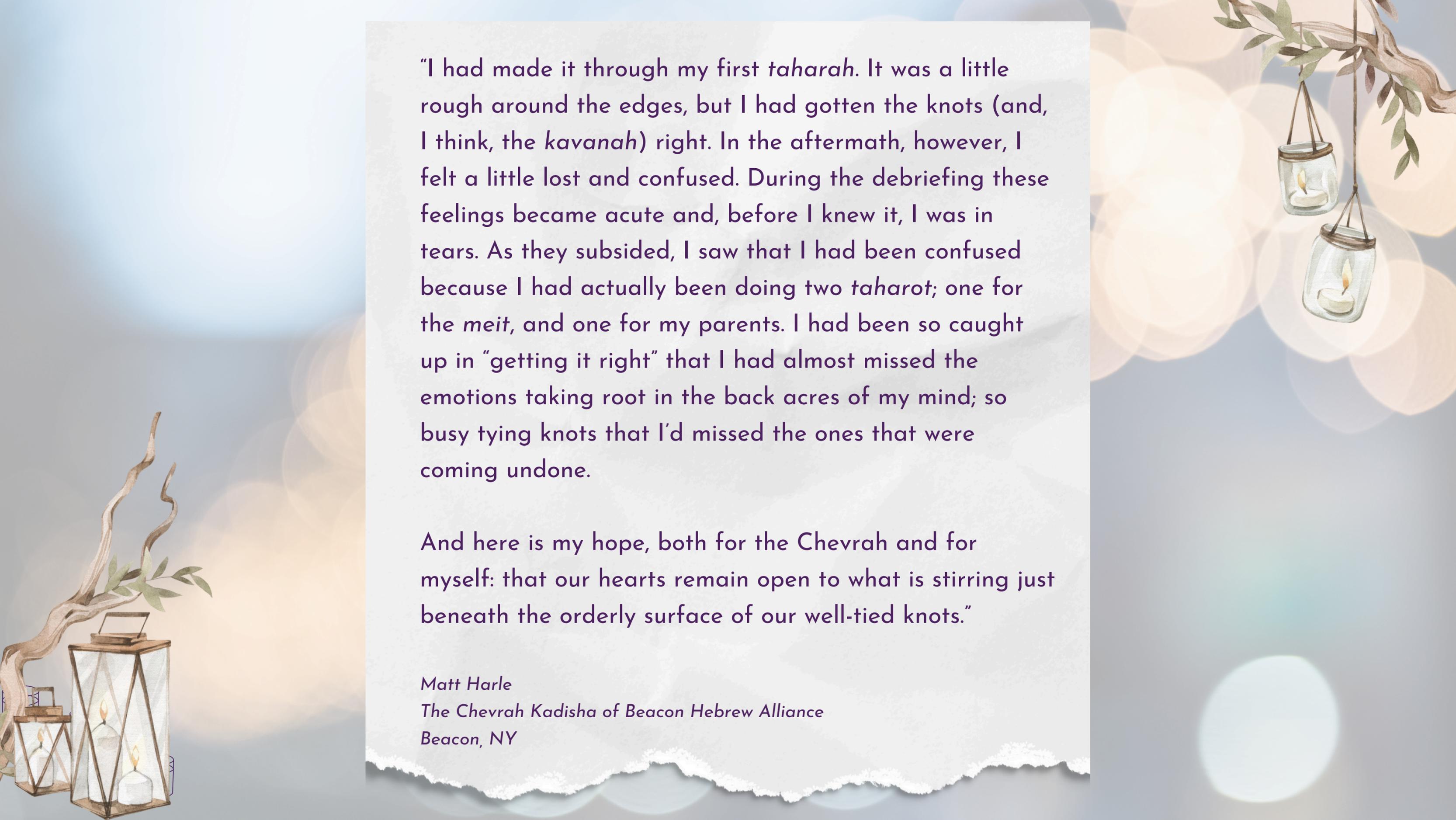
*Gary Tepfer
Eugene, OR*



“The prayer that we say at the beginning and ending of each *taharah*, the *mechilah*, in which we ask for forgiveness from the deceased for anything we do or omit that would go against their wishes. We say that we will do (or have done) the best we can. This last part has become something of a mantra, that most of us are doing the best we can in our daily lives.”

