THE HISTORY AND IMPLICATIONS OF
JEWISH BURIAL LAWS AND TRADITIONS

by
Sarah Tunik

Class of 1992

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Honors in General Scholarship
Copyright 1992 by Sarah Tunik.

Middletown, Connecticut * May, 1992
Dedicated to the millions
who were not given the choice.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ............................................. iii
PREFACE ..................................................... vi

Chapter

1. ANCIENT TEXTS ........................................... 1
2. THE HISTORY OF BURIAL SOCIETIES .................. 13
3. SOCIOLOGY OF THE MODERN HEVRA KADDISHA .......... 28
4. ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE MODERN HEVRA KADDISHA .... 41
5. ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS .................................. 54

ILLUSTRATIONS .............................................. 68
GLOSSARY .................................................... 72
BIBLIOGRAPHY ................................................ 74
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Had it not been for my mother, Marcia Goldberg Tunik, who persevered in founding the women’s Hevra Kaddisha of Spokane, Washington's Temple Beth Shalom I should not have had the experiences of Hevra Kaddisha work, nor asked the questions that lead to this paper. My thanks to you, mom, for asking me to join you and for encouraging me to question the process. I would also like to thank my father, Lloyd Tunik, for his unending patience with computers and printers—and me. I am lucky to have both of you, who have constantly supported my education in general and this project specifically.

To Daniel Oppenheimer, my fiancé, I extend my thanks and love for being always eager to help me with my research. His patience, support, library privileges, expertise with the photographic prints for this paper, and constant willingness in everything kept my goals in sight over the last three years, even when we were thousands of miles apart.

My gratitude is due Wesleyan University's Center for the Humanities for my appointment as a Fellow, and for the opportunity to present portions of this paper to my Center colleagues and the greater Middletown community. I am also
grateful to the Davenport Committee of Wesleyan's Government Department for their generous grant which sponsored my California research in 1991. From the Wesleyan community I would specifically like to thank my advisor to this project, Professor Gary Comstock, whose academic and personal support was perfectly matched to my needs. I could not have hoped for a better mentor. The encouragement and advice of Professors Jeremy Zwelling, Charles Lemert, Indira Karamcheti, Richard Ohmann, Gertrude Hughes, and William Coley has also been invaluable to me.

Since many of the research materials I wanted for this paper were difficult to locate or decipher, I would like to thank the staff of Wesleyan University's Olin Library, and the staff of The Graduate Theological Union Library in Berkeley, California. Additionally, I thank John Handley, Assistant Registrar at the Judah L. Magnes Museum in Berkeley, California, for his time and assistance in photographing the Museum's collection of burial garments. I also appreciate the encouragement of Museum Director Seymour Fromer, and the permission of the Museum to use photographs of its holdings in this paper.

Finally, I must thank the many kind people who helped me gather invaluable information from their Jewish communities. To Maxine Thumim and the rest of the women in the Hevra of Adath Israel in Middletown, Connecticut; the Hevra Kaddisha and community at large of Temple Beth Shalom
in Spokane, Washington; Lowell D. Hanks and Michelle Joshua at Sinai Chapel in San Francisco, California; Claire Holzsweig in Virginia; Rabbi Kenneth Leitner of Adath Israel in Middletown, Connecticut; Rabbi Steven Chester of Temple Sinai in Oakland, California; Patrick Fegilison of Beth Jacob in Berkeley, California; and the staff of Doolittle Funeral Service of Middletown, Connecticut I extend my utmost gratitude, for they were especially helpful.

All Biblical quotations in this paper, unless otherwise specified, are taken from the Tanakh: *A New Translation of The Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Pub. Society, 1985). The Glossary I have provided offers explanations of the Hebrew words which appear underlined in the following text, as well as clarification for other references which may not be familiar to the reader.
PREFACE

As a junior high youth I first participated in the Hevra Kaddisha, a Jewish group responsible for the preparation of the dead. The Hevra was presented to me as a task that needed to be done for the "religious" Jews who had requested the service at death. Because the women’s Hevra was new in our 200-family Orthodox/Reform joint congregation, there were few volunteers to help.

A child was brought to us once, killed in a farm accident. A few more people volunteered to join the Hevra then, and they all talked about the incomprehensible idea of losing a child. When I was fifteen a woman with cancer, with a prognosis of a few months left to live, took instant pictures at my bat mitzvah and told me she was glad my mother and I would be the people to take care of her body.

As a teenager, I learned what a dead person looked and felt like. I had seen an embalming machine, and a refrigerator for bodies. I was told by the funeral home owner that he wanted to be buried in the brushed metal casket, so his body would survive a nuclear war. By this time I had learned, however, to respect other’s ideas about
death, so I didn’t tell him aluminum would not keep the radiation, or anything else, from getting through.

In addition to the lives and deaths of people in my immediate community, I found a connection with the historical and communal death and dying of Jews. One of my first Hevra experiences was with the death of a friend—an elderly woman in the congregation. I used to sit with her during services and she would give me mints. Often I would be the only one keeping her company because her husband was our congregation’s cantor. The two of them had survived a Holocaust internment together. They fell in love with each other there, helped one another survive and then settled in America. At the age of seventeen I boarded a bus to a concentration camp memorial in the woods on the Baltic Sea. I walked alone down the road to the entrance gate—the only one who felt forced to make the walk—and as I cried I thought of every face I had ever seen in my work with the Hevra Kaddisha. I felt at this time that I knew my ancestors, that the faces in my mind were all my true relatives, and not just other members of my congregation. I felt that to be alive was a wonderful state, and that the advantages of living must be cultivated. But I had gained a perspective on life that was absent from my young friends and elders who did not accept, confront, and respond to death—even when it was in their midst or part of an undeniable recent history.
Originally, Jewish burial preparations seemed like something for "religious" Jews, which was not how I thought of myself. I came to understand that I would want to be treated at my death with the same practices I now exercised on others, because the Jewish way was the most beautiful and meaningful to me. But still, as a young, healthy member of the living, despite all I had gained from my experiences in the Hevra, I was not always comfortable with the burial ceremonies. Though the ritual as a whole was meaningful, aspects of it were disturbing. I did not understand many rituals, nor the different relationships among the origins, ancient laws, traditions, and current practices of burial customs.

The rabbis who attempted to explain questions I and other curious members asked did not have or did not feel we could handle the scholarly weight of understanding our histories, traditions and texts. And other Hevra members with whom I have worked were not interested in why we did what we did, but only in conforming to what was instructed by our guidebooks and rabbis. At times it was the other members who made me feel uncomfortable, demanding I wear a head-covering during the process I thought more suited to service at a dessert table, or involving me in prayers and actions which made me feel like an insignificant woman in the face of superior male Jews and a patriarchal God.
Having come to value my membership in the Hevra, I did not want to dismiss it out of frustration, and so I began searching for the answers myself. One investigation led to another, and the inevitable result was a desire to share my newfound knowledge with others who were interested in the Hevra and with the Jewish community at large which did not bother to question. I organized my search systematically into an exploration of the ancient texts, the history of burial practices, a study of burial guides from various diverse Jewish groups, and the participation and observation of modern Hevras, ending with my prescription of what should be maintained, changed and practiced today. What follows is my attempt to understand a ritual of which I am part and to share it with others who are, consciously or unconsciously, searching as well.
CHAPTER 1

ANCIENT TEXTS

To understand the origins of Jewish burial practices it is necessary to consult the Bible, by which I mean the Hebrew Scripture, since it is the basis for Jewish laws and customs. According to recent scholarship, we know that the Bible is a compilation of the work of several sources, representing different periods of Jewish history and religious thought. Of these sources, those that scholars have named J, E, and P are the most notable for the interests of this paper.

In the context of burial customs, the text of P is important, for the overwhelming number of Biblical instructions and stories about death are contained in it. P was written by a priesthood loyal to the traditions of Aaron, Moses' brother, in response to the arrival of the J

---

1 For Jews the Bible is the Hebrew text and does not include what Christians call the New Testament—writings in ancient Greek about Jesus.


3 Judaism regards Moses as one of the greatest, if not the greatest, Jewish leader. This is in part due to the
and E texts in the territory of Judah where the priest and his community lived. 4 Though the texts of J and E were in many ways compatible with the Aaronite priests' understanding of history, significant differences caused conflict and response. For example, the Biblical figure Aaron, considered an ancestor of the Aaronite priests, was largely viewed as a heretic in the E text. 5 Such a difference of views seemed a threat to the Aaronite priests, who enjoyed a relatively powerful position within their own society. The P text was thus written as an alternative to the J and E texts and is the latest of the Biblical sources. 6

While all three sources shared a similar heritage, the P author was faced with the presence of varying versions of Jewish history, and the need for three diverse groups of Jews now living in the same area to coexist peacefully while preserving a position for the Aaronite priests. 7 In

---

4 Friedman, 190.
5 Friedman, 190.
6 Friedman, 190.
7 The situation is much like author Robert Sacks' concept of the "New Way" or "the Way of Law"—the implementation of civil law which was to form relationships in the world following the Flood. This idea of law's role in society has implications throughout the Bible and Jewish history in general. The story of Babel, for example, presents humanity's differences in "languages, customs, and ways," as Sacks puts it, making the institution of the Way of Law more difficult. The writing of P then, in effect, created the Way of Law on a small scale after Babel by
response, the P text concentrates on formal religious rites and order in an attempt to codify law, to stabilize the current society, and to establish the primacy of the priesthood.

Among the references to death and burial in the first five books of the Bible is the story of an incident at Hebron in Judah, then the capital of Israel. In the Book of Genesis, Chapter 23, the founding patriarch Abraham purchases a cave and a field on the occasion of his wife Sarah's death. This purchase is usually interpreted and claimed as the sign that, after their later Egyptian exile, the Jews would return to Israel, the Promised Land. At a time when the groups represented by J, E, and P were forced to live together, P emphasized and found proof of common heritage in the story of this burial cave. That Hebron was also considered a specifically Aaronite inhabited territory is further motivation for the inclusion of the story in the P text. The cave Abraham purchased became and has

writing a version of history to which all three groups could relate. See Robert D. Sacks, A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies vol. 6, (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 66, 75.


