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The Establishment and Perpetuation of a Hevra Kaddisha in a Reform Congregation

Project Summary

By: Scott Edward Colbert, Cantor

This demonstration project is divided into five chapters and two appendices. It establishes the theological construct for including the traditional Jewish rituals for preparation of the dead in a Reform context. It shows the logic for establishing a Hevra Kaddisha in a particular Reform congregation. The project demonstrates how to establish a Hevra Kaddisha in a Reform congregation and then describes its success. The goal of the project was to document and describe the successful establishment and maintenance of a Hevra Kaddisha in a Reform congregation.

The five chapters include a description of the issue, the guiding and informing principles, the methodology to accomplish the goal of the project, the results and a discussion. Each of the chapters are subdivided and the two appendices included the various documents and rituals that were created to establish and sustain the Hevra Kaddisha at Temple Emanu-El.

Both primary and secondary sources were used in researching and writing this project. The thesis includes a partial verbatim account of one of the group experience sessions.

**The Establishment and Perpetuation of a
Hevra Kaddisha in a Reform Congregation**

Scott Edward Colbert, Cantor

**Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Doctor of Ministry Degree**

**Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Studies Program
New York, New York**

March 2001

Advisors: Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman and Lynne Jones, CSW

Dedication

Rabbi Salanter's Last Night

Rabbi Israel Salanter, renowned thinker and founder of the Mussar movement, died in a foreign country, away from his numerous admirers and disciples. Only a very plain and simple man, who took care of him when he was sick, was present when he passed away. Eager to learn what legacy of profound spiritual truths or philosophical ideas the great scholar had expounded in his last hours, the disciples rushed to question the attendant. "Tell us, what philosophical truths or metaphysical concepts did the master teach you in his last hours," they asked.

The simple man replied: "All evening he tried to convince me that I should not be afraid to be alone all night with the body of a dead man."

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord's*

To the love of my life, Karen, who gives me strength and courage, understanding and wisdom, and most of all, love.

And to my daughter Adeena, who brings light and grace into my world.

Atlanta, Georgia
March 2001

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Chapter One: Description of the Issue

Background: Temple Emanu-El is a twenty-two year old Reform Congregation in Atlanta, Georgia. Many of its founders were brought up in Conservative and Orthodox families with significant regard for and experience with Jewish tradition. Yet, upon moving to the suburbs, when founding a synagogue for themselves, they looked to the Reform movement for affiliation.

They established a synagogue that was ritually traditional and ideologically Reform. The founders who still remain the core of committed members observe eight days of Passover, two days of Shavuot, and nine days of Sukkot, Sh'mini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. Two days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur concluding with the sanctuary nearly filled for Ne'ilah (the concluding service), is part of the local custom. Early on, the by-laws of the congregation established a kashrut policy that forbade the eating of biblically prohibited foods and the mixing of milk and meat.

In the early days of the congregation, the members were very connected to each other. The Board of Trustees and the Congregation placed a membership cap on growth. They wanted to be small and in touch with each other. A membership cap of four hundred and fifty families was in place until 1993. Beginning in the autumn of 1993, the congregation removed the cap and began to grow. Over the next seven years the congregation nearly doubled in size. As a part of congregation of now eight hundred and fifty families, the original core of families feels out of touch with many of the newer members of the synagogue.

Creating various programs to integrate the new families into the fabric of synagogue life, the Membership Retention Committee of the congregation has implemented several new ideas. For example, a "buddy" program pairing new member family units with similar families who are active in the congregational family. Similarly, they also created and implemented a New Member Orientation program that consists of five sessions. These sessions focus on the structure of the congregation. Each member of the Professional Staff and Presidents of the Brotherhood and Women of Reform Judaism address the new members and offer many opportunities for involvement. However, the newer families are not of the same background as the founders. Many are interfaith couples with children, others are young couples who have recently moved to the Atlanta area and live within a reasonable proximity to the temple. They seem to be looking for educational programs for their children and perhaps themselves. Though a large synagogue can be a "congregation of congregations," the leadership of Temple Emanu-El would like to demonstrate that it is a Reform synagogue with an appreciation of traditional ritual *that cares* for every member. The clergy of the congregation would like to implement innovative concrete programs and rituals that elevate the lives of its members and add to their spiritual growth.