Jean Berman



The background features a soft, bokeh effect of warm, golden-yellow lights. On the right side, there are two hanging lanterns made of glass jars with lit candles inside, suspended from a branch with green leaves. On the left side, there are three lanterns on the ground, also with lit candles, and a branch with green leaves extending over them.

“I had made it through my first *taharah*. It was a little rough around the edges, but I had gotten the knots (and, I think, the *kavanah*) right. In the aftermath, however, I felt a little lost and confused. During the debriefing these feelings became acute and, before I knew it, I was in tears. As they subsided, I saw that I had been confused because I had actually been doing two *taharot*; one for the *meit*, and one for my parents. I had been so caught up in “getting it right” that I had almost missed the emotions taking root in the back acres of my mind; so busy tying knots that I’d missed the ones that were coming undone.

And here is my hope, both for the Chevrah and for myself: that our hearts remain open to what is stirring just beneath the orderly surface of our well-tied knots.”

Matt Harle

The Chevrah Kadisha of Beacon Hebrew Alliance

Beacon, NY

“Bless you, your family, your hands and your *neshama*, for the sacred work you are able to do.

For those who are parents, modeling this mitzvah teaches our children what is important.”

*Linda Goodspeed
Community Hevra Kadisha North Shore Boston
Malden, MA*

“In the sacred work of tending to the dead, we are reminded that care is a practice, not just an act.

In our hands, in the water we pour, in the prayers we whisper, we weave a community of belonging – where no one is abandoned, no one is forgotten.”

Alix Lutnick

“It's truly a divine gift, an honor, a privilege to tend to the bodies and the souls.”

*Kohenet Pleasance Silicki
New Synagogue Project Community Chevra
Kadisha
Washington, DC*



“I got the phone call.

My close friend shared that her daughter had successfully committed suicide. Not her first attempt. Yet still so shocking.

Just over 30, living alone, struggling for years with severe depression. I remember when she was born. Remember her as a youngster, what her passions were, how smart she was, how she radiated light and energy and enthusiasm. And beautiful of course with a smile like no other. A smile that was a gift when you got it. I also remember how tormented she was.

The past two years I'd volunteered with the local Chevra Kadisha, slowly learning and experiencing Jewish death rituals and how to prepare the physical body and the soul for burial. When my friend called with the news and said “I just don't know what to do” I was able to help. And so thankful that I could help.

We discussed things, made plans and they chose to have a *taharah*, the ritual washing, purification and dressing of the deceased.

They'd been early donors to the new hevra I'm part of. Though their daughter was out of state my Jewish family funeral home was able to refer me to the funeral home in her area. They were able to connect me with the Chevra leader and we spoke.

Because of circumstances, a modified *taharah* would take place. An autopsy had been performed and she would be cremated. The local orthodox hevra understood my desire to extend lovingkindness to her: for her and for her parents so I was allowed by the local family owned funeral home to use their tahara room. So, so, pleased to be able to perform this honor.



I'd performed many *taharot*, most for women over 70. This was different.

Usually, I would uncover the face and scan the body to see if anything needs to take place before the washing. In this case, I was not able to uncover her beautiful face. Instead, I tentatively uncovered a bit of her shoulder. Saw her incredibly beautiful tattoos finally realizing this really was her.

I washed her right shoulder and arm, taking breaks. On the breaks I sat next to her and just held her hand. And cried. Cried for this incredible loss and cried for her parents of course. I spoke with her just as I'd always spoken to her saying "it's ok, baby, Aunty is here." Aunty by choice not by blood. My kids call her mom aunty also, and she has definitely earned that title.