Josh. 21:13; Friedman, 206.
remained an actively worshipped shrine.\textsuperscript{10} Throughout Jewish history, the cave and the land of Israel have been "symbols of national and social unity."\textsuperscript{11}

Another notable story related by \textit{P} is the death of Moses. Certainly the Aaronites would have respected the memory of Moses, but the \textit{E} text often praised Moses at the expense of Aaron. The \textit{P} text therefore elaborated on the stories of Moses to the advantage of Aaron. Biblical scholar Richard Elliott Friedman compares the two stories of Moses drawing water from a rock. Friedman translates God's instructions in the \textit{E} text of the Book of Exodus as "you [Moses] shall strike the rock, and water will go out from it."\textsuperscript{12} In the Book of Numbers the \textit{P} text makes an important change in this scenario by having God say "you [Moses] shall speak to the rock" and so will have water (emphasis mine).\textsuperscript{13} Moses still strikes the rock, as in the

\textsuperscript{10}This should not be surprising since the cave was not only the burial site of Sarah, the first matriarch, but also of the first patriarch, Abraham, as well as their successors Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah. The accounts of these burials are all recorded in the writing of \textit{P} in the book of Genesis. Refer to Gen. 23, 25:9-10, 35:27-29, 49:31-32, and 50:13. The cave is also implicated, in I Samuel, 10:2, in connection with the anointing of Israel's first king. See comments in The First Book of Samuel, ed. Peter Ackroyd (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1971), 82.


\textsuperscript{12}Friedman, 199; Exodus 17:6.

\textsuperscript{13}Friedman, 200; Num. 20:8.
Exodus version, and water is still provided, but in this version he neglects to speak to the rock as he was told. He has not followed God's instructions properly and so is punished by being excluded from passage into the Promised Land. Moreover, though Moses is the main character in both stories, the P text alone inserts Aaron's presence alongside his brother.\textsuperscript{14} This serves to improve Aaron's character because he is spoken to by God, included in a miraculous event, and presented as a leader of the people.

Other contributions of the P text describe the process of purification following corpse defilement and priestly functions during this process. Numbers 19:14-15 indicates the effect of a corpse:

This is the ritual: When a person dies in a tent, whoever enters the tent and whoever is in the tent shall be unclean seven days; \textsuperscript{15} and every open vessel, with no lid fastened down, shall be unclean.

The week-long tenure of impurity is a testament to the strength of corpse defilement, as most other defilements require only a cleansing and a day of waiting.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14}Friedman, 200; Num. 20:6, 8, 10, 12.

\textsuperscript{15}Numbers 19:17-20 instructs that after contact with a corpse, a person must be cleansed, sprinkled with the ashes of a red heifer, and wait seven days. (The red heifer ritual has not been used since the abolition of animal sacrifice in Judaism. Author J. Morgenstern claims the sacrifice was made to protect the living from the ghost of the deceased (Morgenstern, \textit{Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death, and Kindred Occasions Among the Semites} (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College), 117f). The punishment for not following this rite was excommunication (Num. 19:20). Other defilements, such as ejaculation outside of
Furthermore, the holy Aaronite priests were, with rare exception, forbidden to allow themselves to be defiled by a corpse. Since priests were allowed to contact other defilements, this prohibitive measure testifies to the corpses power to ruin. Defilement required the intervention of a priest and excommunication from the community should someone fail to exercise the rites of purification when appropriate.

Throughout the Bible people are instructed to cleanse themselves after they are defiled, and they are also told to do so before any meeting with God. Washing with the intent to sanctify, whatever the occasion, became the fulfillment of a covenant with God. It is not only the living, however, who prepare themselves for such a meeting. Preparation for burial requires a simple copulation, require only a cleansing and a wait "until the evening" (Lev. 15:16-17).

16See Lev. 21 and Ezek. 44:25.

17Death was an occurrence every person would have been exposed to and the P text asserts that the only path to purification after exposure to a corpse and other defilements was with the ashes of a red heifer, which could only be prepared by a priest. See Lev. 11, 16, and 21; and Num. 5:2-3, and 19:11-22.

18In Exodus 19:10, for example, Moses carries a message from God to his fellow travelers instructing them to "stay pure today and tomorrow. Let them wash their clothes," and then God would visit them. See also Lev. 16:4.

19Even today many Jews follow the laws of ritual purification which dictate how one can be made clean again after contacting an unclean thing. There are special
washing, to remove dirt, and a ritual purification, involving a pouring of or immersion in water, so the spirit is prepared to go to God having fulfilled the covenant.\textsuperscript{20}

It is important to remember that the changes made by the writing of the P text were a reaction during a time of turmoil in Jewish history; that is, the expulsion of the J and E communities from their territories and encroachment on the area of the Aaronite priests. What was essentially a re-interpretation of the J and E texts, plus the promulgation of newly defined laws, marks the reformation of Judaism itself so that it could more fully serve the needs of the immediate society. Major post-Biblical writings by Talmudic and post-Talmudic scholars served much the same purpose.

The P text stresses, as do post-Biblical writings, that everyone is equal in death. This is evident in the treatment of Abraham and Sarah, who were buried in like manner and in the same revered cave. The Bible recounts Sarah's burial by saying "Abraham buried his wife Sarah in

baths, called mikvahs, in some communities for this purpose. Some communities actually have a special mikva for the deceased, although without a mechanical lowering device it is quite difficult to maneuver the body. The more common method involves a pouring of water.

\textsuperscript{20}See Lev. 16:4. The purification, or tahara, calls for a continuous pouring of approximately 24 quarts of water, or the immersion in a ritual bath (mikva). Even after the tahara, however, the corpse has the ability to defile so one must presume it is the spirit which is actually being prepared to meet God. This practice is evidence, then, of a Jewish belief in an afterlife.
the cave of the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan."\textsuperscript{21} And so was Abraham buried when "His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field . . . facing Mamre."\textsuperscript{22} Not only does this ongoing story indicate that a man and a woman were buried in the same fashion, but the lack of elaboration concerning the burial preparations leads some scholars to believe that this story encourages simple burials for all the dead.\textsuperscript{23} However, if that was the intended message, it was not by itself strong enough to shape and hold subsequent burial practices, for Talmudic scholars readdressed it.

Talmudic scholars responded to the excessive burial customs in their societies and sought to re-codify related laws and customs. During these post-Biblical historical periods, common practice involved burying the deceased lavishly. The poor felt ashamed to bury their dead, because they could only do so in what appeared to be an inferior fashion. Consequently, the scholars wrote that the deceased of any class should be conveyed on a plain bier, and not on a fancy bed, and that food at a house of mourning should be served from simple containers, and not

\textsuperscript{21}Gen 23:19.

\textsuperscript{22}Gen 25:9.

\textsuperscript{23}See Sarna, 156.
from expensive glass. Similar instructions command equal burial rites for women and men, for the sick, and for a scholar and ordinary person.

Post-Talmudic authors, like Talmudic scholars, reflect and claim the intent of their Biblical predecessors to clarify laws for the stability of Judaism in times of turmoil. Ensuring equal burial customs was a part of this clarification, and such attempts were produced from about the year 500 C.E. until the late sixteenth century, when the Shulhan Aruk or Code of Jewish Law was co-authored by Joseph Caro and Moses Isserles.

The Shulhan Aruk was originally authored by Caro, a Sephardic Jew, and its appearance corresponded with the time of the tumultuous migration after the Spanish Inquisition and with the general demise of Jewish leaders in Israel. The book was Caro's attempt to create "one


25"Mo'ed Katan," 27b, 27a-b, and 25a respectively.


Torah and one law,"\textsuperscript{28} to replace the multiplicity of
writings about and interpretations of Torah. Moses
Isserles, an \textit{Ashkenazic} Jew, recognized cultural
differences in the \textit{Sephardic} Caro text and added notes to
Caro's original so that it might speak to all Jews.\textsuperscript{29}

Among the laws addressed here and in other post-
Biblical writings are the prominent and closely connected
burial laws of cleanliness and purification. It has been
said that Jewish law is obsessed with the idea of
cleanliness, though not without reason.\textsuperscript{30} A dead body,

\textsuperscript{28} Denburg, 13.

\textsuperscript{29} Isserles had been working on his own code of law,
but Caro published first. Isserles therefore contented
himself with adding comments to Caro's work, so only one
set of laws was produced.

\textsuperscript{30} In all the years before the revered Jewish leader
Gamaliel took over as head of an academy at Yavneh, 28.1\%
of all the lawful rulings set forth concerned uncleanness,
the largest percentage for a single category. In
just the years of Gamaliel's authority, uncleanness
rulings still accounted for 12\% of the cases (from Shamai
Kanter, \textit{Rabban Gamaliel II: The Legal Traditions}, (Chico,
cleanliness can be traced to at least an issue of health,
as well as other issues. In the case of food laws, one is
prevented from eating animals which are found dead, or in
some other circumstance at high risk of bacterial
contamination (Lev. 22:8, for example). Author Joshua
Trachtenberg (\textit{Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in
Folk Religion}, (Cleveland and New York: World Pub. Co.,;
the concern for cleanliness to the belief in demons, who
were called "spirits of uncleanness." He says that in
the Middle Ages "the connection between demons and uncleanness
was made to serve important hygienic ends," and
unwashed hands were a great danger (32). Ritual washing
"destroys or dislodges the demons" (32), and Trachtenberg's
other comments imply that, on occasions such as death when
with its relation to bacteria and disease as it decomposes, is a serious health threat and is treated as such in Judaism. As noted above, it is treated in the Bible as the most contagious of defilements. The ability of a corpse to defile both humans and objects is of such concern that when the *Shulhan Aruk* was written the possible routes to contamination briefly touched upon in the Biblical passages above were expanded. Whole chapters detail, for example, how defilement can spread and how small an opening must be to prevent spreading to neighboring houses, and affecting whole towns.\(^{31}\)

Though there exist several important commentaries since the *Shulhan Aruk*, none has matched it in popularity and longevity; that is not to say the *Shulhan Aruk* has been left unchallenged, but rather that the challenges have not taken written form and been recognized and accepted officially by major Jewish organizations. The problems and turmoils which face modern Jewish communities have frequently caused the abandonment of many laws and customs, rather than a scholarly questioning on the level of Caro,

---

\(^{31}\)See especially Caro and Isserles, chpt. 371.
Isserles, and their predecessors in an attempt to update, re-appropriate and strengthen Jewish law and Judaism.
CHAPTER 2

THE HISTORY OF BURIAL SOCIETIES

The importance of burial rituals for Judaism is embodied in the practices developed to care for the dead. Responsibility for the deceased originally lay with entire communities, then with smaller, representative societies which sometimes operated like private clubs and other times as community-wide service organizations. In more modern times professional organizations outside the immediate Jewish community have taken or been given these obligations. The departure from community-based responsibility has had the effect of divorcing the values of caring for the dead and sharing the burial obligations from the very communities which have typically embraced and learned from them. Throughout Jewish history this important resource for enriching communal and personal life has often been in danger of being lost and consequently reevaluated and reclaimed.