Over the years, a significant number of the congregational families that have suffered deaths in their family units have requested that their loved ones be ritually prepared for burial. Until recently, Atlanta did not have a Jewish funeral home and relied on non-Jewish funeral directors. When requested, ritual preparation by the *Hevra*

Kaddisha (traditional Holy Society) of a Conservative, Traditional or Orthodox congregation would perform the *Taharah* and *Takhrikhim* (the ritual washing and dressing of a corpse). Usually, a *Taharah* is performed by a team of three or four people of the same gender in the preparation room of a funeral home.

The Specific Needs to be Addressed: In determining what could be done symbolically to show our congregants that Temple Emanu-El cares deeply about all of its members, the Caring Committee of the congregation, which is directly under my supervision, began discussing the possibility of forming our own *Hevra Kaddisha*. There is no better way to demonstrate care than by observing the mitzvah of caring for our own dead. Not only is this ritual considered to be one of the most important religious obligations for a community to perform, it is also one of the most important transitional issues of the life cycle.

In order to successfully establish and maintain a *Hevra Kaddisha* in a Reform Congregation, the volunteers who have applied to serve on the *Hevra Kaddisha* need to be carefully screened and educated. A chairperson of volunteers needs to be chosen to coordinate the volunteers. He or she will be the contact person the funeral home will call to organize a team to perform a *Taharah*. As the head of the *Hevra Kaddisha*, I will conduct a personal interview with each applicant. The interview will be a standard psychological intake with questions relating to motivation, feelings about handling a corpse, handling grief, sadness and fears concerning mortality and loss. Once I secure a critical mass of volunteers, the members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* will embark upon a

course of basic safety education taught by the local funeral director. Safety education is critical for any person handling a corpse. It is necessary to learn how to gown and glove, and how to wash following the procedure. Many of the deceased may have had a communicable disease and it is therefore necessary to take special precautions when preparing the corpse. The local Conservative *Hevra Kaddisha* will then run two ritual training sessions for our *Hevra Kaddisha*. We will then require each of our members to observe at least two instances of *Taharah*.

Through the congregational bulletin and announcements (Appendix A), I created an awareness for the need of a *Hevra Kaddisha*. I chose the chairperson of volunteers during a congregational trip to Israel. One of our trip participants had to return to Atlanta due to a death in the family. After spending the night with the traveler and her family at the hotel consoling her, I met my group for breakfast and explained what had happened. One person approached me and asked if our congregation had a *Hevra Kaddisha* to prepare the deceased. I explained that we did not but would appreciate her help in organizing one. Though I did not properly interview her, she became the volunteer coordinator. I quickly learned the importance of a proper intake interview. Each person with the exception of one completed the course. Every member has said they want more education and they feel a need to share their feelings and emotions with the entire group. They have stated that they don't understand the traditional Hebrew liturgy that is recited and would like to create a modern "meaningful" ritual to accompany the traditional text. The goal of this project is to create an uplifting spiritual experience and to provide the

clinical support that members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* will need to serve the deceased and their families without suffering burnout and dropout themselves.

The Relevance of This Project to Ministry in a Wider Context: As Reform congregations continue to increase ritual observance and attract members from more traditional movements, the need for a Reform *Hevra Kaddisha* will increase. The fundamental concept of this demonstration project is to construct a model of a *Hevra Kaddisha* in a Reform context whose members will perform the mitzvah of *tohorat hamet* (purification of the dead). As a member of the congregational clergy, using clinical skills, I will address the substantive and emotional issues that the members of a *Hevra Kaddisha* face in their holy work. I will endeavor to help members of the *Hevra* understand that death is a part of life and that as in all life, there is a Jewish way to be buried and a Jewish way to mourn.

Chapter Two: Guiding and Informing Principles

Pertinent Religious Principles: Though the Reform Jew does not accept the authority of the Talmud and Codes as binding, informed choice demands a thorough understanding of the traditional texts.

The Torah does not spell out mourning practices for the Jew, yet, there are instances where we learn about respect for the dead and the beginnings of rules concerning mourning. "The lifetime of Sarah was one hundred years, twenty years, and seven years; the years of Sarah's life. Sarah died in Kiriath-arba which is Hebron in the land of Canaan; and Abraham came to eulogize Sarah and to cry over her"(Gen. 23:1-2). At the end of Genesis, both Jacob and Joseph die. Both are embalmed according to the text, in the way of the Egyptians. Jacob was taken by Joseph to Canaan and buried in the Cave of Makhpelah with Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca and Leah. Joseph was placed in a coffin so that later his remains would be accessible when the Israelites leave Egypt (Gen. 50:1-2;25-26). At the end of Deuteronomy it says, "So Moses the servant of the Lord died there, in the land of Moab, at the command of the Lord. He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, near Beth-peor; and no one knows his burial place to this day (Deut. 34:5-6)." The tradition states that God buried Moses (Plaut, p. 1582).