As I sang her The Angel Song, a traditional and haunting melody, tears streamed down my face. Not for her. I could see she was completely at peace now. She was telling me "My mind is finally at rest, it's ok, Aunty. I'm ok. Really. But my parents aren't."

For me, it was an honor and a blessing to be able to perform this mitzvah to comfort her parents. An honor to serve her and be with her one final time. If not for the Chevra and the knowledge I received, I'd not have been able to support them."

Linda Godspeed
Community Hevra Kadisha North Shore Boston
Malden, MA



“The Chevra Kadisha is not a somber affair, although there is respect and honor in our work. There is a richness, a personal and community experience of sharing in the mystery of life and death, that can inform and bless us all.”

Jean Berman

“I have learned what a beautiful community a Chevra is. The teams that come together on such short notice, the natural, quiet cooperation and collaboration that happens during *taharah*. I know, that regardless of what my final plans are after my death, I want to be prepared for it by a Chevra Kadisha.”

Judy Yacker
Progressive Chevra Kadisha
Chicago, IL





"Tend"

Kohenet Pleasance Silicki

*New Synagogue Project Community Chevra Kadisha
Washington, DC*

"I always pick a word/phrase of the year and given the global challenges that are often on my mind and heart, this year 2025, I chose the word TEND. In many ways, my Chevra Kadisha work has elevated and expanded this tending. Shaping my role in community and in how I interact with the living and the dying has touched all parts of my life and my days."

Kohenet Pleasance Silicki

*New Synagogue Project Community Chevra Kadisha
Washington, DC*

When I participate in *shmira*, I treasure the time to sit and pray for the soul of the deceased. The psalms which are the most meaningful to me are Psalms 20, 23, 100, 146, 149, 150, and my favorite, Psalm 122.

Participating in a *taharah* has always been a very spiritual experience for me. I am so grateful to have the honor of being a part of this special ritual that means so much and which gives honor and dignity to the deceased. We carry on the tradition of doing sacred work that has been done for centuries.

Since I became a part of the *taharah* team, I have become much more grateful for every minute of life. Gratitude is such an important part of my life now, because I am so conscious of the finite time we have on earth.

Laura Sacks
Congregation Beth El's Chevra Kadisha
South Orange, NJ



“During the second taharah I participated in, I had the wish that everyone in the world could have such respectful, compassionate care at the end of their lives. During that same taharah, I had a strong sense that part of the reason I was born was to do this work.

I have been present at taharot in which death was not peaceful and sometimes may have been traumatic. But following the taharah, I always see a peaceful countenance on the person's face. It's quite amazing.”

Jean Berman

“Many years ago, I was a bit overwhelmed when I learned I had to do a *taharah* all by myself. No one else was available. I and the *maita* were alone. That I, in those solitary moments with this *maita*, felt a deep connection to her...a total stranger. Not sharing these private, personal, intimate actions with others left me in awe of my huge responsibility to do well by her.”

*Laurie Kurs
Mercer Community Women's Chevre
Hightstown, NJ*

“Do the most Jewish thing possible.”

Taharahs are an amazing display of camaraderie and loving kindness. When asked, we gather on a moment's notice, a small clique of 4-6 people, some of whom are strangers, working mostly in silence with a focus of preparing a lifeless body for its final journey. We know that we have been entrusted to perform this ritual by the people who we assume best knew and now mourn the person before us. We do our best to find that intersection of honoring the life and wishes of the person before us and the needs of those who mourn.

It is no secret that despite our best training and preparation, there is always an element of uncertainty when we are in the *taharah* room. Of course, we all prepare each time, each in our own way.

I choose to review the liturgy and visualize the process down to recalling the texture of the towels we use to dry the body before dressing or the feel of the terracotta pieces we place or the flow of the earth that we sprinkle. But the critical preparation for me is to join my teammates, entering with an engaged, clear mind, and compassionate heart.