Since the beginning of Judaism's long textual history, the concept of respecting the dead has been central. Biblical laws were understood as personal, read as direct edicts from God to each individual Jew. The commandment
"you must not let his corpse remain . . . but must bury him the same day"\textsuperscript{32} meant every individual had a responsibility to care for the deceased, despite the absence or presence of a family, the known or unknown identity of the deceased, or even the availability of aid from a benevolent society. It was a Jewish duty to ensure the respectful care of fellow Jews.\textsuperscript{33} However, though the responsibility to care for the deceased was an individual one, a group expression offered by many individuals was the desired result. When a death occurred in a town, all inhabitants would stop their work long enough to participate in at least a portion of the funeral procession. Not to do so was considered a mockery of the dead.\textsuperscript{34}

Judaism was often influenced by the practices of neighboring non-Jewish peoples. For example, the Romans had burial societies which cared for the deceased in Roman communities.\textsuperscript{35} Likewise, Jews created benevolent societies which cared for the deceased and the poor, and also performed other duties at births and marriages. Such

\textsuperscript{32}Deut. 21:23.
\textsuperscript{33}Caro and Isserles, chpt. 343.
\textsuperscript{34}Caro and Isserles, chpt. 343.
groups were outlets for community dedication in fulfilling the rites which all deceased deserved.

The Talmud relates the story of Rabbi Hammuna's visit to a town where a funeral was taking place. When he saw that some people did not stop working to make their individual contributions to the mourning process, he recommended excommunication for all transgressors. It is explained to Hammuna that these people need not stop their work because a special representative society had been instituted in the town. This example is one of the first times a specialized, Roman-style organization for the care of the deceased is mentioned by a Jewish text.

When the burial group, what is known today as the Hevra Kaddisha or Holy Society, existed in a town it oversaw charitable activities relating to the poor and the dead. Membership in the society was an honor granted only a select few, and at times these societies acted as a judicial body in a town. The records of the Polish province of Posen, compiled and translated by author

---

36 "Mo'ed Katan," 27b.

37 There is also a reference to a similar group in The Tractate "Mourning" (Semahot), trans Dov Zlotnick, ed. Leon Nemoy, Yale Judaica Series, (New Haven: Yale U. P., 1966), chpt. 12, #5.

Michael Zarchin, offer an illustration of communal governing systems, of which the Hevra Kaddisha is an integral part. This community’s government functioned as did a medieval system referred to as the "Kehillah structure." There were several Kehillahs in the province of Posen, each having jurisdiction over a section of the province. Together, the Kehillahs "assumed the responsibility for the Jewish community and represented it in all civic, economic, and judicial matters." The respective Kehillahs conducted local taxation and representation, as delegated by their elected boards. They regulated economic guilds and communal societies, such as workmen’s guilds and the burial society, which served the community in various ways. Benefits depended upon membership, granted on the basis of income and social position, though the poor could petition the Kehillah system for aid.

The surviving records of the Burial Society of Neustadt offer many details of its functions. In addition to the fees asked for the actual burial of community members, this group demanded onetime initiation fees, plus

---


40 Zarchin, 15.

41 Zarchin, 10.
weekly dues. Fines were levied if members failed to perform or could not attend to their expected duties, and at the weddings and other occasions of members additional donations were expected both by the party's host and the guests.\textsuperscript{42} This burial society attended to the sick, including the procurement of drugs or a doctor; prepared graves, coffins and "accessories," meaning burial clothes and other equipment for ritual preparation; organized attendance for mourning services; maintained the lighting of remembrance lamps; operated its own synagogue, in which members rotated the honor of officiating at services; supervised the charity fund for the poor, the donations of which were used in part by the burial society; and even woke people for morning services.\textsuperscript{43}

The ongoing production of Biblical and Talmudic interpretations, discussed in Chapter 1, are evidence of the attempt to standardize Jewish burial practices by seeking intellectual consensus. The elements of Judaism which scholars encouraged, both the uniquely Jewish practices and those practices borrowed from larger or surrounding societies, sought to reaffirm and clarify ethics and laws. Although the benevolent societies of Kehillahs, as care-givers for the needy, satisfied certain

\textsuperscript{42} Zarchin, 61-65.

\textsuperscript{43} Zarchin, 62-64; 71-73.
Jewish ethical and lawful principles, they too were subject to scrutiny and criticism from scholars and subsequent change.

Benevolent societies, whether specifically referred to as the Hevra Kaddisha or not, were common in all Jewish communities. It was not until the sixteenth century however that a Hevra was organized which was responsible for an entire community, and not just for those who belonged to or supported the Hevra in their Kehillah. This was the Prague Hevra Kaddisha of 1564, organized by Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi. This group began the trend of the Hevra Kaddisha’s tending to the sick and the dead exclusively. Other benevolent societies formed to perform the other tasks no longer under the jurisdiction of the Hevra Kaddisha (e.g., collections at weddings and care for the poor). The Prague example was followed by Jewish communities around the world, especially those like Prague with large or concentrated Jewish populations. The increase of urbanization in these communities decreased the likelihood of community-wide responsibility for the dead.

---

44 Information on a dozen such burial societies founded between 1650 and 1912 in Germany can be found in: Adolf Kober, "Jewish Communities in Germany from the Age of Enlightenment to Their Destruction by the Nazis," Jewish Social Studies, ed. Salo W. Baron, et al., (New York: Conference on Jewish Relations, July 1947), 9.3: 220. Other examples from Europe, Russia and the United States may be found in J. D. Eisenstein, "Burial Society," Jewish Encyclopedia, (1902).
Individuals transferred these responsibilities to and expressions of respect for the dead to committees which they appointed to act for them.

This new, specialized nature of the Hevra Kaddisha had the result of codifying and institutionalizing the proper care of the dead. Its tasks included watching the body, washing and purification, making of shrouds and dressing of the body, raising funds for burial of the poor, and digging and tending to the grave site. One important value preserved and established by the Hevra's development as an all-serving philanthropic society is the demand in Jewish law that no profit be made from the dead.\(^{45}\) The emergence of an organization dedicated to the care of the deceased is most significant however in its continuing protection and affirmation of the Jewish belief that all people deserve proper and equal care in death. The Hevra's evolution would in time prescribe a standardized and normative care of the deceased for Jews.

After Jews emigrated to the United States, traditional burial practices were less frequently observed. The desire

\(^{45}\)See especially Caro and Isserles, chpt. 349. The prohibition from profiting of the dead is related to the concept of respecting the dead, and the surviving family, by disallowing the sale of the body itself, or the clothes it wears to the grave, or anything so close to the dead that removing it would be like disfiguring the body. (For example, removing a false eye.) It also lends the Hevra, as a strictly non-profit organization, an air of benevolence not historically afforded the character of the profit-seeking mortician.
to assimilate caused many Jewish Americans to conform to the prevailing Victorian funeral practices which inform American burial practices to the present. The morals and cultural expressions within burial practices were and are overwhelmed by American Christian culture. The Victorians emphasized an insolvability of the body, as evidenced by the renaissance of embalming, the use of makeup, clothes and caskets to transform the dead into the merely sleeping, and the duplicity of caskets and casket liners in an attempt a delay decomposition.\textsuperscript{46} An image of the deceased in a fine suit with hands clasped across the chest, or the idea of cremation and the prevalence of embalming are common for any Jew who has spent sufficient time in the American atmosphere of assimilation. These trappings will not be unfamiliar to any but the most Hassidic Jew\textsuperscript{47} in America.

In addition, life in an industrialized nation made communal care, even by proxy of a Hevra, increasingly difficult. The original inception of Hevra Kaddisha groups released townspeople from some duties to the deceased by

\textsuperscript{46}There is extensive writing on the subject of Victorian burial customs. Harvey Green, \textit{The Light of the Home: An Intimate View of the Lives of Women in Victorian America}, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983) is a particularly well presented example.

\textsuperscript{47}Hasidism is a branch of Judaism which demands strict adherence to Jewish law. Because of their strict religious lifestyles, Hassidic Jews tend to live in their own, insular communities. A more complete definition is offered in the Glossary.
delegating the responsibility to a designated group. Although mortuaries originally were seen as a release from certain duties to the deceased, they have expanded to replace individual responsibility altogether.

Also, Judaism has been greatly changed in the modern world by major shifts in the geographical location of Jews. The largest Jewish population is in the United States, and that group is influenced by the diverse customs of Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews from around the world, as well as by the various influences of non-Jews and recent immigrants. Since 1948 a strong influence from the Jewish state of Israel has introduced the combination of the religious laws of Jews everywhere with its state laws. Add to this the large divisions among Humanistic, Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Hassidic Jews\(^48\) new since 1565 when the Shulhan Aruk set the rules, and the interpretations of sixteenth century laws are understandably diverse.

The religious, social and communal value of Jewish burial rituals and customs tend to become lost as modern, assimilated liberal Jewish communities neglect burial

\(^{48}\)The Hassidic and Orthodox Jews represent branches of Judaism which are the most concerned with fulfilling Jewish law. The other sects of Judaism listed here are the major Jewish movements which wished to depart from the strict ideals of Judaism Orthodoxy and Hasidism follow. Within each sect there is an additional range of beliefs. More complete definitions of each Jewish branch are provided in the Glossary.
traditions. Perhaps one of the greatest ironies of the liberal congregations' abandonment of traditional practices is that the egalitarian ideals supported by the Hevra Kaddisha are the same kinds of ideals sought by liberal congregations in their humanistic programs and agendas.

As an example of the egalitarian nature of burial customs, the history of burial dress is among the best. In ancient days people, especially those of high societal rank, were often buried in the clothes they wore in life. According to author Hayyim Schauss, during the first centuries of the Common Era the belief that the deceased would rise in their same clothes of death became popular. It says also in the Talmud\textsuperscript{49} "the righteous will rise with their clothes on." Great expense was made to prepare a deceased loved one in as fine a manner as possible, and it was not long before the number of garments and the fineness of the materials created impractical and competitive conditions among the rich and a distance between the rich and the poor within communities.\textsuperscript{50}

One person who was largely responsible for a change away from this extravagance was Rabban Gamaliel II, Patriarch of Jabneh. Gamaliel perceived the immorality in


\textsuperscript{50} Schauss, 231f.
emphasizing wealth and status instead of modesty and equality. He drew attention to this problem by advocating marked deviations from standard practices.\textsuperscript{51} It was the subsequent discussions of and writings about Gamaliel’s deviation by other scholars however, which established the tangible laws propounding all persons be buried in the same manner.

Another aspect of burial garment history which underscores egalitarian values and the necessity of ongoing re-codification concerns the material and fashion chosen for making these clothes. There are several reasons for Gamaliel and others following him to make linen the material of choice. Abraham Sperling, in his study of Jewish traditions, claims that linen’s plant of origin, flax, is a symbol of the Tree of Life.\textsuperscript{52} Another source claims white is chosen as a "sign of purity and forgiveness."\textsuperscript{53} The Egyptian priesthood considered linen a

\textsuperscript{51}Gamaliel addressed these problems in his written decisions, but more importantly he addressed them by making his own funeral an example of simplicity. See Tosefta "Niddah" 9.17 and Kanter, 207f.