In Rabbinic writings, Maimonides in his Mishneh Torah says, "The custom for attending the dead includes: closing the eyes, closing the mouth (even by force), close orifices, anoint the body, dress with shrouds sewn with linen thread. The shrouds should be inexpensive (one zuz). You must cover the face of the dead (for a poor man's face may be black from hunger). It is forbidden to the dead in silk or golden cloth, even for a

prince. This would be haughty and a waste. It is also the custom of the non-Jews."

(Mishneh Torah, The Laws of Mourning, 4:1-2).

The Shulchan Arukh (O. Ch. 526), asks the question, "what if someone dies on a Festival?" On the first day, Jews shouldn't be involved in the actual burial of a corpse. However, a Jew may perform a *Taharah* and dress the deceased in already made and prepared *Tachrichim*.

The Shulchan Arukh, (Y. D. 6) relieves the person who is watching the corpse (*met*), even if the watcher is not a relative, of the mitzvah of reciting the Sh'ma. A quote from the will of Elazar Halevi, states: 'I am asking you my sons and wife, do not make a eulogy for me. Leave me on my bed inside the house, then take me and put me in a wagon and take me to make a complete *Taharah* including my fingernails, toenails and my hair should be combed. In cleanliness, I will go to my rest. A poor person should do the *Taharah* and charity should be given to the poor person.'"

Maurice Lamm (1969), writes: "Man is created in the image of God, and thus possesses dignity and value.

Because God has created him, he is endowed with sanctity. To destroy man is to commit not only an offense against man, but sacrilege – the desecration of the Name of God. An indignity inflicted on man is a profanation of the Name of God. The body that housed the soul is sanctified by Judaism. It is a gift of Almighty God, and the sanctity adheres to the body even after the soul has left.

The care and consideration and respect that are bestowed upon the living must be accorded the dead as they are attended, prepared and escorted to their final abode on earth. To assist in the preparation and burial of the dead is one of the greatest mitzvot in our faith. The rituals of *Taharah* and *Tachrichim* not only give dignity to the dead, but bring comfort to those who perform the mitzvah."

Pertinent Clinical Principles: As the leader of the *Hevra Kaddisha*, I will clinically address the emotional needs of the members of the *Hevra Kaddisha*. As these people perform their sacred task, they will confront fear of touching and handling a dead body; fear of contamination of some communicable disease; fear of doing something wrong; and fear of their own mortality and the potential loss of a loved one. They will need to overcome the fear of entering a funeral home late at night to officiate at *Taharah*. They will also experience a variety of emotions concerning love, loss, anxiety, grief and guilt. Through group experience, I will attempt to help them overcome resistance in confronting their emotions. Issues of transference and countertransference will be thoroughly examined in the group setting. An understanding of object loss and its effect on our lives will be critical in the group experience sessions. The group experience will be critical in shaping the *Hevra Kaddisha* into a therapeutic social system (Yalom, 1995). "An unwritten code of behavioral rules, or norms, must be established that will guide the interaction of the group. And what are the desirable norms for a therapeutic group? They follow logically from the discussion of the therapeutic factors." (Yalom, Page 107)

Through group experience and journal writing, we will explore the emotions of the members of the *Hevra Kaddisha*. I will also need to explore my own issues with mortality and loss as well as my own countertransference within the group.