And yet, despite all my efforts to prepare, I know and accept that it is inevitable that at some point in some *taharah* room, I and my teammates will encounter in that room things for which I and perhaps we feel unprepared. Isn't that life? Why should things be any different in dealing with death?

Truly, one of the best pieces of advice I ever received about handling those moments of uncertainty is "do the most Jewish thing possible." That open-ended validation is exactly what I need to hear in those moments. That advice helps me reframe into doable tasks what could be panic-inducing doubt and paralysis of fear of making a mistake. To "do the most Jewish thing possible" means I must know a little something about my-Jewish-self in this moment of time, in this spot of the cosmos.

It reminds me that my strength is not in doing, rather it is in being, specifically being the best and brightest unvarnished me that I can be in those moments. It reminds me to breathe, to just be for a moment, and pause while the path forward is revealed in a way that only the silence of breath can reveal. It guides me through that classic human trapping of "doing" versus "being" by reminding me to be before I do.

It is said that the Hebrew letters spelling God's name are unpronounceable but would sound like the sound of breath. Perhaps breathing becomes my call to God and listening in that liminal space for the guidance I need. The way forward manifests in my mind, and I wonder if it is God saying "*Hineni.*"

Barbara Schmidt
Progressive Chevra Kadisha
Chicago, IL

"In this work, *intention* reigns supreme. My intention to do the best I can, to do the right thing, to live up to expectations, are values that are invaluable."

Laurie Kurs
Mercer Community Women's Chevre
Hightstown, NJ

"I have particularly enjoyed helping to educate the community about our Jewish rituals around death and mourning. This helps to demystify the process and to prepare us for something that we will all face in our lives."

Gary Tepfer

"We are all part of a community – no one is alone."

Isaac Pollak
CJK
New York, NY

"May you go from strength to strength."

Melissa Mizel
Progressive Chevre Kadisha
Chicago, IL



The River

We assemble in the dark
in this cold parking lot

We watch our breath hanging in the air
with conflicted gratitude

We struggle to find words
amidst anxiety, sadness, the unknown

*And in this river
I am once again a child,
of two or three,
at the beach with my family,
suspended uneasily between sea and shore.
Hands and water and voices are jumbled,
then as now,
and I feel the confusion
even as the river softens its edges.*

We inventory and arrange
so that our tools will not obscure your reality

We light the candle and set the intention

We wheel you into a room
whose sterile efficiency deepens the loss

We ask for forgiveness,
from you and from each other,
for our fallibility,
for our distraction, and

*Laughing, gesturing,
confident of their child's safety,
the voices and hands can't seem to sense the
fear, coiled in the moment.*

*But with each ebb,
I feel the water inching me over a threshold
I don't want to cross.*

*Is that what before was?
Alone, struggling to stay upright as the
waves rearrange the sand under my feet?
Voices and hands of loved ones missing the
point with the best of intentions,*

We call you by your name

We remove the bag,

the clothes,

the vestiges of that other world

We cover you out of respect

for a modesty you can no longer express

We invoke compassion and call for mercy

We summon strength, all in the service of love.

making alone lonelier.

Water, too, seemed to want something from me

that I wasn't ready to give,

pulling me from what I thought I knew,

what I thought I needed.

Or maybe that's backwards:

maybe I needed water to be what it was not.

Maybe the water of water flowed away

even as I poured it into my glass.

But in this river,

sound swallowed and strange,

I let go.

We feel your vulnerability,
your fragility,
the mirror of our own

We see the indignities of death, yet

We call you beautiful, and know it to be true

We feel tenderness in our fingertips,
and in that touch, feel the flesh of our children,
of our lovers, of our parents, of ourselves.

Hungry lungs once brought the world rushing back.

But now, lungs still, the water holds me.

Now, the hands and voices hold me.

They flow over me, but I am held.