\textsuperscript{53}Shmuel Rubenstein, The Jewish Funeral: An Illustrated Analysis of the Laws and Customs Governing the Jewish Funeral, (Bronx: by the author, 1977), 9.
holy fabric, and they are a likely influence.\textsuperscript{54} The \textit{Shulhan Aruk} details the myriad significances of linen in its approval of "fine white linen" for the clothes of the afterlife, asserting that the choice confirms "our belief in the resurrection of the dead."\textsuperscript{55} Despite linen's many possible representations of religious beliefs, the cost of material became the most important factor once Gamaliel re-emphasized simplicity. Linen was a reasonably priced fabric,\textsuperscript{56} and the ancients indicated that a "paltry" outfit which costs very little money was quite respectable.\textsuperscript{57}

Contemporary burial guides often prescribe that at least three items of clothing cover the deceased. This may be because three often is considered a lucky number in Jewish mysticism, and perhaps a simple enough safeguard to ensure complete clothing of the deceased. The \textit{Shulhan Aruk}, a document of an era in which the burial outfit had just become formally standardized, does not offer


\textsuperscript{56}The Biblical passages of the book of Ezekiel indicate that linen was fine, though not extravagant, material in comparison to what common people wore, and was probably imported from Egypt (see Ezek. 16:10 and 27:7; Haran, 160).

\textsuperscript{57}"Mo'ed Katan," 27b and "Kethuboth," 8b.
particulars as to its fashion. The assemblage of burial
clothes is strikingly similar to the priestly uniforms
detailed in the Bible, through Leviticus and Exodus,
in portions from the text of P. Leviticus 16:4 relates the
story of Aaron, the high priest, and his atonement for sin.
God commands that "Aaron enter the shrine."  

He shall be dressed in a sacral linen tunic, with linen
breeches next to his flesh, and be girt with a linen
sash, and he shall wear a linen turban. They are
sacral vestments; he shall bathe his body in water and
then put them on.  

These garments are worn by Aaron and his priestly sons who
necessarily must be in holy places like the alter, as the
clothes "serve to indicate a kind of dialectical elevation
into that sphere which is beyond even the material."  

Designated "appropriate" modern burial attire in the
United States, standardized and produced by professional
companies, imitates these Biblical passages by providing
"priest-like" fashions for men, women and children: one
short shirt, one long shirt (the kitte, ), pants
("breeches") with closed feet, a sheet (the sovey), and a

---

58 Rabbi Jacob Izakson, address of the Hevra Kaddisha
of Temple Beth Shalom, 19 Dec. 1990, Spokane, WA., tape
recording.

59 Lev. 16:3.

60 Lev. 16:4.

61 Haran, 174.

62 A kitte is a long shirt still worn by some Jews for
special occasions.
small bag containing one long and two short ties. The
man’s package also contains a white yarmulke; the woman’s a
bonnet and a square piece of cloth with two strings at one
end.\textsuperscript{63}

In some ways this standard company offering makes the
burial process more egalitarian, as both women and men wear
pants and a \textit{kittel}. Handmade burial clothes from the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example,
often include dresses for women, as well as aprons, veils,
and feminized head coverings and shawls.\textsuperscript{64} The clothing
kits, however, do include different head coverings for men
and women, and a veil/apron for women only, which separates
this part of the burial process from the most modern
versions of egalitarianism.

We see in this industrialization of burial clothes
again the pattern of re-codification. A Jewish principle,
in this case equality in death, is overwhelmed by the

\textsuperscript{63}Religious authorities prefer that these items be
called by their proper Hebrew name, \textit{tahrihim}, as the common
word shroud has multiple connotations, not all of which are
always appropriate. The items listed in this text are the
exact contents of garment packages from Rose Solomon Co. in
New York which seems to be the most popular company. There
are about four other companies in the United States.

\textsuperscript{64}Women’s handmade burial garments from a museum
collection are shown in the Illustrations of this paper.
It was not uncommon for Jewish women to sew their own
burial outfits in anticipation of death. From the same
museum collection, the much less common men’s burial
clothing seems confined to \textit{kittels}, fabric boots, and, in
one case, long tassels knotted like the fringes on a prayer
shawl.
influence of non-Jewish practices, recognized for its value, and responded to and salvaged by clarifying laws and offering more specific examples of proper conduct. Thus Jews have adopted plain burial clothes, invested various traditional and historical meanings in the fashions and the materials used to make them, and eventually industrialized their production.
CHAPTER 3

SOCIOLOGY OF THE MODERN HEVRA KADDISHA

The historical changes affecting Judaism mentioned earlier—emigration and the quest to assimilate, Sephardic and Ashkenazic differences, and a coexistence of Hassidic, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Humanistic, and Reconstructionist Jews—have produced a variety of burial practices. Assorted guides written and used by individual burial groups in the United States reflect the organizational patterns and social structures of the different groups of Jews living in the U.S.

Although no single modern guide to burial practice has enjoyed acceptance on the scale of Caro and Isserles' sixteenth century work, several have been published. Probably the two most acknowledged are the Chicago Jewish Sacred Society's "Regulations and Procedure" guide and The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning by Maurice Lamm.65 Both

guides are conservative\textsuperscript{66} and gender biased. Jewish burial customs, however, are not inherently sexist. Their egalitarian basis is located and established by the founding Biblical patriarch Abraham and the renowned scholar Gamaliel, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. Furthermore, a willingness to adapt Jewish principles to current needs and to survive and flourish amid mainstream counter-cultural influences has been the hallmark of Jewish history. Burial practices should not be and have not been an exception.

The necessity for adapting burial practices to current needs is evident in the range of lesser or little-known guides created by various communities in the United States. These guides reflect the practices of the myriad social groupings of Jews within the U.S.A., for example, those based on the cultural and geographical origins of immigrants and the particular assimilationist versus autonomous tendencies of Jews encountering mainstream society. Of the twelve guides I have examined from across the United States, three represent distinct customs as practiced by different social groups: a liberal-Orthodox guide with both the men’s and women’s duties included; a

\textsuperscript{66}Traditional, orthodox influenced practices that do not recognize or perceive any need to alter earlier established guides.
concise, yet detailed, Conservative women's guide with traditions not recognized in Jewish law; and a short, generalized guide from a Jewish mortuary designed to appeal to a diverse urbanized population.

The first, Orthodox guide has two parts: "A 'How To' Manual For Synagogues" and a "Ladies' Chevra Kadisha" manual. The "Manual For Synagogues" includes instructions for duties by several committees: 1) the Hevra Kaddisha, which prepares the body, 2) the "Shomrim," who watch the body, 3) the "S'udas Havraah," which provides the mourners' first meal and prepares the mourner's house for Shiva, 4) "Shiva Committee," which provides and arranges special equipment needed at the mourner's house, 5) a committee to ensure a minyan is present for daily prayers at the mourner's home, and 6) a record-keeping committee which also functions as an agency between the mourning family and the cemetery. In addition to instructions for each committee, the manual provides sample letters, forms, and prayers.

---

67 Subscribing to the ideals of the Jewish Conservative Movement. See Glossary for a more complete definition.

68 Chaim Mechanic, "A 'How To' Manual for Synagogues," TD from Congregation Young Israel of West Hempstead, N. Y.; "Manual Ladies' Chevra Kadisha," TD from Congregation Young Israel of West Hempstead, N. Y.

69 C. Mechanic, 4.
The male-centered format of this congregation’s main guide reflects an historical problem because, though women’s burial groups are as old as men’s, they were and are often treated as auxiliary committees to male Hevras. Women were/are expected to derive their Hevra Kaddisha practices from male-centered texts and adapt them to female experience. The separate women’s manual for this Orthodox community was most likely created so that during the ritual preparation women would not have to reference the large male-centered manual while performing their tasks.  

For the most part, men and women are prepared in a similar fashion in this congregation. Exceptions are the absence of the use of prayer shawls for deceased women and the difference of methods used by the men’s and women’s groups for covering the face of the deceased.  

This congregation’s movement from having only a men’s Hevra Kaddisha to having strong men’s and women’s groups accompanied by a substantial guide can be seen as a continuation of the Talmudic and post-Talmudic commitment

---

70 The main manual details the preparation for men in a linear fashion, and then adds notes of difference for women’s preparation at the end making it difficult to understand women’s preparation without continually cross-referencing. The separate women’s guide provides linear instructions, and would be more easily followed during preparation when speed and efficiency are usually important to members faced with a difficult task.

71 This is still in keeping with egalitarian procedures proscribed by Gamaliel, unlike many communities which only cover the faces of women.
to re-compilation and clarification of Jewish law. The size of this particular Jewish community and the importance of burial customs to it are reflected in the length and detail of its forty-page manual. Though other communities may hold the rituals of death in high regard, the number of people needed to fill the seven committees detailed here cannot usually be met. Some communities would have difficulty finding even the five people to participate in the Hevra Kaddisha committee which this congregation requires. Furthermore, this guide’s details involve complicated preparations and extensive Hebraic knowledge which demand a particularly qualified Hevra member. The prevalence of and attention to details in this manual conforms to the observant nature of an Orthodox congregation, which defines itself in part by following Jewish laws strictly. The practices in this manual vary little from those of Hevrás 100 years ago, because Orthodox Jews consider the law to be stable and less open to the interpretations encouraged by Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist congregations.

The second guide I will discuss is a product of tradition and community of a different Jewish social grouping. Its creation, however, like the Orthodox guide’s, was a response to the decreasing emphasis on these rituals of late. The guide’s author, Claire Holzsweig, is the third generation of women from her family to serve on a
Hevra Kaddisha,72 and the first to find the creation of a guide necessary. To write the guide, she examined a detailed set of instructions by "the rabbi from an ultra-orthodox congregation" near her own. The Orthodox guide, like others of its type, calls for the composition of the Hevra Kaddisha to be of pious, "Sabbath observers," who are "conversant with the laws and customs" that bear on their position as members.73 Holzsweig found that the only person in her congregation who fit this description was her rabbi. The author discovered other differences between the Orthodox rabbi's instructions and the practices of her congregation. For example, within her Hevra a yearly fast was not observed, immediate post-death care responsibilities were not proscribed, the tahara was less detailed, and limited post-preparation viewing of the body was allowed.