Chapter Three: The Methodology

Approach and Procedure: The Jewish calendar determines the rhythm of Jewish life. The Jew senses the temporal values of Torah, repentance, thanksgiving and revelation through the holidays of the Jewish year. Connecting the group meetings of the *Hevra Kaddisha* to the annual cycle of the Jewish year will add meaning to the life cycle. Therefore, the *Hevra Kaddisha* will meet four times during the current year. As head of the *Hevra Kaddisha*, I will serve as the group facilitator. The first meeting will take place on the morning of Yom Kippur Eve. Meeting at the synagogue, we will confront the nature of the Holy Day and how it relates to death and repentance. In a group setting in the sanctuary, the twenty-one members will sit on the bima and read the confession. We will talk about sin and the death of the spirit. We will examine our own feelings through group dynamics. We will explore feelings about honoring the dead and our own fears by confronting our own sins and then writing in our journals our feelings about our own relationship with God and with sin, about death and mortality. We will examine God's mercy in the liturgy of the Neilah (concluding) service. We will then begin to understand that Judaism views the human body as one of the miracles of creation, which makes it important for us to maintain that view even after the body dies. Therefore, we, the *Hevra Kaddisha* treat the human body with respect and honor, never as an object. Concluding the morning, we will create our own opening ritual for the *Taharah*, a liturgy that will speak to the holy act we are about to perform.

The second meeting will occur during Chanukah. This festival of lights is an appropriate time for us to re-evaluate what we have been doing and feeling as we proceed

with our holy work as a *Hevra Kaddisha*. The members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* are a dedicated group of volunteers. Taking this time to rededicate (Chanukah means dedication) ourselves to the mitzvah of *k'vod hamet* (giving honor to the dead). This four-hour session will include an opportunity for members of the group to share their feelings about the experiences that they have had in performing the rituals of purification and dressing. Again, the members will have time to write in their journals and discuss their entries with each other. They will re-visit the opening ritual they created before Yom Kippur and they will create a new closing ritual.

The third meeting of two hours will take place one month later on the New Year of Trees. We will again examine our emotions through group process. We will talk about each team experience (there are five teams of four people in the *Hevra Kaddisha*) and the dynamics within each team. Who has assumed a leadership role? Is the team functioning as a unit or are there difficulties? Through group dynamics as studied in Yalom, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, we will confront feelings that members are having as they continue on this journey.

The final session will occur on the 7th of Adar, the traditional date when a *Hevra Kaddisha* is honored. This date, Moses' *yahrzeit* will be used to evaluate the program established during the previous few months. We will continue with group experience, and we will join in a community dinner to honor the members of the *Hevra Kaddisha*.

Assessment Methodology: I will measure the success of this program by how many people remain active members of the *Hevra Kaddisha*. The purpose establishing and maintaining the *Hevra Kaddisha* will be fulfilled if those who began the program continue to find the performance of their holy tasks meaningful and fulfilling. Through group discussion, I will be able to assess why people are remaining as active members of the *Hevra Kaddisha*. However, since some members may choose not to participate, I will develop an exit interview that will focus on the reason for their departure from the *Hevra Kaddisha*. Based upon the exit interview responses, I will make changes in the process by which the *Hevra Kaddisha* functions.

For those who hear about the *Hevra Kaddisha* and choose to join it at a later date, I will give them an appropriate intake interview and determine whether or not they will become an asset to the group.

Chapter Four: Results

Description of Outcomes: The process for determining the success and perpetuation of this project is based on the method described in Chapter 3B. The *Hevra Kaddisha* at Temple Emanu-El has been in existence for nearly a year. To date, we have had two people drop out of the group. Their reasons are described in the exit interview (See Appendix A). The *Hevra Kaddisha* has also attracted three new members this year and at the concluding banquet it was announced that we have four new applications. Having heard from other members that this was one of the most meaningful religious experiences of their lives, they decided to seek membership.

The initial group consisted of twenty-one members, each had responded to an article that I had written for the temple bulletin (See Appendix A). The diversity of age and gender of the members in the *Hevra Kaddisha* created a rich dialogue during the group sessions. Eight men and thirteen women applied. The ages of the women were from one nineteen year-old to one sixty-seven years of age. Most of the women were between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-five reflecting the general demographic make-up of the congregation. The men were all thirty to sixty years old. The questions used during the interview process included basic information, such as, name, addresses, e-mail address, telephone numbers and availability for service. I then asked questions concerning their physical health since they would be lifting a heavy dead body. To ascertain their desire to participate in the *Hevra Kaddisha* and their state of mental health I asked the following questions:

1. Why do you want to join a *Hevra Kaddisha*?

2. Have you experienced the death of a loved one?
3. If you did have such an experience, how did you cope with your loss?
4. Tell me about the feelings you had regarding your grief?
5. Did you find the Jewish mourning process to be helpful in dealing with your loss?
6. Do you work well in a group?
7. How well do you handle direction?
8. Have you ever seen a dead body?
9. What do you think you will feel like the first time you have to go to the funeral parlor late in the evening to prepare a body?
10. What is it that you want to gain from this experience?