I am held because I am also water.

As are the voices.

As are the hands.

"A fountain for gardens, a well of living waters,"

defined no longer by the glass,

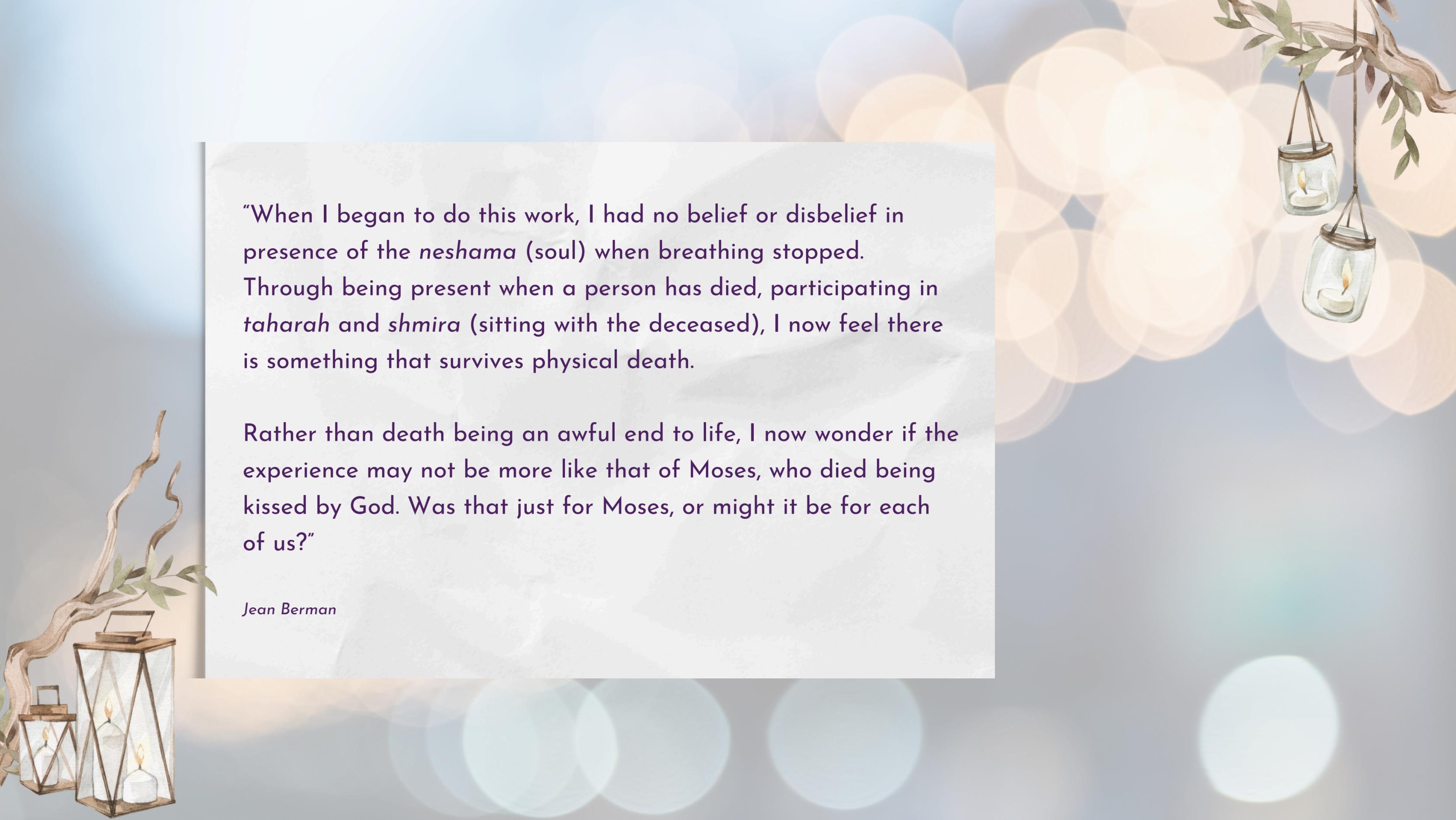
but by the flow.

