



Kavod v'Nichum

Building Meaningful Relationships Between Chevra Kadisha and Funeral Homes

A Guide for Collaboration and Communication

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Introduction

Chevra Kadisha and funeral directors share a common purpose: ensuring respectful and dignified care for the deceased and providing support for grieving families. While the roles and responsibilities of each group may differ, a strong and collaborative relationship can lead to smoother logistics, greater understanding, and an overall enhanced experience for all involved.

This guide provides practical suggestions for building relationships with funeral homes, navigating differences, and advocating for Jewish end-of-life practices. It is intended to support Chevra Kadisha groups across different geographic regions and communal settings, including areas where the local funeral home may not have extensive experience with Jewish burial traditions.

Why Strong Relationships Matter

A strong relationship between a Chevra Kadisha and a funeral home can make a significant difference in ensuring that Jewish end-of-life practices are upheld with dignity and care. When there is trust and clear communication:

- Funeral homes are more likely to accommodate requests for *Tahara* and *Shmira*, and Jewish burial practices.
- Misunderstandings and logistical challenges can be minimized, reducing stress for both volunteers and grieving families.
- There is a greater opportunity to advocate for Jewish burial customs, including eco-friendly practices and respectful handling of personal belongings.
- Families who may not be familiar with Chevra Kadisha work can be better supported when funeral directors understand and affirm its value.

Building relationships is not just about logistics—it is about creating a shared commitment to honoring the deceased with respect and care.

Understanding Each Other's Roles

The Chevra Kadisha's role:

- Offering *Tahara* (ritual washing, dressing, and prayers) in accordance with Jewish tradition.
- Organizing *Shmira* (guarding/watching over the deceased until burial).
- Supporting families with Jewish end-of-life customs and comfort.
- Advocating for the use of Jewish-appropriate burial materials (e.g., simple wooden caskets, biodegradable materials).

The Funeral Director's role:

- The legal custodian of the deceased on behalf of the family.

- Managing and completing legal documentation (e.g., death certificates, burial permits)
- Overseeing transportation, storage, and preparation of the deceased.
- Advising families on funeral arrangements and burial logistics.
- Educating unfamiliar families on the importance and beauty of Shmira and Tahara
- Navigating legal and facility requirements related to burial practices as well as security measures for both staff and visitors.

A strong relationship is built on recognizing the necessity and expertise of both roles.

How to Reach Out to Funeral Homes

Whether you are starting from scratch or strengthening an existing connection, reaching out in a thoughtful and intentional way can set the foundation for a strong working relationship.

Assess the Current Relationship

- If your synagogue already has a relationship with a funeral home, connect with clergy or leadership to learn about past interactions and existing agreements.
- If there is no established relationship, research local funeral homes and identify key contacts.
- If you are in a community with a non-Jewish funeral home, be prepared to offer educational materials on Jewish burial traditions.

Making the First Contact

- Email or Phone Call: Introduce yourself, explain the work of your Chevra Kadisha, and ask if they would be open to a conversation about Jewish burial practices.
- In-Person Visit: If possible, arrange a meeting at the funeral home to discuss logistics, policies, and shared priorities.
- Clergy or Community Liaison: If a rabbi or community leader has an existing relationship with a funeral home, they may be able to facilitate an introduction.
- Sometimes, having a rabbi accompany you to an initial meeting lends “gravitas” to the interaction.

Key Points to Cover in the First Conversation

- The role of the Chevra Kadisha and its importance in Jewish burial practices.
- Specific needs and expectations related to *Tahara*, *Shmira*, and burial materials.
- Funeral home policies and any potential limitations or concerns they may have.
- Willingness to collaborate on solutions for any challenges that arise.

Building a relationship is an ongoing process. A single conversation may not resolve everything, but it sets the stage for future collaboration.

Ways to Strengthen the Relationship

1. Open Communication & Relationship Building

- **Regular Check-Ins:** Establish a point of contact at the funeral home and set up periodic check-ins.
- **Clear Expectations:** Provide a written checklist of supplies and procedures to avoid last-minute confusion.
- **Respect for Differences:** Approach conversations with patience and a willingness to educate and learn.

