

THE HOLY SOCIETY (Chevra Kadisha)

I. Why the Holy Society?

- It is the last act of love for the deceased.
- The worst time to deal with death is after it occurs.
- It is a ministry to the family of the deceased.
- We take care of each other from the cradle to the grave.
- It is a Torah Mitzvah.
- It is the most Messiah like we can be.

Death is inevitable and often unexpected. We must be prepared at all times to act in this ministry.

Burial and burial preparations are burdensome and at times complicated. For the bereaved this is an added stress that is unneeded at this time of mourning. Probably the greatest calling in this ministry is to help take some of the burden from the bereaved and let them mourn in a healthy way over their loss.

This includes preparing the home of the bereaved, organizing meals, attending family meetings with the funeral director, becoming the spokesmen for the family to the funeral home if needed, preparing the body for burial, organizing yearly Yahrzeit, organizing the Shiva services.

Death is emotionally disorienting to the bereaved. It can be a frightening experience to lose a parent, child, or spouse. Knowing that there are people who love you and will take care of you during this time of mourning is very comforting.

II. Answering some misconceptions about the Holy Society.

- *What's in it for the young person? Death is easier handled by the elderly.* Everyone is vulnerable to death's intrusion. Why should such a feeling of fulfillment and enrichment be withheld from the young.
- *Hands on work with the dead requires only pious volunteers who are strictly observant.* Great merit is accrued to all who are a part of the Holy Society. It is work like this that will encourage others to become more observant.
- *It is better to leave the work to professionals.* The most important element of the Holy Society is love for the deceased and their family and friends you are ministering to. Instructions are precise and the work is simple so mistakes are not regular. If they do occur it is not unforeseen nor is it a great tragedy. The fact is that we don't want to become good at this.
- *The work is time consuming.* Most preparations of the deceased takes no longer than 1 hour, less if the number of workers increase.
- *There is no room in a Chevra Kadisha for someone who will never be able to hands on work with the deceased.* Members of the Holy Society have many tasks and some within the Holy Society, such as Kohanim, will never have direct contact with the deceased.

III. If I do not want to or cannot be involved with the preparing of the body for burial how else can I minister?

- During the preparations of the body someone is needed to read from the Songs of Solomon and the Psalms.
- Prepare for delivery of meals to the grieving family during the Shiva period.
- Arranging for a Minyan every night at the bereaved home during the Shiva period.
- Helping to prepare the home of the bereaved for Shiva.
- Providing rides to the cemetery.
- All are needed to extend compassion and sensitivity to the grieving family.
- Beyond the Shiva period someone is needed to help schedule yearly Yahrzeit.

IV. The Stages of mourning.

Mourning is very natural and healthy for the bereaved. If left uncontrolled however it can be devastating to the grieving family and individuals. I am confident most of us know someone who has become attached to the grave site. Their life is unable to continue because they gripped in the pain of loss. The Holy Society helps those grieve naturally during their time of grief. When the time for mourning is over the Holy Society helps the bereaved pick up the pieces of their lives and begin to live again. The 5 stages of mourning have been proven many times over through the millennia to be an extraordinary guideline for this process. There is no other culture in the world that encourages healthy mourning the way Judaism does through the Holy Society. It is impossible to underestimate the importance of all stages of mourning, especially the Shiva period.

The loss of a loved one often leaves the bereaved overwhelmed with emotions, but the psychological, emotional, and spiritual healing that takes place at every stage is necessary for the bereaved to embrace life again. One mourner said her journey through the stages of mourning was like being in a cocoon. At first she felt numb and not perceptively alive, yet gradually she emerged as a butterfly ready again to fly.

Stage 1 Aninut: It is the period immediately following death just before the funeral and internment.

Stage 2 Shiva: This is the first week of mourning that begins after internment. The mourners return to a home called the "shiva house," to begin a seven day period of intense mourning. Shiva is from the word sheva, which means seven. This week is called "sitting shiva," and is an emotionally and spiritually healing time where the mourners sit low, dwell together, and friends and loved ones come to comfort them with short visits referred to as "shiva calls."

A person sits shiva after having lost a parent, spouse, sibling, or child. Memories will come easily, and part of the comfort of the week of shiva is sharing such memories.

When one pays a shiva call, the focus is on comforting the mourners in their time of greatest grief. Traditionally, one enters the shiva house quietly with a

small knock so as not to startle those inside. No one should greet visitors; they simply enter on their own.

Food or drinks are not laid out for the visitors, because the mourners are not hosts. They do not greet the visitors, rise for them, or see them out.