So as we pour the water, *tehorah hee*,
and bear witness to your purity, *tahor hu*;
as we dress you and wrap you and tie the
knots, and raise you up to lay you down,
swaddled like the baby you once were,
we open our eyes and see you whole,
and in that seeing, we are transformed.

Later, standing again in the cold,
our goodbyes hanging in the air,
we hold this gift close,
knowing that one day it will be ours to give.

And the flow tells me I am beautiful.
And the flow tells me I am pure.
The flow honors what I was, and then,
with compassion,
eases me towards what I will be:
no longer the frightened child,
but the waves lapping the shore.

Matt Harle
The Chevrah Kadisha of Beacon Hebrew Alliance
Beacon, NY

The background features a soft bokeh effect of warm, golden-yellow and light blue circles. In the upper right corner, two small glass lanterns with lit candles hang from a branch. In the lower left corner, a larger lantern with a lit candle sits on a wooden stand, with a branch extending from it.

“When I began to do this work, I had no belief or disbelief in presence of the *neshama* (soul) when breathing stopped. Through being present when a person has died, participating in *taharah* and *shmira* (sitting with the deceased), I now feel there is something that survives physical death.

Rather than death being an awful end to life, I now wonder if the experience may not be more like that of Moses, who died being kissed by God. Was that just for Moses, or might it be for each of us?”

Jean Berman



"I am a believer that we are all equal in death and that the simplest burial is a recognition of this. A plain pine box and the simple linen garments of the *Kohen Gadol*, as is our custom. The presence of an expensive *aron* in the *taharah* room seemed like a contradiction, and I am ashamed to admit that more than once or twice, I was judgmental, if but for a moment until our *taharah* team leader set the *kavanah*. When my mother chose one for my father, I was dumbstruck, but as a dutiful son, voiced no objection. A few years later, back in Portland, I saw the mahogany *aron* as we entered the *taharah* room, I felt judgment raising its head in my psyche. Then I saw the numbers tattooed on the *met's* arm. My first thought was "he can have any kind of casket he wants."

While I still advocate for the simplest of burials (when I die – *keneh hara* – I will not keep to the older family traditions; yes, my brother and I bought the fancy casket for my mother), there is already plenty of judgment in this world, thank you. We all need a little mercy now, and all the *neshamot* we usher out of this world are *tahor*. All are equal in death."

Charlie Rosenblum
Chevra Kavod haMet
Portland, OR

The Wisdom of the Annual Chevra Kadisha Banquet

A few years back, my husband and I visited Prague. At the top of my list of things to see were the old Jewish cemetery and the Ceremonial Hall, which was the home of the Chevra Kadisha until the New Jewish Cemetery opened.

The Ceremonial Hall is now a museum housing the history of the Prague Chevra Kadisha, and it is a special place to visit for anyone involved in a chevra.

Our visit was poignant and moving; most of the artifacts and writings are solemn reminders of the work being done by the chevra and its importance in the community.



*Prague Burial Society Tableware,
Ceremonial Hall of the Prague Jewish Burial Society
Photo by Birgitta Kastenbaum*

This may be why when I took the old winding staircase up to the upper floor, I was struck by the abundance of hand-painted plates, beakers, finely cut crystal glasses, and inscribed fine silver. Many of the tableware showed depictions of the services of the Chevra Kadisha, and all of it was used for the Annual Burial Society Banquet.

The plaque on the wall describes the annual banquet: "In the course of their service, burial society members had to deal with the sorrowful side of life. This is why the statutes mandate at least one joyful event in the year."

Looking at the elaborate tableware, it was clear that this event was important. Standing there, the items used for this yearly celebration of joy brought the Prague Chevra Kadisha to life; it made them human.