Instead of being concerned about strict adherence to ancient laws, Holzsweig decided to rely more upon the traditions from her own community which she learned from her mother, grandmother, and other Hevra women. The traditions which she includes set this guide apart from those of other groups. For example, after washing and


purifying the body, this guide calls for the white of an egg to be touched to various parts of the body. This custom is acknowledged by Isserles as representing the wheel of fortune and added to the writings of Caro (see Chapter 2). It is also occasionally mentioned by modern guides in a variety of forms but not with the care and centrality of Holzweig's guide. Another tradition selected and preserved by this guide is the call for "Y" shaped twigs to be placed in the hands of the deceased. I found this practice referenced only in the twentieth century version of the Shulhan Aruk, which claims this is a "foolish custom" and suggests that it attempts to symbolize "holy names," (i.e., the "Y" shaped twig as the first letter of Yahweh, the name of God in Hebrew scripture).

---

74 Claire Holzweig, "Burial Guide," TD, Congregation Gomley Chesed, Portsmouth, VA, p. 1. While other guides may share this tradition, the mixture varies with some mixing the egg with wine or water, and by instructing only the forehead, or parts of the head to be touched instead of the multiple body parts assigned in this guide.

75 Caro and Isserles, chpt. 352, #4. The custom is added by the Ashkenazic Isserles. See also Ganzfried, chpt. 197, #4.

76 The custom called for in Rubenstein, 6; Mechanic, 24; and is mentioned in Lamm, 245; Mescheloff, 30


78 Ganzfried, chpt. 197, #5. See also Trachtenberg for a discussion of Jewish belief in demons and methods used to repel them.
Holzsweig’s guide preserves traditions which have special meanings for her congregation as legacies from past congregational practice. The thrust of her guide, therefore, is "conservative" rather than "creative," albeit a selective or even creative conservation of the past. Such adherence to tradition befits her congregation’s affiliation with the Conservative Movement as members of United Synagogue of America. In departing from many required details which the Orthodox guide prescribes, Holzsweig’s guide speaks more to the particular interests, values, and traditions of her own Conservative congregation. Furthermore, the dependence of her guide on practices and traditions handed down by women captures the more women-centered legacy and involvement in this congregation. Her choice to preserve the egg-white and twig rituals, even though they are not a primary aspect of Jewish law and have at times been ridiculed, attests to the different values and organization of her community. Tradition and familiar practice as passed from person-to-person shape this community more than does an adherence to writings and laws that were established centuries ago. Details and debates over interpretation interest her and her group less than the influence of relationships, especially those among women, mothers, daughters, and grandmothers. Holzsweig’s approach and assumption are that religious rituals must speak to their audience if the religion is to have meaning
for those in the community. Both she and the Orthodox community continue the Jewish impulse and need to re-code, clarify and reclaim Judaism, but each does so from the assumptions of a different social grouping of Jews.

The third guide is from the Sinai Memorial Chapel of San Francisco—a Jewish mortuary serving Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Jews from all over the California Bay area. The guide is brief yet includes detailed elements related to burial laws, and it also addresses practical problems other guides do not such as autopsy, AIDS, and accidental non-requested embalming.79 The significant difference between this guide and the others I have examined is the absence of prescribed or suggested prayers or other forms of traditional utterance.80 The

---

79 Embalming is not allowed in Conservative and Orthodox Judaism and is an unnecessary procedure on many levels. Embalming replaces the body's fluids with chemicals which harm the environment (see Warren E. Leary, "Not Even Death Ends Anti-Pollution Crusade," New York Times, 27 Aug. 1991, natl. ed.: B8). If the funeral is delayed, the body is easily preserved by refrigeration. There are even methods of preservation if the body must be transported a far distance. Embalming is also expensive. Though the embalming fluids cost about $2.00 per fifty pounds of body weight, mortuaries have been known to charge a flat rate of as much as $60.00 per body (from the Continental Association of Funeral and Memorial Societies, et al., "Casket Wholesale Prices," TD).

80 For example, it is common for the words "she/he is pure" to be said as the tahara is performed. The name of the deceased is usually invoked at some point as well, and Hevra members often ask the deceased for forgiveness, in case they inadvertently mishandle the body. None of these elements are included in the mortuary guide. I do not mean to imply in any discussion of mortuaries, however, that the
mortuary indeed does perform the requisite washing, purifying, and dressing of the deceased that conform to Jewish law, but communal participation from a Jewish congregation is missing. Prayers and utterances during the ritual are not provided because members of the deceased’s immediate Jewish community are not present or involved, making absent the necessity for communal bonding and support which prayer can provide. And while there is communal and personal comfort in knowing that the deceased is cared for by fellow Jews, there is not the added comfort of the deceased being cared for, without the impetus of money, by a friend of the mourning family or deceased who would come from the congregation. The burial ritual is less communal and interpersonal and less of a collective event for the Jewish community when handled as a professionalized service.  

Sinai’s attempt to serve all Jews of all affiliations creates predictable problems. Since embalming, cremation, and non-Orthodox caskets are available to those who want them, portions of the Orthodox community feel that the mere institutions are at fault for the disintegration of burial practices, for their existence is merely a response to societal request.

At Sinai Memorial Chapel it is common for one person to perform the burial rituals alone, and there is no significant diversity in attendants. It is conceivable that, if the many congregations associated with Sinai sent representatives, the communal and generational aspects of burial customs could find new life from within the mortuary system.
offering of such practices and services precludes the possibility of proper Orthodox preparation within such a mortuary.\textsuperscript{82} Some Jews are offended by Sinai’s business appearance, by the trend toward extinction of the Hevra Kaddisha as a function of individual congregations, and by the perceived disregard for the "proper needs" of Judaism.\textsuperscript{83} However, like the traditional purpose of the Hevra Kaddisha, Sinai Chapel is a philanthropic organization which contributes a large sum of money every year to Jewish community events and provides free burials for the poor. Even though some positions are paid, such as those of the Executive Director, Funeral Director, and other chapel staff, others, such as the Hevra members, are paid a "nominal amount" or volunteer their services. Because the Board of Directors is unpaid and elected from various Jewish affiliations, Sinai considers itself owned by the community.\textsuperscript{84}

Sinai Chapel is in the difficult position of offering to serve a variety of interpretations of Jewish law, to satisfy a range of appropriations of Jewish tradition, and to provide a host of services which meet the demands of


\textsuperscript{83}Gluck, 1, 33.  

\textsuperscript{84}Funeral Director Lowell Hanks, conversations with the author, July 1991, San Francisco. See also Gluck, 33.
mainstream society. It does not, for example, presume to judge a funeral non-Jewish if cremation is requested. Orthodox Jews, of course, take serious issue with this "violation" of Jewish law. Because Sinai has "the support of rabbis as well as the Board of Rabbis" in its geographical area they assert they "have nothing to be ashamed of" concerning their policies, practices, and missions. As their services are widely used in their region, there is in fact a greater chance that Reform Jews, who are least exposed to and taught about burial rituals in their congregations, will utilize the Hevra Kadisha preparation made available by Sinai, and not by other Jewish and non-Jewish mortuaries.

One can see in these burial guide examples the updating, reclaiming, and clarification of Jewish burial practices that has been done by Jewish scholars and communities throughout the ages and by the present-day social groupings of Jews represented by the guides discussed in this chapter. While the Orthodox guide seeks to preserve, adhere to and organize itself around a recognized period of Jewish law, Holzsweig's guide seeks to preserve and update the interpersonal traditions and practices that have maintained and enriched her Conservative community, and Sinai seeks to preserve and

As quoted in Gluck, 1.
adapt traditional Jewish burial practices for an urbanized, professionalized and diverse Jewish population. Sinai's Hevra Kaddisha may seem to be an abrupt shift from the congregation-based committees of many Jewish communities, but it does indeed reflect the effort to keep and make Judaism applicable, relevant and meaningful for a Jewish population with a distinctive sociological character. Sinai, the professional organization, emulates the diverse community it serves as the Jews of the San Francisco Bay Area are largely a professional group. It seems to serve people who are involved in highly specialized, urbanized communities who may be less likely to afford the time for intense non-professional communal activities like burial customs; because Sinai is more likely to encounter diversity of religious beliefs among the correspondingly large diversity of the urban Jewish population, its services must be multifarious to satisfy a more professional, commercial, diverse population.
CHAPTER 4

ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE MODERN HEVRA KADISHA

Anthropological studies of any Hevra Kaddisha's work are scarce. The most informative article written on the subject reveals little about the preparation of the deceased and feelings of Hevra members. It is less participant-observation of the Hevra's actions and more a selective survey of the reactions of mourners. The Hevra Kaddisha discussed in this piece is in Jerusalem. The author describes: 1) the Hevra's affiliation, which is Orthodox and primarily Ashkenazic, yet serves "religious and secular Jews" alike, 2) their dress, which inspires common insults like "vulture" directed toward them, and

---


87An anthropological method of combining the "personal and the professional" in order to analyze by "observing the observer--observing yourself--as well, and bringing the personal issues into consciousness" (Mary Catherine Bateson, With a Daughter's Eye: A Memoir of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), 161).

88Abramovitch, 127.

89Abramovitch, 131.
3) the languages used within the Hevra, being officially Hebrew but practically Yiddish.\textsuperscript{90} The essay does address rituals of the funeral,\textsuperscript{91} offering partial histories and origins for these customs and reactions to them from the secular community. These rituals include magical ceremonies which keep demons away, dances to honor the dead of certain social positions, and the placement of small stones on a grave.

Abramovitch acknowledges that, though the Hevra abides by the "burial custom of Jerusalem," practices vary according to perceptions of Jerusalem law. But he does not specify, by referencing various interpretations of other burial societies for example, what those variations might be. Precise descriptions of the Hevra's work are minimal. Details of the Hevra's actual functions in preparing the deceased are confined to one of the author's shortest paragraphs with the unelaborated claim that the deceased is internally and externally purified, that dirt is put on the eyes, and that the body is "dressed in plain white garments, [and] covered with a winding sheet."\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{90}Abramovitch, 127. Yiddish is a Germanic-based language which uses the Hebrew alphabet. Hebrew is the official language of Israel.

\textsuperscript{91}Abramovitch, 128-130.

\textsuperscript{92}Abramovitch, 128.
Abramovitch's personal biases undermine his critiques of the practices of the Jerusalem burial society. He claims that "the handling of the corpse in practice does not always attain the ideal of reverence" which Heyra work is supposed to embody, but his opinion offers no criteria for evaluating or judging reverence.\(^93\) He continues:

perhaps the most astonishing thing is the simple fact of the corpse wrapped in shrouds lying on a stretcher. I know for myself, coming from a North American background, it was the stark confrontation with the shrouded corpse which was the most striking and disturbing aspect of the funeral.\(^94\)

His shock is not unlike that of many Jews who believe they understand what "proper" Jewish practice is, only to find another congregation of Jews with radically different practices. In Abramovitch's case, a basic review of Jewish burial practices and history would have shown that not using a coffin honors the dead, and does not mistreat it as he believes.\(^95\) The use of the "winding sheet," or sovey,  

\(^93\) Abramovitch, 130.