Some of the members had never experienced the loss of a close relative, others had lost parents or siblings. None had lost a spouse or child by death. Most had fears about touching a dead body and all had fears about entering a funeral home late at night.

The entire group met four times. The group process proved to be complex since the size of the group was so large. As the group facilitator, I felt the frustration of the various members at the inability to have the opportunity to speak. Since the group was so large, people felt they had to keep their comments brief and to the point. It was difficult for some of the people to articulate their feelings with such brevity. At the conclusion of the second meeting, the group decided they wanted periodic team group meetings. The entire group had been divided into two male teams and three female teams. I established

the team structure early on, wherein they would perform their holy task, it was easy to divide the group by teams and have them meet with me on a periodic basis. Since only one team at a time performs a *Taharah*, the members felt they needed more time to discuss their feelings following a *Taharah*. This will be instructive to other clergy and counselors who may staff such a group in the future.

I anticipated seven major outcomes to the large group meetings. These are of particular concern in structuring a future *Hevra Kaddisha*:

1. The introduction of the concept of *Hevra Kaddisha* did not necessarily mean an acceptance of traditional theological concepts previously abandoned by the Reform movement over a century ago. If people were uncomfortable with concepts such as *t'chiyat hameytim* (bodily resurrection), certainly other reasons could be established to re-introduce the *Hevra Kaddisha* into the Reform movement.
2. As I was leading the group experience, it became apparent during the first meeting that the chairperson of the volunteers of the *Hevra Kaddisha* was dominating not only the discussion, but also the process. She would use terms like "my women do it my way" and "my women have no fear in handling a *met* (corpse)." The group roundly rejected these statements and it necessitated that I have a private conversation with chairperson following the meeting. The chairperson felt she had ownership over the women's groups and wanted

complete authority in ritual matters. I told her that I was the head of the *Hevra Kaddisha*. The Board of Directors with the consent of the Senior Rabbi had determined that I was to be the final authority on ritual matters pertaining to *Taharah*. Therefore, she was in charge of securing people to perform a *Taharah* according the guidelines I set forward. I also explained that she needed to allow the other members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* to state their feelings and tell their stories. She accepted this criticism, but from time to time has lapses into former behaviors.

3. During the second meeting, the women in the group stated "that they felt that there was too much talking during the *Taharah*." The men stated that "there was no talking during their service, except for that which was necessary to complete the *Taharah*." I then asked the women then as a group to express their discomfort to the chairperson and they told her that they would no longer permit talking during a *Taharah*. They told her that they felt they were betraying a sacred trust and disturbing the sanctity of the moment by talking. This empowered the women to own their feelings and wrest control of the group.
4. The men in the group found they needed to work out their denial of what they were actually doing. At first, they saw it as a task and just did what needed to be done. As the members began to discuss feelings, they realized they were denying the humanity of the deceased by not according him the dignity that a

human being deserves. Through small group discussion the men talked about their fears concerning their own mortality and possible loss of control. One man said: "I can't believe that just yesterday this man was living, breathing, eating and thinking. This man loved a wife and children. He worked and took care of his family." The man then began to cry. He said, "I fear dying young like the deceased. I want to live a full life and not miss out on anything." The group was supportive and began to grapple with their mortality. I encouraged the group to write their feelings in their journals and monitor their feelings. I also invited them to come see me individually if need be.

5. The women saw their holy work as uplifting until they had to prepare a deceased woman who had suffered a double mastectomy without reconstruction. This particular team called for a separate group meeting with me to process their fears of "having cancer, having their bodies violated and dying in a similar way." I explained to them that over the years we will see many types of death. I asked them to explain their sense of violation and horror at the desecration of her body. The sadness for the deceased and her final illness filled the room, but, in the end, the women "felt they prepared her in a caring way for her final journey."
6. At the conclusion of the project, the entire group stated that they wanted to continue to meet as a large group for education and training, but wanted monthly or bi-monthly team meetings with a group facilitator.

7. The group felt that continued training and education added to the spirituality of the act of *Taharah*. They wanted the number of sessions increased to six in the year.

