

WAYS OF PEACE Community Resources

Mindful responses to human needs throughout the life cycle

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Seven Steps to Sacred Fellowship*

“Everyone knows they’re going to die, but nobody believes it,” observed Morrie Schwartz (of *Tuesdays with Morrie*) as he faced his own death nearly three decades ago. The *hevra kadisha* / sacred burial fellowship believes it—and offers us the priceless gift of ultimate *hesed* / kindness. Yet the vast majority of *hevra kadisha* services are still provided on an impersonal cash basis in our major urban centers, far removed from public awareness.

(/in-the-media) We need to regroup. Over the past 25 years as a *hevra kadisha* organizer and educator in **communities across the United States** (/scholar-in-residence-and-retreats), I have identified seven core practices for sacred fellowship development and sustainability. These practices are especially appropriate to review around the 7th of Adar, a traditional Hebrew date to celebrate the *hevra kadisha*—but, as demonstrated below, they remain vital throughout the year.



In a well-known Talmudic story, the ancient sage Hillel agrees to teach the entire Torah while a prospective convert stands on one foot: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your counterpart. ... All the rest is commentary. Go forth, learn!” With that in mind, please consider the following as notes toward a “Torah on one foot” of sacred fellowship.

1) Regularly Celebrate Caring Community—and Invite EVERYONE.

Whether your community maintains a *hevra kadisha*, is in the process of organizing one, or simply wants to grow in its caring efforts, schedule a modest program with food on or around the 7th of Adar—and promote the program to your community at large. **Tell all your people that, even if they can’t imagine themselves volunteering to care for the dead, they can support this sacred effort by simply showing up to eat, drink, and celebrate kindness.**

Park Slope Jewish Center (PSJC) in Brooklyn, NY offered our first 7th of Adar program in 2004, building on an infrastructure of showing up for the bereaved (**see Practice 4**). When we held our first annual *hevra kadisha* dinner a year later, we had not yet mobilized for *taharah* / cleansing and dressing of the dead. When *hevra* volunteers asked what we were celebrating, I responded that we were celebrating our being organized, on call, and ready to serve. Three months later our burial fellowship mobilized on a full-service basis for the first time, offering *taharah* as well as *sh’mirah* / vigil-keeping.

If your pre-Purim schedule is overloaded, consider other traditional dates for highlighting these issues—including the 15th or 20th of Kislev, the 1st (new moon) of Tammuz (when the prototypical **Prague burial society** (<http://www.jewish-funerals.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Prague-CK-Paintings-Posters.pdf>) held its annual banquet), *Lag b’Omer*, and/or (hiding in plain sight) the High Holy Days with their “Who shall live and who shall die?” **Consistent public programming generally pays off with additional “civilians” joining the ranks of vigil-keepers (see Practice 5)—and with vigil-keepers stepping up to join the *taharah* team.**

2) Uphold Principles Over Personalities.

When the PSJC *hevra* first mobilized on a full-service basis—during a major holiday weekend, with most key congregational leaders out of town—it was to care for a synagogue member whom almost no one knew. **To be truly sacred, burial fellowships must offer an egalitarian level of care to ALL community members, regardless of social status or personal connections.**



(/in-the-media)The *hevra kadisha* can learn much from modern addiction recovery fellowships about anonymity as “the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities.” On principle, individual sacred fellowship members are not publicly identified or acknowledged for our involvement with any particular death.

This safeguards the privacy of the deceased—with whom *hevra* members come into intimate contact at the most vulnerable of times—and also helps to

insure that gratitude and community support are appropriately channeled to the fellowship as a whole.

On the other hand, certain secretive, elitist traditions of the *hevra kadisha* contributed to its near-demise in twentieth-century North America (see Practice 3). **While practicing anonymity at the level of individual deaths, we need to identify ourselves more generally as appropriate to sustain community support through education and outreach.** Volunteer recognition at an annual public dinner (as per Practice 1) can advance this goal very effectively. In the words of my sacred fellowship mentor, Myriam Abramowicz, who brought *taharah* to the mega-Congregation B’nai Jeshurun in Manhattan: “A *hevra kadisha* is a sacred society, not a secret society.”

3) Learn from History. Then Add Your Own Stories.

Sustainability, simplicity, equality and community are interlocking values that have helped Jews face death for thousands of years. Learning from our Jewish “usable past” (<https://forward.com/opinion/181346/the-american-jewish-way-of-death/?p=all>) can help us recover and reintegrate these values in practice.

Rabbi Arnold Goodman’s *A Plain Pine Box* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=t0Idr2Uk748C&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>) (on which the short documentary film of the same name is based) is a classic, brief, and readable primer. The book restores **hands-on participation in honoring the dead** (<https://www.adathjeshurun.org/chevra.html>) to its rightful place on the caring continuum between visiting the sick and consoling the bereaved. It also locates the sacred fellowship within the historical context of both Jewish funeral consumer advocacy (see Practice 6) and the do-it-yourself Judaism of previous generations.

Equally compelling are the first-person testimonies of sacred fellowship members throughout the United States and across the denominational spectrum. With respect for anonymity and without identifying details of the dead (as per Practice 2), we can add to this body of personal stories, demystifying participation while providing inspiration for others to join, support, and/or request the *hevra kadisha* (see Practice 7).

4) Start by Showing Up for the Living.

(/training-and-peer-consultation)“It seems to me that consoling mourners takes precedence over visiting the sick, since consoling mourners includes kindness with the living and with the dead,” observed the great scholar Maimonides in his *Laws of Mourning*. Our PSJC *hevra* was initially drawn from the ranks of synagogue members who could be counted upon to show up at houses of mourning.