\(^94\) Abramovitch, 130.

\(^95\) Burial directly in the ground, which is the practice in Israel, is often considered preferable to burial in a coffin. There is the related custom in the United States of placing Israeli dirt on the body, inside the casket. The choice of "proper" places to sprinkle the dirt is as varied as the number of burial groups in existence. Frequently the earth is placed about the head, however, which may relate to the practice of Biblical figures who put dirt on their heads at times when death seemed imminent (see Josh. 7:6 and Job 2:12). The importance of earth in both customs is supported by Biblical references, such as Genesis 3:19, "And to dust you shall return." Caro and Isserles (chpt. 362, #1, footnote 5) reinforce the
instead of a coffin conforms to the Jewish belief that the sooner the body contacts earth the better, as earth atones for human sin. 96 It is Abramovitch's "North American background" and assimilation into its culture which makes him feel uncomfortable, as the presumption to use a coffin is not based in Judaism.

Other more prevalent writings which could be considered anthropological come from popular religious magazines and newspapers. The authors are usually women and they present personal experiences of having created and participated in Hevrás. They typically recommend that readers create, join, or use similar groups. 97 In only three of these articles are there details and brief explanations of how the deceased is prepared. 98 All of the historical preference for direct contact with the earth (as does H. Dobrinsky, A Treasury of Sephardic Laws and Customs, (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1986), 72). See also Ganzfried, chpt. 199, #1-2; other portions of Caro and Isserles, chpt 362; and Schauss, 224, 242, on the Jewish belief that only the process of ground burial leads to atonement.

96 Deuteronomy 32:43 is used to support this claim in the line linking the land with the expiation of people (as quoted by Ganzfried, chpt. 199, #2).


98 Berman; Goodstein; Kaplan.
articles focus on the positive feelings of Hevra participants and can be summarized under three categories: mitzvah, personal enrichment, and communal development.

1) Mitzvah

Participating in a burial group is considered the greatest good deed, or mitzvah, a person can do because there are no thanks received in return. It is also the greatest good deed because it is one of the hardest to do. Members of societies usually comment that Hevra work "is a very difficult mitzvah" which they are drawn to out of "a sense of obligation" because there are few other volunteers to carry out the laws Hevra work accomplishes.99

2) Personal Enrichment

Despite the difficulty of the task, involvement in a Hevra offers many personal benefits. "We all want to say no" when called upon, says one woman, "but every time I [agree to] do it, I feel glad I did."100 The rewards are identified as reaching newfound personal understandings of death and of the self, and as discovering the ability of an individual to influence positively others. "The Chevra has ... made me more socially adept at handling the uncomfortable situation" of interacting with a mourner, says a member who, before Hevra involvement, could not even

99 Goodstein, 33.
100 Goodstein, 33.
help her child cope with the death of a pet. One woman claimed the Hevra experience was uplifting and comforting for the women in her group, particularly when faced with the difficult death of a young girl. Others claim that they gain "an incomparable feeling of fulfillment and a greater love of life" and the sense that "you really feel like you've done good work."

3) Communal Development

For some writers, creating a burial society was equivalent to creating a basic Jewish community. When one small group of Jews started a Hevra, they needed both to study Jewish history and law and to explore the needs and desires of the people around them. "It has been this thinking about death as Jews that has obliged us to connect ourselves, more tangibly, to life as Jews," writes a woman

\[101\] Ochs, 45.

\[102\] Berman, 63.

\[103\] Daniel A. Ornstein, "Deeds of True Lovingkindness" (sic), Women's League Outlook, Fall 1991: 21.

\[104\] Goodstein, 36.

\[105\] Joshua Rothenberg writes of the counter-phenomena, where the destruction of burial groups has been used in an attempt to dissolve Jewish communities [The Jewish Religion in the Soviet Union, (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1971)]. Rothenberg explains that the Jewish cemetery was one of very few places Jews were legally allowed to congregate in the anti-Semitic Soviet Union. The systematic elimination of Jewish cemeteries and the harassment of Hevra members were both methods of forcing Judaism into obscurity.
from a community without a temple or a rabbi to join them. Other Hevra members from various Jewish backgrounds have commented that the experience "makes you understand how tied we are to one another" in the largest sense.

While the Hevra can encourage closeness within the Jewish community, it is also creates more specialized support for and among Jewish women. In a religion where complaints of hierarchical formations discouraging equality and women's space are frequent, Hevras offer women the opportunity and practice of independent control of a ritual. A woman from a New York congregation writes:

Sharing this awesome experience created a special bond between us [the Hevra members]--an undeniable sense of sisterhood . . . I feel that by participating in the egalitarian customs and ceremonies of burying the dead, I am affirming my own philosophy of life.

A California woman finds the tahara (purification ritual) to be "the ultimate feminist ritual" with such power that, she says, "every time I do tahara, I am transformed."

My experiences and interviews with Hevra work and members from the past ten years confirm the overriding themes from these magazine and newspaper articles. This

---

106 Ochs, 45.
107 As quoted in Goodstein, 36.
108 Berman, 63.
109 Goodstein, 33.
work has been centered in my family’s congregation in
Spokane, Washington, and in a congregation in Middletown,
Connecticut. As a composite of my participation and
observations, I offer the following narrative:

"The phone will always ring at an odd hour—a little
earlier or later in the day than anyone meaning to make
conversation will call. As you feared, it is Lois, the
head of the burial society. ‘Helen Shwartz, you know she’s
been in the nursing home with that bad lung, well . . . she
passed away last night. Can you help out tomorrow morning
at nine?’ Of course you say yes. You knew Helen for
twenty years; she made cookies for your son’s bar mitzvah.
And after all, if you don’t help, nobody else will. Lois
apologizes for calling.

"The funeral director greets you with his practiced
face of sympathy and escorts you to the usual room where
the other burial group members are re-acquainting
themselves with the supplies: three buckets, scissors,
talcum powder, comb, nail stick, soap, nail brush, burial
group guidebook, towels, candles, Israeli dirt, one boxed
set of new clothes for Helen, and a plain coffin. For the
three members there are white coats and disposable rubber
gloves. In the preparation room there are two sinks: one
large basin, into which will drain the water used to wash
the body, and a smaller sink for filling buckets and for
washing your hands. There are cabinets along the wall with hair dye and embalming fluids for those whom the morticians prepare. The body is on the white, adjustable table covered by a white sheet.

"The three of you gather around the table. Someone lights a candle and closes the doors to the small room. After sliding the sheet to one side, you remove the hospital shirt and identification tags and place them in the garbage can. You feel how cold the body is, through your gloves, and think of the large refrigerator where the bodies stay. The sheet is used to keep the genitals covered. Everyone asks the deceased for forgiveness, in case they should transgress their duties in any way. With a wet cloth and some soap you wash the entire body and, without speaking, everyone knows when it is time to turn it. Two of you hug the body toward you, so it is on its side, and the other quickly washes the back. You are amazed as always that such a small body can weigh so much, as you gently rest it face-up again and return the head to the beige rubber headrest. The nails are cleaned. You check the neck for a plastic plug which would indicate a mistaken embalming, and luckily there is no such evidence. There is a bruise on the left side of the head and you notice a little blood beginning to flow from the ear. With some cotton you quickly plug the ear, whispering 'a little blood' to the other members in warning.
"The three buckets are filled with twenty-four quarts of water. One of the members begins pouring water over the head of the body, gradually moving toward the feet. So as not to break the continuous flow, you begin pouring from the second bucket at the head before the first bucket is empty. Everyone recites "she is pure" in Hebrew and in English as the buckets are emptied and the water washes down the table and into the basin. With towels you dry the body and table. Another combs the hair while you sprinkle talcum powder, which will ease the difficulty of dressing the body.

"The first item out of the box of white clothes is a pair of drawstring, footed pants which, after a great deal of struggling, are fitted on the body. The plain, short shirt is manipulated over the head, as if one were dressing an unhelpful child, and then tucked into the pants. Then the large long-sleeved, collared shirt is put on with even greater difficulty. Fabric strips are tied around the knees, and one around the waist. The head is covered.

"Opening the doors, you wheel the coffin into the adjacent room and place it next to the table. The three of you, with some effort, move the now-dressed body into the coffin and sprinkle Israeli dirt on the eyes. The coffin lid is closed, you remove your gloves, wash your hands, and leave the funeral home. The funeral will take place the same day."
A Hevra will usually have a male and female head who are notified when a death occurs and who are responsible for gathering the rest of the Hevra members for the preparation. In most of my experiences with Hevras, the primacy of this position ends once all members have gathered. Most participants will have worked together before and will be familiar with the entire task and participate in all of the duties.\textsuperscript{110} It is when a Hevra member of a different social position or level of knowledge is present that the egalitarian dynamics of the group usually change.

The first Hevra I was part of had from its beginning created egalitarian working relationships. When it was joined on one occasion, however, by the wife of the congregation’s rabbi the dynamics of the group changed. This woman was fluent in the Hebrew language, and by reciting many prayers which the Hevra did not usually include (she used a different guide than the one written for our Hevra by a congregation member) she became the leader of the group. She had to direct the other members to begin each procedure since the Hebrew prayers she inserted to begin the various tasks were not understood.

\textsuperscript{110}Historically, elder members of the Hevra were given as a privilege certain specific tasks, while young or apprentice members may have only watched or helped with physical duties like the lifting of the body.
signals. Though she asked if others would like to read, and so offered to share in the authority, she felt compelled to repeat in Hebrew any prayers or utterances which the other members recited in English. Furthermore, prayers had not been a central or meaningful part of our Hevra's rituals. Members also felt that if the Hevra performed as usual, the rabbi would be told that it was not performing the rituals correctly and the Hevra would be forced to change.

When I joined another Hevra years later, I was briefed on the practices of the new group and asked about variations from my previous Hevra experiences. Their traditions were similar enough to my experience that fitting in and sustaining an egalitarian atmosphere was easy. In later conversations with my fellow participants, I mentioned my research of Jewish burial customs. Thereafter, members often looked to me as an authority when disputes or questions arose concerning the preparation and gave up on their usual communal consensus methods of decision-making and task-sharing.