2. Mutual Education & Resource Sharing

- **Share Jewish Burial Guidelines:** Offer materials that explain Jewish burial practices, including casket requirements and the importance of *Shmira*.
- **Explain why embalming traditionally is not used for Jewish burials.**
- **Provide a Supply Checklist:** Funeral homes may not be aware of specific supplies needed for *Tahara* (e.g., linens, sovev, PPE). Providing a list ensures preparedness.
- **Clarify Expectations for Returning Personal Belongings:** Address concerns about clothing and personal effects being returned in a dignified manner.
- **Inform the funeral director if there will be a charge for your services or whether a donation from families would be appreciated; ask how this information will be communicated to families. Find out if there will be a charge to families for use of the taharah room by the Chevra Kadisha.**

3. Addressing Common Challenges

Shmira & Security Concerns

Some funeral homes cite security concerns as a reason to prohibit overnight *Shmira*. Options to address this:

- Share examples of other funeral homes that allow *Shmira* and their established protocols.
- Offer to provide insurance coverage or liability waivers if necessary.
- Explore alternatives like virtual *Shmira* when in-person presence is restricted.

Casket Considerations & Eco-Friendly Options

- Some funeral homes sell caskets labeled as "Jewish" that may contain non-kosher elements (e.g., metal staples).
 - Request detailed information about suppliers to verify materials.
 - Educate funeral directors about the importance of fully biodegradable caskets.
 - Encourage sustainable burial options aligned with Jewish tradition.
 - Share examples of other funeral homes that utilize "kosher" caskets from reputable casket companies

Safety & Infection Control: Learning from Funeral Directors

Ensuring the safety of those performing *Tahara* and *Shmira* is essential. Funeral directors adhere to OSHA regulations and infection control protocols, and their knowledge can help Chevra Kadisha members work safely and confidently.

Key Topics to Discuss with Funeral Directors

- OSHA Standards: Understanding workplace safety regulations that impact Jewish burial practices.
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE): Proper use of gloves, masks, gowns, eye coverings, and other protective gear.
- Handling Biohazards: Best practices for handling bodily fluids and maintaining a safe environment while also following Jewish traditions of what should be buried with a *met/meitah/meiteh* (deceased person).
- Facility-Specific Policies: Each funeral home may have different procedures—learning these in advance can prevent misunderstandings.
- Respecting Jewish Practices While Ensuring Safety: Collaborate to find solutions that uphold both safety standards and Jewish tradition.

If this is an area where Chevra Kadisha members need more structured learning, funeral homes might be willing to offer a brief training session or provide access to relevant resources.

Inviting Funeral Directors to Gatherings & Meetings

Funeral directors are valuable partners in this work. Inviting them to Chevra Kadisha gatherings, educational sessions, and community events can help deepen relationships and build trust.

Ways to Engage Funeral Directors:

- [Zayin Adar](#) Gatherings: A meaningful opportunity to honor those who care for the deceased and to foster connections.

- Chevra Kadisha Training Sessions: Helps funeral directors understand the values and rituals of Jewish burial.
- Community Events: Including them in broader Jewish lifecycle discussions strengthens their connection to the community.
- Educational Meetups: Offer a chance for both groups to learn from each other and discuss best practices.

Best Practices for Collaboration

- Respect Differences: Not all funeral homes are familiar with Jewish practices. Approach conversations with patience and an openness to educate.
- Establish a Liaison: Having a designated Chevra Kadisha member as a point of contact can streamline communication.
- Be Flexible & Creative: Every community is different—find solutions that work within legal, geographic, and communal constraints.
- Show Appreciation: A simple thank-you or acknowledgment of a funeral home's efforts can go a long way in strengthening relationships.

Next Steps & Additional Resources

- Consider reaching out to funeral homes in your area to start a conversation.
- If you already work with a funeral home, invite them to discuss ways to improve collaboration.
- For further discussions, [join our Chevra Kadisha group on Facebook](#).

This guide is a living resource. Please share your experiences and insights to help us refine and expand it.