One who has come to comfort a mourner should not greet the mourners. In fact, it is best to come in silently and sit down close to them. Take your cue from the mourners. If they feel like speaking, let them indicate it to you by speaking first. Then you can talk to them, but what about? Let them lead and talk about what they want to talk about. It is best to speak about the one who has passed away, and if you have any stories or memories to share with the mourner, this is the time to do so

Stage 3 Sheloshim: This is the 30 days following internment. At the end of Sheloshim formal mourning ends for all except for parents.

Stage 4 Yud Bet Chodesh: 12 month period of formal mourning for parents. It also singles the time when we can again return to the grave site. This is the first Yahrzeit for the deceased loved one.

Stage 5 Yahrzeit: the yearly anniversary of the loved ones death.

V. Preperation

The first thing we need to do is make arrangements with the funeral home.

Here is a list of things to remember.

1. Availability of burial shrouds.
2. Availability of plain pine casket.
3. Availability of equipment and facilities.
4. Agreement to perform Taharah (cleansing) and Halbashah (dressing).
5. Agreement to forbid viewing of the deceased.
6. Arrangements for the Shomer (watchmen) if needed.
7. Outline funeral and burial services with funeral director.
8. Agreement of costs of burial to the family.

VI. Taharah Procedure

What to bring with you: Nail clippers, comb, brush, soap, disposable wash cloths, disposable toothbrush, toothpaste, disposable gloves (Some non latex for those allergic), three water pitchers, shampoo, disposable masks, plastic aprons, and toothpicks (for sealing the casket).

Body is placed on back on the Taharah board.

Private parts are covered out of respect until cleansing time.

Luke warm water is used for cleansing.

One member pours water over a selected body portion while the second member washes.

While body is being washed someone in the room reads from the Song of Songs. For someone who does not want to work directly with the body but is comfortable being in the room where the body lies this is an awesome ministry.

Who can perform the Taharah?

Most Jews are permitted to perform this Mitzvah. Kohanim and close relatives of the deceased are forbidden from performing the Taharah. As a general rule

Jewish males shall perform the Taharah upon the male deceased and Jewish women upon the female deceased.

When is Taharah performed?

The Taharah should be performed as close to the funeral service as possible.

When possible within three hours of the service is the accepted standard.

Order of washing

1. Finger nails and toes and cleansed.
2. Hair is combed.
3. Teeth are brushed.
4. Front of the body
 - The entire head
 - The neck
 - Right upper arm, arm, and hand
 - Right upper half of body
 - Private parts
 - Right thigh, leg, and foot
 - Left upper arm, arm, and hand
 - Left upper half of body
 - Left thigh, Leg, and foot.
5. Body is inclined on left side and right side of body is cleansed from shoulder to foot.
6. Body is inclined on right side and left side of body is cleansed from shoulder to foot.

Rules for blood flow.

- Care should be taken with the cleansing of the rectum. If blood flow does not cease than rectum may be stopped up after the cleansing.
- Blood flow at the time of death may not be washed away.
- Blood that flows during the time the body was lifeless is washed away and gathered together by a cloth which is put inside the casket.
- If the removal of a bandage or plaster upon the body will cause the body to bleed it should not be removed.
- If there is a continual flow of blood it must be covered with a bandage before burial, other wise it should be removed.

VII. The Nine Kabin

After the body is cleansed 9 Kabin (around 24 quarts) of water is poured continuously over the body as a final Mikvah unto death. No more than three pitchers are used during this process. One person should continually fill the empty pitcher while at least two, ideally three others perform this final Mikvah for the deceased. The flow of water should not stop until all of the nine kabin have been poured. Most of the garments you will be wearing for the Taharah are

provided by the Funeral but rest assured you will get wet so come in old cloths that you don't mind throwing away if needed.

VIII. Halbasha Procedure

Shrouds of white Lenin are used to dress the body. During the dressing of the body there are special recitations read.

The shrouds consist of the following.

1. Headdress
2. Shirt
3. Trousers
4. Kittel
5. Veil for women
6. Belt
7. Linen Sheet
8. Tallit for men

Order of Dressing

1. Headdress- Placed over the head and neck.
2. Trousers- Bands at waist are wound four times. The band is tied in two bows pointing towards the head.
3. Shirt- Bands at the neck tied in the same way the trousers are.
4. Kittle- Follow same rule of the shirt.
5. Belt- Tied around the Kittle at the waist. The ends are wound four times with three bows tied facing towards the head.
6. The Sovev- Spread diagonally inside the casket.
7. Tallit- Put in the casket over the Sovev. The removed Tzitzit are tucked into a corner of the Tallit.
8. Earth- A handful of earth from Israel is poured upon the deceased's pillow, eyes, heart, and private parts.
9. Earthenware- Broken pottery or earthenware is placed over the eyes and mouth.