Though a member with a certain knowledge or position can have the effect of changing the interpersonal dynamics of the Hevra, normal communication appears to be egalitarian. This is a product of repeating group interactions, and of becoming accustomed to which rituals are of particular importance to certain members and which
individuals have particular abilities. An intuitive and intentional cooperation seems to be the hallmark of the Hevra in performing familiar, repeated tasks and encountering unusual problems. It also seems that in Hevrae where members take time to discuss the preparations after they are finished, problems that have arisen calling for new ways to anticipate and solve can be dealt with by consensus. I have found that such self-critical evaluation and discussion minimize the emergence of authoritarian roles because knowledge and concerns are shared and do not become the protected and specialized province of individuals.
CHAPTER 5
ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

Basic to the evaluation and preservation of Jewish burial practices are the values put forth by Rabban Gamaliel: equality of class and gender, respect for the entire life cycle, and the dignity of simplicity in lifestyle. Gamaliel caused radical alterations in the wealth-privileged and stratified burial rituals of his society. Parallels between Gamaliel's society and our own are apparent. Many Jews in the United States have assumed the burial practices of extravagant clothing, coffin, and presentation from mainstream culture. Death itself is avoided and feared instead of embraced and dealt with as an important portion of the life cycle. The avoidance is marked by the refusal of personal involvement in burial activities and the now standard options for embalming and otherwise altering the dead to achieve a life-like appearance. Gamaliel's vision needs to be reclaimed as more than an historical footnote, and emulated in a time when Jews have become removed from the burial process and the opportunities it offers for learning about life and for bringing people together in meaningful community activity.
Fortunately, there has not been a complete abandonment of traditional practices, and attempts to recapture them in a fittingly modern fashion do exist. The emergence of some community-centered burial groups writing their own guides for corpse care and preparation can be recognized as a positive move toward a reclaiming of burial group work and purpose. But these efforts are few, scattered, and have not been utilized by congregations to reformulate the way young generations are taught about death.

The Victorian Age still holds control over Western concepts of death, which enmesh assimilated Jews. Like Jewish mourning customs, the Victorians created a time line for mourning which included a dress code and restrictions upon the social lives of mourners. In both cases mourning customs provided time and opportunity for psychological healing after a great loss. The focus of Victorian burial customs, however, was a denial of death. In elaborate attempts to preserve the deceased in a life-like state, the Victorians dealt with their loss by denying the

111 Such practices include multiple casket liners, elaborate and "strong" caskets, and embalming to attempt an actual delay in decomposition. The Victorians also kept the deceased alive by making tokens, commonly involving pictures and the hair (woven into bracelets and pins) of the deceased. It was the Victorians who also changed representative images of death from the skull-and-crossbones sort to purely sentimental images of willow trees, flowers, and sad women, and who built cemeteries on a scale of small cities and the mortuary business as an indispensable institution.
finality of death. While Judaism has burial practices reflecting a belief in an afterlife, the focus of Jewish burial customs is still the differentiation between life as we know it and the acceptance of death as something unknowable. Though the mourning customs of the Victorians have long been abandoned, their burial customs remain firmly in place. These burial customs are not merely Victorian relics, but have become American customs, and as such they have played a key role in the assimilation of American Jews. All but the Hassidic in Judaism are, in one way or another, primarily influenced by Victorian concepts of death which deny the all-important Jewish precepts of differentiation and acceptance.

These precepts and their attendant social and religious value for Jews may be reclaimed by using available Jewish organizations to educate both young and old generations. The Conservative, Reform, Humanistic, and Reconstructionist Movements all have their established methods of educational involvement. The topic of Jewish burial customs can be given priority within each movement's educational campaigns and for all levels of education.  

112 When these organizations were asked for information, referral to Maurice Lamm's book, which I have discussed in the previous chapter, was usually the answer. The United Synagogue of America includes in its "Code of Personnel Practices for Educators" (from "United Synagogue of America: 1988-89 Yearbook Directory and Buyers' Guide," TD, p. 112f) a guide for Hevra Kaddisha that is skeletal and does not go beyond ordering the basic procedures to a
Also, such national organizations as Hadassah\textsuperscript{113} and United Synagogue Youth\textsuperscript{114} could incorporate a review of burial customs into their conferences and other educational campaigns. Religious youth schools could likewise build discussions of death and burial into curricula. In none of the educational programs of these agencies and institutions are the values and various meanings of the other life cycle events—birth, circumcision, puberty, and marriage—neglected. Death must be reinserted to round out and complete lessons of Jewish heritage and of the full cycle of life. As Bishop John Baker says, death "sharpen[es] one's priorities as very few other stimuli can."\textsuperscript{115} Our new priorities will affect other parts of our lives, and help us to find the important values burial customs instill in other rituals, like birth and marriage.

Another opportunity for the deeper understanding and more meaningful practice of burial rituals may be realized in the recent efforts of Jewish feminists. Because there has not been a positive emphasis on women's ritual events

description of the acts or an explanation of the meanings and intents behind the rituals.

\textsuperscript{113} International Zionist women's organization.

\textsuperscript{114} Jewish youth group affiliated with the Conservative Movement's United Synagogue of America.

in Judaism, the Hevra offers a concrete ritual space for the self-construction and affirmation of women’s roles. Preparation for burial requires only that the body be washed, purified and dressed with care and respect. It does not involve any mandatory invocations, so there is latitude and opportunity for making and using humanistic or gynocentric rituals and prayers. As theologian Judith Plaskow asserts, "in the ritual moment, women’s history is made present." As an important, yet previously ignored ritual opportunity, the Hevra Kaddisha is a constructive and creative place for changing and reclaiming Judaism.

In the spirit of furthering the reclamation of Jewish burial rituals, for both men’s and women’s Hevras, I offer the following guide for the creation of and involvement in a Hevra:

Members of a Hevra must communicate and evaluate their involvement on an ongoing basis if their experience is to be meaningful and satisfying. If a group has a regular practice of meeting and talking, then a member can readily discuss concerns or questions with the group. When, for

---


example, a member feels uncomfortable with the types or existence of prayers being said during the preparation, the topic can be more easily approached and the group can discuss it and work toward a compromise. Regular meetings prevent feelings of exclusion and the postponement of dealing with personal issues and problems. I take this provision for ongoing criticism, evaluation, and refinement of Hevra practices from the tradition in Jewish history of updating and adapting burial customs to the times while preserving original purpose and value.

The Hevra should work in a private area, so that it will not be disturbed during the preparation. This preserves respect for the deceased and protects the independence of the Hevra. It also realizes the potential of the "ritual moment," as put forward by Plaskow, to make history—to be Jewish in the here and now with the understanding that one is doing what has always been done, but in a new form. It is a protected moment in which the traditions handed down are preserved, as Claire Holzweig has shown, and new prayers and utterances can be created, as modern feminists are finding.

1) Washing the Body

The purpose of this action is to remove dirt. Since most people die in hospitals today, the bodies are usually

---

118See Chapter 3.
clean. Still, there are instances where a cleansing is needed: marks used to guide doctors in surgery or cardiac resuscitation, dirt under the fingernails, nail polish and make-up are a few sample cases. The washing time also allows members to inspect the body for bleeding\textsuperscript{119} or accidental embalming. This process requiring detailed contact with the deceased emphasizes the intuitive cooperation of members. In the sharing and completing of this difficult task, verbal communication is outlawed by authorities with the explanation that discussion is disrespectful to the deceased. Even without the prohibition, however, verbal communication seems awkward at the beginning of a ritual where individuals are continually considering the ramifications of the acts they perform and of the death before them, and unnecessary in a situation with little technical difficulty. In a look, or less, members understand what is felt or needed by other members.

2) \textit{Tahara}

Either twenty-four quarts\textsuperscript{120} of water or a \textit{mikva} is

\textsuperscript{119}Excessive blood and/or tragic death may call for an alternative preparation where washing and purifying are not done and the body is wrapped only in a sheet. Ganzfried, chpt. 197 may be consulted for a description of ancient practices in such cases. The major concern addressed in alternative preparation is the loss of "lifeblood," being the portion of a person's blood which contains life and should be kept with the body.

\textsuperscript{120}Derived from ancient sources, calls for nine kabim (an ancient measurement) of water. See Ganzfried, chpt. 197, #3.
used to purify the body, the object being to immerse the body in water. The methods a Hevra uses will depend upon available facilities, such as a mikva or mechanically tilting tahara board, and upon interpretations of a proper purification ritual.\(^{121}\) Usually the twenty-four quarts are put into two or three buckets and poured without interruption from the head to the feet.

3) Dressing the Body

The dressing of the deceased is the most technically difficult procedure because the body must be continually manipulated, and this demands attentiveness of members. After the body is dried, it must be dressed in the tahrihim. Presuming the standardized kits available in the United States are used, there will be pants and two shirts to put on the body, just as a living person would wear them. The second, larger shirt is a kittel so if the person wore a kittel in life it should be substituted. Concerning head coverings and veils, the men’s and women’s Hevras should talk together about how they dress the deceased, because different materials are provided in the men’s and women’s packages. Historically, both men and

\(^{121}\)Groups without a special mikva for the dead sometimes attempt complete immersion by raising the body off the tahara table, with metal or wooden supports, so water may flow underneath the body. Some groups are very particular that the body be in a standing position for the tahara. Each Hevra should set its priorities, because when the ritual becomes excessively complicated or simplistic it will cease to satisfy the participants.
women have worn bonnets and *yarmulkes* to cover their heads, and both sexes were buried with their faces veiled.\textsuperscript{122} If it is important to one or both *Hevras* that both sexes be dressed the same, then both the men's and women's groups can use the kits of just one sex, or make other compromises. Likewise, in communities that emphasize egalitarianism, both men and women should be buried in prayer shawls. The reigning principle of burial practices which I have found to be consistent in my examination of ancient texts, Jewish history, contemporary burial guides, and participant-observation of *Hevras* is that of dignity in simplicity. This principle is perhaps most clearly recognized and embodied in the use of uniform clothing in a plain, inexpensive fabric, simply sewn and produced. Feminist principles of sexual equality combine easily with this principle and underscore the equal treatment of clothing the deceased of both sexes.

Another problematic aspect of burial dress concerns the ties: one long sash tied around the waist, over the *kittel*; two ties for around the ankles or knees; the

\textsuperscript{122}The origin of veiling indicated by "Mo'ed Katan," 27a, was a response to disfigurement. The faces of the poor, "because their faces turned livid in years of drought," were being veiled. With easier lives the rich would not have been disfigured with the same frequency, but Gamaliel addressed this inequality by calling for the faces of rich and poor to be covered. Sperling, 292, similarly claims the practice is performed out of honor, so that the "ravages of death" are not seen by the living.
strings at the shirt necks; and the drawstring of the pants. No knot is supposed to be tied in any part of the tahrihim—even in the sewing.¹²³ Most guides list elaborate instructions for twisting the strings and then making a series of slipknots which usually represent Hebrew letters, but many burial groups have never executed these instructions because they are intricate and difficult for some people to follow, or because their religious meaning is unclear, or unacceptable.¹²⁴ Whenever I am part of a preparation, I make the slipknots because I like the feel of the ritual of tying, and the knots dress-up the tahrihim without making it look excessively ornate. Sometimes I do this by myself, and other times I am joined by another who likes the ritual as well, or wants to learn it from me. The importance of deciding what rituals to perform should

¹²³ From A.P. Bender come the explanations that the absence is a "token that the mind of the dead is disentangled of the cares of this life," or that it was an "expression of a wish that the bones of the dead may be speedily dissolved into their primitive dust" (Bender, "Beliefs, Rites, and Customs of the Jews Connected with Death, Burial, and Mourning," Jewish Quarterly Review 7 (1894-1895): 261). Another author explains the ban on knots, hems, and pockets as "a reminder that man takes no material wealth with him into his grave" (Rubenstein, 9). The knee/ankle ties are reminiscent of priestly dress when the pants were not closed at the bottom. Tying each leg closed prevented embarrassing exposure of the priests when they stood before their congregations.