Suddenly, these were not mere objects; they were proof of the humanity of the people of this Chevra.

Seeing how abundantly they celebrated felt like a master class in holding both the heaviness of life and the joy of life. In a way, it modeled what community care and self-care might look like.

For the chevra to have a day dedicated to honoring one another and celebrating in community seems to carry a message that while we may gather to tend to death, we cannot forget to also tend to life.

Death might bring us together to serve, but this doesn't mean we do not need to renew our spirit, allow ourselves to celebrate life, and permit ourselves to embrace joy.

The annual banquet in Prague was held on the eve of the month of Tammuz (mainly in June), but many societies chose to have their banquets on the 7th (Zayin) of Adar, the day that Moses died and where God teaches us about our holy obligations in caring for the body and soul after death by burying Moses himself. Adar is also the month of Purim, and it mandates us to increase joy.

Maybe, having our yearly Chevra Kadisha banquet on Zayin Adar is a beautiful example of how to hold both the lows and the highs of life.

Zayin Adar is the day Moses died, and we recognize that, yet we gather in Joy because we are alive, a precious gift to be grateful for, mindful of, and celebrate. It is this gift that allows us to do our sacred work.

For modern Chevra, our Zayin Adar celebrations are often a tapestry of old traditions and new ideas.

However, at the heart, there may be a wisdom-teaching for all of us, a reminder to balance our service with joy, to hold the solemnness of our work and the joy of life together. If I had a beaker in my hand, I would toast to all who serve at this threshold, the members of the Chevra Kadisha, who tend to the bodies and souls of those who depart before us with honor and loving kindness.

May you be blessed with the sweetness of joy.

*Birgitta Kastenbaum
Valley Chevra Kadisha
Los Angeles, CA*

"In the Vancouver, BC Chevra Kadisha, the men and women with whom I serve hail from different synagogues, each bringing with them a tapestry of values, beliefs, and sacred customs. Had it not been for this shared calling, our lives might never have intersected. Yet death, in its quiet majesty, draws us together as it has done for countless souls before us. Through this work, I have come to know these strangers not by the particulars of our faiths, but through the unspoken bond of honoring life and death in their purest, most vulnerable forms. It is a humbling privilege to stand together in this profound unity, where our differences dissolve in the face of such deep reverence."

*Reena Lazar
Greater Vancouver Chevra Kadisha
Vancouver, BC, Canada*



“One of our founding Chevra members, our beloved Jonathan Schachter z”l died very unexpectedly several years ago. He was a key driver in our Chevra's development and in our ongoing growth over the years. At the end of each *taharah* in which he participated, it was his practice to turn to each of the other team members and say, "Friends, it has been an honor to perform this mitzvah with you."

Since his death, each year at our annual Adar 7 gathering, we place table tents on each table to remind us of his blessing to all of us and to remember his special spirit, so filled with learning and *kavanah*.”

Patricia Cluss
New Community Chevra Kadisha of Greater Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, PA

“Whenever our Chevra meets for a meeting or a program, in person or via zoom, we recite this blessing: *Baruch atah adonai eloheynu, melech haolam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav vitzivanu la'a'sok b'tzar'chai ha'ke'hi'lah* – Blessed are you, Ruler of the Universe, who has commanded us to be engaged in the needs of the community.”

Malke Frank
New Community Chevra Kadisha of Greater Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, PA



May Adonai bless you and keep you.

יְבָרֶכֶךָ יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמְרֶכָּ:

May Adonai deal kindly and graciously with
you.

יְיָ אֵר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחֲנֶנֶךָ:

May Adonai bestow favor upon you and
grant you peace.

יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם:

*May this sacred work continue to bring you meaning.
May your path always be full of light.*



For more resources,
reflections, learning
opportunities, and
moments of connection
for anyone involved in,
interested in, or exploring
the work of Chevra
Kadisha, visit
kavodv'nichum.org