Unexpected Developments: The number of families requesting that our *Hevra Kaddisha* officiate at the preparation of a loved one increased dramatically. Prior to the establishment of our own *Hevra Kaddisha* one out of four families requested such preparation. During the past year our *Hevra Kaddisha* has prepared eighty percent of all the funerals conducted from Temple Emanu-El. The demand for the *Hevra Kaddisha* to perform more frequently creates more stress over time commitment and availability. The members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* determined in a group session that they must help attract more members and create two more teams for the *Hevra Kaddisha* to help alleviate the issues of availability and possible burnout.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The Implications of These Results: The first topic to be discussed is the core issue of whether or not a Reform congregation will support and sustain a *Hevra Kaddisha* when commercial Jewish funeral parlors are available and traditionally used within the community. I have found an overwhelming support for the concept of our own *Hevra Kaddisha*. Beginning with the Senior Staff and the lay leadership, the idea of taking care of our own has resonated with this congregation. In fact, at the Community-wide *Hevra Kaddisha* on the Seventh of Adar, three women from a neighboring Reform congregation came forward and asked me to help them establish a *Hevra Kaddisha*. When asked why they were starting one, I fully expected the answer, "Because you have one," and was pleasantly surprised to hear, "Your congregation reminded us how important it is for us to care for all of our members, whether alive, dying or dead."

The theological aspects of bodily resurrection, though clearly antithetical to Classical Reform Jewish thought, is making a re-appearance. In the Reform prayer book, *The Union Prayer Book for Jewish Worship*, (Newly Revised Edition, c. 1940), in the morning prayer, *Elohai Neshama*, it says: "The soul which Thou, O God, hast given unto me came pure from Thee. Thou hast created it, Thou hast formed it, Thou hast breathed it into me; Thou hast preserved it in this body and, at the appointed time, Thou wilt take it from this earth that it may enter upon life everlasting" (CCAR, Page 101). In the second paragraph of the Amidah, the concluding benediction says: "*Barukh Atah Adonai, note'a b'tokhenu haye olam* – Praised be Thou, O Lord, who hast implanted within us eternal life" (CCAR, Page 125).

In Service VIII of the Gates of Prayer (CCAR, Page 255), the second benediction of the *Amidah* re-introduces the traditional words *m'chaye hameytim* (who gives life to the dead). The conclusion thus must follow, that Reform Jews are being reintroduced to the concept of bodily resurrection and therefore, it is conceptually acceptable to initiate the traditional practices of *Taharah* and *Tachrichim* by a *Hevra Kaddisha*. Though our reasoning for establishing such a *Hevra* was not based on the theology of bodily resurrection, it is based on the *mitzvah* of *l'vayat hameyt* (escorting the dead to the grave). The concept of *l'vayat ha-meyt*, found in both the traditional and Reform prayer books, in the quote from the Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Shabbat 127b), speaks to comforting the mourner by caring for the dead.

The Second outcome concerns the choice of an appropriate chairperson. It is important to look at interpersonal skills before making a choice. At first, fearing that no one would volunteer for such a position, I chose a person who wanted to see a *Hevra Kaddisha* exist in our own congregation. Many of her positive qualities including persuasiveness and tenacity, brought the reality of the *Hevra Kaddisha* into being; however, her very strong personality became an issue for the group as well. The chairperson, has a low self-image. She tries very hard to ingratiate herself into groups of people but, often is rejected because of force of personality and issues of control. Due to many instances of failure in her own life, such as a failed marriage, and children who have rejected her, she tries hard to maintain control of her position and alienates people with this behavior. She exhibits anxiety when working with other people who do not

follow her directions exactly. This creates a feeling of inadequacy among the volunteers and required an intervention on my part. In order for the group process to succeed and for the *Hevra Kaddisha* to continue to grow, it was necessary to remove ritual authority from the Chairperson of the *Hevra Kaddisha*. We then established the clergy of the congregation as the absolute authority in matters of ritual practice regarding the *Hevra Kaddisha*. The congregational by-laws call for the Senior Rabbi to be the final arbiter in all matters of ritual. In this case, the Senior Rabbi appointed me as the ritual authority in all matters relating to the practices of the *Hevra Kaddisha*.

Third, the issue of unnecessary talking during the ritual of *Taharah* and *Tachrichim* was an extension of the issue of control of the Chairperson. Once that matter was resolved, the participating women reported a significant change in the demeanor that was present in the *Taharah* room before, during and following the ritual.