¹²⁴ This ritual probably originated in ancient attempts to keep spirits away by invoking God's presence (see Trachtenberg on methods to repel demons). The shape of the tie, and/or the method of tying, is indicated by most guides as representative of God.
be guided by pleasure, contentment or cooperation that a member or members feel in performing the task.

Because the washing, purifying, and dressing of the deceased are the three mandatory divisions of the Hevra preparation, a variety of existing Hevra traditions may be selected as supplements. The placement of dirt, an egg mixture, sticks, or pottery shards with the body are common. 125 Some Jews perform a simulated execution ceremony on the body to relieve the deceased’s spirit of any punishment due in the afterlife. 126 Hevras should feel free to create their own rituals, or to redefine existing ones such as those abovementioned. Prayers said at any point during the preparation may be taken from Hevra guides already written, or from passages in modern or ancient texts, or may be created anew by members.

125 Pottery shards may represent the destruction of the Second Temple (as does the breaking of a glass or piece of pottery at a wedding). It may also relate to the ancient customs of pouring out water when someone dies, and the potential for containers to become impure when in the presence of death. Obviously, it could be a relic of days when eyelids were not sewn shut and the shards would have kept the eyes of the dead from opening (and having mystical implications). Finally the pottery, being made of the earth, may be related to the practice of sprinkling dirt on the face of the deceased. I have addressed the other traditions in previous chapters.

126 This comes from Moroccan Jews and includes death by stoning (a few stones are put on the chest); by fire (some nail on the hand or foot is burned); by strangulation (a scarf around the neck is pulled in opposite directions); and by sword (the body is dragged on the tahara board, or a reed is placed on the stomach). From Dobrinsky, 79f.
As with any contagious disease, if a person dies of AIDS they will usually be sent to the mortuary in a plastic body bag, and the cause of death will be known to the mortuary. Some Hevras treat the death as they would a tragic, bloody death, skipping the washing and purification procedures and dressing the body by wrapping it in a large white sheet. If there is no evidence of sores or bleeding, however, Hevra members should feel safe performing the normal preparations (excluding any internal cleansing), especially if rubber gloves are worn. Members may wish to let the body airdry after the tahara if they are uncomfortable with frequent contact.

As previously discussed, Judaism preferences noncremation and unelaborated caskets. The traditionally styled casket is plain and without nails, and even within this limitation there are several stylistic choices still to be made. The cost of a coffin will be between $500 and $4,000 or more, but this still represents the lower end of the price spectrum. Hevras also should investigate

---

127 The Hevra should find out what the procedures of the mortuary used are for such cases, so that the Hevra will be informed of any pertinent information.

128 "Casket Wholesale Prices" lists one "Orthodox" pine casket with a wholesale cost of $195 which sold for $254-$1,365. This is from the second least expensive category of caskets out of five. The other listed, made of oak, had a wholesale cost of $571 and a retail cost between $800 and $3,712. This is from the second most expensive category. Information is from 1989, however, and these prices are likely to have increased significantly.
state laws concerning coffins and, if none is required, make this fact known to the community so the use of a coffin may be altogether avoided when acceptable to mourners.

Finally, I recommend that where Hevrás are present a yearly meeting of the men and women involved be initiated. Bringing the two groups together encourages the egalitarian and communal functions which are the hallmarks of burial practices. It has been when the two groups meet that I have witnessed the greatest gains in understanding how the Hevra Kaddisha functions in the Jewish community, outside the smaller arenas of the individual Hevra groups. Some part of this meeting could be educational, giving the men’s and women’s committees a chance to interact and share knowledge and questions with each other, and with the local rabbi, or perhaps with a visiting scholar or Hevra member from another community. Ancient Hevrás also were involved in a yearly fast and subsequently honored by their communities with a feast.129 Enlarging the yearly meeting

---

129 The feast usually corresponds with the anniversary of Moses’ death (the seventh of the month of Adar). The Precious Legacy: Judaic Treasures from the Czechoslovak State Collections, ed. David Altshuler (New York: Summit Books, 1983), 155ff, claims the feast tradition was taken from the model of Christian guild practice, as was the custom of using specially made Hevra glasses or plates at the occasion. (See this reference for more information on and pictures of burial society artifacts.) The call for an "annual public service" on the seventh of Adar, which seems to have taken the form of an educational address to the
to encompass the whole community also provides another educational opportunity. As a celebration for Hevra and nonHevra member alike, Jewish burial customs will become a fitting part of the life of Jews. That, after all, is the ultimate goal.

My suggestions here conform with two consistent themes in my research. The themes may be expressed as two principles, one of egalitarianism and simplicity, the other of recoding and re-claiming burial practices. I have found these 1) in ancient Jewish texts, most notably in the story of the burial of Abraham and Sarah, 2) in the history of Jews, especially as concerns Caro, Isserles and Gamaliel, when circumstances in Jewish life have necessitated a clarification of Jewish meaning and practice, 3) in the various burial guides of individual groups of Jews who attempt to define burial customs for their particular needs and communities, and 4) in the cooperative efforts and community building work of Hevra Kaddisha members whom I have observed and with whom I have participated. I offer my suggestions as part of that Jewish history which has sought to clarify, apply, and update burial practices for the understanding, benefit and meaningful exchange among Jews today.

Figure 1. Woman's white cotton bonnet with lace, from collection of the Judah L. Magnus Museum, Berkeley, California. Photograph by author.
Figure 2. Top. Woman's hair ornament with lace and satin ribbon. Bottom. Woman's white cotton double-layered garment is probably a collar. These two pieces are from a group of matching attire, which includes an ankle length apron-style garment. From the collection of the Judah L. Magnus Museum, Berkeley, California. Photograph by the author.
Figure 3. Woman's white cotton apron with lace. Part of an outfit which includes sheer cotton, lace-edged bonnet, scarf and face covering, and the dress shown in Figure 4. From the collection of the Judah L. Magnus Museum, Berkeley, California. Photograph by the author.
Figure 4. Woman’s burial dress of white cotton. Large white strips at either side lie over shoulders and have holes for arms. From the collection of the Judah L. Magnus Museum, Berkeley, California. Photograph by author.
GLOSSARY

Ashkenazim: Jews of the Middle East and India who migrated to Europe, and primarily to Germany.

Conservative Judaism: A response, in part, to disagreements within the Reform movement. Represented by the United Synagogue of America (U.S.A.), founded in 1913, and affiliated with the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Congregations who are members of U.S.A. are presumed to "observe Shabbat, the holidays, and kashrut" and be "halakhically oriented" ("United Synagogue of America: 1988-89 Yearbook Directory and Buyers' Guide," 13).

Hassidic: Judaism which emphasizes strict adherence to law. Originally formed as a counter-response to Jewish rabbinical traditions of interpretations.

Hevra: Also Hebra or Chevra. A society or group.

Hevra Kaddisha: Also Hebra/Hevra/Chevra Kadisha. Usually translated as "holy brotherhood" or "holy society." Jewish burial group.

Humanistic Judaism: A movement which emphasizes Jewish culture and identity, yet "rejects supernatural authority and affirms the right of individuals to be the masters of their own lives." (Humanistic Judaism, 16.1 (winter 1988), i.) The movement is relatively young and held its first world conference in Detroit in 1986.

Kehillah: A medieval governing body under which early forms of the burial society were controlled. See Chapter 2 for a discussion.

Kittel: One of the garments of priestly dress (see Chapter 2). A special shirt worn by some modern Jewish men during important Jewish holidays. Part of the burial dress outfit.

Mikva: Ritual bath for bodily purification.
Minyan: Ten Jews who must be present in order for some religious events to take place. These ten are symbolic of the congregation, and make the event a public one. Not all Jews count women eligible to be part of the minyan.

Orthodox Judaism: Strictly observant branch of Judaism which follows Biblical law as put forth in rabbinic traditions of interpretation (such as the Shulhan Aruk).

Reconstructionist Judaism: The "fourth Jewish movement," Reconstructionism attempts to honor the Jewish past by adopting Judaism to the needs of the present (Rebecca T. Alpert and Jacob J. Staub, Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach (Wyncote, PA: Reconstructionist Press, 1988), v.) This, the movement believes, is in keeping with Jewish history. Reconstructionism asks that members be active participants in Jewish education and life, leaving a rabbi a less authoritarian role. Reconstructionism is a relatively young movement, and its representative rabbinical college was founded in 1968.

Reform Judaism: Unlike Conservative and Orthodox Judaism, Reform Judaism does not demand or even expect strict compliance with Jewish law, but only ethical and spiritual compliance. Belief in a supreme being is still central, but laws, for instance those concerning the Sabbath or diet, are loosely interpreted. I am not aware of a Reform congregation which has its own burial society to ritually prepare the dead.

Sephardim: Jews of the Middle East and India who migrated to Spain and Portugal.

Shiva: Mourning period.

Sovev: Large sheet wrapped around the deceased as a cover for burial.

Tahara: Also Taharah. Purification. One of the major functions of the burial society is to perform tahara. See Chapter 1 for a discussion of purification.

Tahrihim: Also Tachrichim. Burial garments.

Yarmulke: A head covering.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Bender, A. P. "Beliefs, Rites, and Customs of the Jews Connected with Death, Burial, and Mourning." Jewish Quarterly Review. 7 (1894-1895): 101-118; 259-269.


Eisenstein, J. D. "Burial Society." Jewish Encyclopedia. 1902.


*Humanistic Judaism.* 16.1 (winter 1988), i.


Kober, Adolf. "Jewish Communities in Germany From the Age of Enlightenment to Their Destruction by the Nazis." *Jewish Social Studies.* New York: Conference on Jewish elations, July 1947. 9.3: 220+. 


UNPUBLISHED WORKS
all circa twentieth century

"Check List for Tahara." Addendum by Jacob Traub. TD. Sinai Memorial Chapel Chevra Kaddisha, San Francisco. Pp. 3.