If your fellowship is congregation- or minyan-based, begin by reviewing your protocols for consoling the bereaved in light of the principles described in **Practice 2 for egalitarian levels of care, regardless of social status or personal connections.**

If your fellowship is inter-organizational and community-based, successful recruitment and retention are likely to proceed along similar paths of more familiar kindness.

5) Lead with *Sh'mirah* / Vigil-Keeping.

In light of renewed Jewish interest in *Mussar* / Jewish ethical development, it's worth noting that **Rabbi Israel Salanter's final *Mussar* teaching was the reassurance of his attendant to “not be afraid to be left alone all night with the body of a dead man”** (A.J. Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord's*, page 21).

Protection of the body against dishonor is the essence of *levayah* / accompanying the dead. Even more than *taharah*, I believe that the heart of this accompanying is ***sh'mirah*, the traditional vigil** (blog/2018/11/04/all-through-the-night-reclaiming-the-vigil-in-times-of-trauma) between death and burial. *Sh'mirah* can be kept alone or shared, in shifts of 2 hours or longer, reciting Psalms or reading other appropriate literature, **singing** ([/service/blog/2013/06/28/caring-for-the-dead-by-singing-to-them](https://service/blog/2013/06/28/caring-for-the-dead-by-singing-to-them)) or sitting mindfully in silence.

Since it does not involve direct physical contact with the dead, vigil-keeping is a more accessible form of sacred fellowship service. It requires no specialized training or materials, and can be organized even in the absence of *taharah*. And while *taharah* remains the purview of adults, *sh'mirah* is accessible to adolescents as well. Even recent *b'nai mitzvah* can take a shift sitting at a funeral home with a parent or other trusted adult—as the cultural **fascination with the “undead”** (<https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/149661/jewish-halloween-undead>) is channeled toward a healthy, helpful involvement in honoring the actual dead.

Our PSJC *hevra kadisha* began mobilizing sporadically for *sh'mirah* a decade before our first *taharah*. Today there are about 70 adult volunteers on call, and many have been parents of young children at the time of their involvement. All the volunteers are vigil-keepers (of whom about one-third are also *taharah* team members), and some have recruited their teenagers to sit with them. **Children learn by example that showing up for the dead is part of what makes a caring community**—and that if you're not available this time, no worries. We'll keep you on the roster for next time.

6) Understand and Respect the Jewish Funeral Ecosystem.

Funerals impact our natural ecosystems through human ecosystems of funeral arrangements—each organic, inorganic, emotional, social, and economic component interacting with and modifying the others. Ostensibly lower consumer costs may obscure **greater environmental damage** (<https://forward.com/opinion/letters/531063/jewish-cremation-controversial-ecological-damage-pollutes/>). In this era of climate crisis, our quick-cheap-and-clean funeral mythologies must yield to the difficult but vital conversations that they characteristically stifle.

Learning from *A Plain Pine Box* (see Practice 3), the PSJC **Simple Funeral Plan** (<http://images.shulcloud.com/433/uploads/psjc-planform-2015-final.pdf>) offers full-service *levayah* / accompanying—including *hevra kadisha* and cemetery plot—at a cost historically on par with the Hebrew Free Burial Association. *Levayah* encompasses biodegradability (“To dust you shall return”), sustainability (“Do not waste or destroy”), simplicity and equality (“All should be brought out on a plain bier for the honor of the poor”), as well as kindness toward both living and dead (see Practice 4). **A better understanding of *levayah* and the funeral ecosystem that it represents can help Jews of diverse backgrounds to navigate the bewildering range of final choices (/cremation-dialogues) that face us today.**

7) Keep It Simple—and Keep It Going!



(/sacred-undertaking)My *hevra kadisha* mentor Rabbi Shaul Ginsberg has more experience with the diversity of sacred fellowship practices than anyone else I know—between his native South Africa, his adopted *Hareidi* / insular Orthodox neighborhood in Brooklyn, and his decades of shipping bodies to Israel. He asserts that “**The only *halakhah* [law] is *k’vod hameit* [honoring the dead]. Everything else is *minhag* [custom].**”

The manual that I **compiled in 2005**

(https://3989ac5bcbe1edfc864a-0a7f10f87519dba22d2dbc6233a731e5.ssl.cf2.rackcdn.com/waysofpeace/PSJC_Taharah_Manual_copy2.pdf) features a traditional egalitarian liturgy and detailed instructions, and has been **used internationally**. (<https://forward.com/culture/320686/blowing-the-shofar-in-cairo/>). Even so, I affirm Rabbi Ginsberg’s “Torah on one foot” through my own: **The only requirement for *hevra kadisha* involvement is the willingness to be respectful and cooperative in the presence of the dead.** It may not be easy, but it’s that simple.

“All the rest is commentary. Go forth, learn”—and serve!

The future of the sacred burial fellowship depends much more upon in-service support, continuous recruitment, and coverage rotation contingencies than upon the formal ritual details that I’m also **happy to share** (/scholar-in-residence-and-retreats) with those interested in moving toward practical commitment.

Rabbi Regina Sandler-Phillips (/staff) is the executive director of WAYS OF PEACE Community Resources, which renews justice and kindness across lines of diversity and throughout the life cycle. She offers consultation, education and training through **Sacred Undertaking (/sacred-undertaking)**, a program of WAYS OF PEACE.

*** An earlier version of this essay was published by Jewschool.com** (<https://jewschool.com/2018/02/80962/7-practices-7-adar-torah-one-foot-sacred-fellowship/>).

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