Fourth, the men's teams were reacting in a totally different way. They saw they had a task to fulfill and completed it with alacrity. They were not finding the ritual meaningful. It was just a task. The anxiety of touching a corpse automatically triggered the defense mechanism of denial. Since, many men tend to deny their fears, my role as facilitator was to help them clarify their feelings, expose their fears and create an atmosphere where they could feel safe voicing their reaction to their fears. In the first group session, one of the men reported that "it was like working on a life-like doll." His unconscious rejected the idea that this was a dead human being and he substituted the person with an object. This was clearly an instance of resistance in recognizing the reality

of the death. When worked through in the group experience, the men realized that they were anxious about their own mortality and were denying the humanity of the corpse. Conditioned by society, not to show their feelings, these men had suppressed their own feelings. During the second group meeting, it was reported that in addition to the ritual of reciting the Hebrew name at the beginning of the ritual and asking for forgiveness for any indignity they may cause, they would refer to the deceased by his English name. For instance they might say, "let's turn Joe on his right side." I was able to use my own countertransference regarding the recent death of my father in addressing this issue. I explained that I wanted people who knew my father to take care of him and prepare him for burial. I saw this not only as a sign of filial love, but of honoring my parent. Thus, the direct naming as a reminder, that the deceased was in fact a living person just a few hours before, helped the members reject the denial of death and the men have found their work more spiritually rewarding.

The fifth outcome was indeed the most challenging. When the team of women who prepared a corpse who had been significantly disfigured by cancer surgery, they went into an emotional meltdown. Immediately following the *Taharah*, the team leader called me to report that the women were extremely upset. As we discussed their feelings their feelings, their repressed fears regarding their own final illnesses and demise were surfaced. They were no longer preparing women who had lived long lives and died of old age, this was someone who had young children and husband and should have had many more productive years of life. They displayed some of the anger and depression that constitute the traditional signs of grief as outlined by Kubler-Ross (1969).

The women were angry that a young woman who had so much to live for should have her body so ravaged by disease and also by the treatment. They also displayed signs of depression. At the beginning of the session two of the women were especially withdrawn. When queried as to why they were being so quiet, they said that they had close relatives who had died of breast cancer and had been reminded of the pain and suffering of the victim. They also were even more concerned for their very own existence. At the conclusion of the group meeting the women were hopeful. They saw their role as healers of the spirit. Though they were still grappling with the experience they had participated in, they were able to see the benefit of treating the corpse with love and dignity, both of which were probably missing in the last days of the deceased's life.

Sixth, all the members of the large group discussed the need for continuing education and training. Since each team is likely to officiate only three or four times each year, some of the procedures and skills are forgotten or lost. It is therefore necessary to continually reinforce the procedures, skills and knowledge base of the members. The call by the members not to meet in large groups is in concert with Yalom (page 276) "that the ideal size of the interactional therapy group is approximately seven or eight, with an acceptable range of five to ten members."

Finally, the seventh outcome requesting an increase in the number of training sessions was met with delight. Fearing to place a burdensome load on the shoulders of the volunteers, the number of training sessions of this project was kept to four. The request to add two more sessions to increase spirituality and knowledge is especially noteworthy. It

points to the fact the people will volunteer for something meaningful and fulfilling. Each of the sessions involved significant group experience, but content and practical training were important components of each session.

There were two unanticipated outcomes to this project. The first is the number of families requesting traditional preparation by the *Hevra Kaddisha* for the burial of their loved ones. Almost eighty percent of the funerals conducted from Temple Emanu-El since the formation of the *Hevra Kaddisha* have utilized the services of the *Hevra Kaddisha*. The overwhelming response has been positive and though anecdotal, the evidence suggests that the number of people who seem to say the congregation has lost its sense of caring has diminished.

The second unanticipated development from this project is that we have had requests to initiate additional bereavement support groups. After additional training, we will utilize the members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* as lay facilitators to increase the number of groups we have running. These connections with the living will give the group-leader an opportunity to use skills learned in group experience, and to hear first hand the appreciation of the families who have been helped.

The journal writing that I had assigned at our very first meeting was used as a clinical tool to get further in touch with their feelings. I asked the members to write down all of their feelings. How did it feel to walk into the mortuary late at night to prepare a body? How did they feel when touching a corpse? How did they feel when bodily fluids

or odors were expressed? I requested samples of their journal writing, but, with one exception, they felt that their feelings were too personal to share.

The one person who shared wrote: "Entering the mortuary at ten o'clock in the evening was scary. I went to the back door. I had no idea of what to expect. A man in khaki's and a sport shirt answered the door. He kindly directed me to the preparation room. There I met "Andy", the deceased. He was thirty-five and had died of cancer. I felt bad and was ready to leave when the other members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* walked in and bowed slightly and smiled. My feelings of fear diminished and I was suddenly transported to a different place. My grandfather had done this for his friends and now I was doing it for my community."

Clarification of Religious Principles Raised in Chapter 2: Orthodox and Reform Jews differ on the significance of *mitzvah* (obligation). Where the Orthodox Jew performs the command because a prior commitment to the *Halakhah* (Jewish Law) as an entire system, the Reform Jew chooses to observe the *mitzvot* (commandments) one at a time.

The initial commitment by the Orthodox renders moot the aspect of individual choice regarding any particular *mitzvah*. The Reform Jew, by contrast chooses freely whether or not to perform any particular *mitzvah*. The members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* are all Reform Jews. Their choice to engage in this sacred work of preparing bodies for burial should be seen as their opting of a specific religious obligation to which they become totally committed.

The rabbinic literature that is cited in chapter two clearly points to dignity of not only the deceased, but also to the person performing the *Taharah*. Knowing that they have asked to perform such sacred tasks, enhances the self-image of the members who do it.

Clarification of Clinical Principles Raised in Chapter 2: The issue of large group versus small group clearly became a focus of this project. Small group (Yalom, 1995) experience sessions should have been planned from the outset. The issues that the small groups later confronted did not necessarily deal with those topics that were postulated in Chapter Two. Rather, for the men, most of the emotions were centered on denial of their own mortality. For the women, the idea of bodily mutilation through surgical amputation became a significant issue. Secondly, the issue of control was a major factor, especially for the women. With a Chairperson who was focused on controlling the entire conversation, the group rebelled and I, as group facilitator, was forced to step in and take action.

Contributions of This Project to Ministry in General: This project assumes that the modern methods of dealing with death in contemporary American society are not necessarily the most healing. Other communities in our society have opted to see their loved ones rest peacefully in expensive caskets while they themselves do nothing but hire a professional funeral home to make the arrangements. This practice may take place over a series of days in which the deceased are viewed. The Jewish community has refrained in most part from such practice. The Jewish burial practice of having the funeral within a twenty-four hour period, if possible, allows the process of grieving to begin sooner, along with the process of eventual healing. But family and friends that is, have sacrificed the traditional way that the funeral is prepared – to the professionalization of burials that characterize the rest of society. This project seeks to regain the traditional process and wisdom inherent in Jewish funerals. Having one's own community participate in the final preparation of the body and the funeral positions the temple family to reach out to the family that is in pain. Simultaneously, it provides the opportunity for Temple members to feel the satisfaction inherent in opting for this age-old Jewish *mitzvah*.

When teaching children and adults the *mitzvah* of caring for all living things, the concept of *Hevra Kaddisha* should be introduced to exemplify our care for all of God's creation even after death. The children need not be instructed in what the *Hevra Kaddisha* actually does, but just to say that a group of our own members helps prepare the deceased for the funeral sends an important message of caring.

The core belief which supports the reintroduction of the *Hevra Kaddisha* to Reform Jewish practice is the *mitzvah* of *K'vod Lamet* (honoring the deceased). Judaism teaches that the human body is sacred even after death. Jewish law generally discourages autopsies on the basis of *nivul hamet* (disgrace to the dead). The professional funeral director will dress the body and apply cosmetics following embalming of the deceased. According to Jewish law, these practices are forbidden. The human body is the vessel that contains the soul. Since Judaism considers the soul divine, Reform Judaism should maintain the practice of giving honor to the dead. The Jewish way of observing the *mitzvah* of *k'vod lamet*, is through the traditional rites of Jewish burial practice.

The Implications for Future Ministry: As Reform congregations grapple with ways of bringing spirituality and meaning into peoples lives, rituals and practices long discarded can be given new meaning and brought back as authentic practice. When coupled with clinical support and the understanding of the psychodynamic principles, old rituals in new settings can be exceptionally valuable.

This particular project is only one of many that could be started in Reform congregations to re-vitalize and to activate the membership into models of caring human beings. Not only congregations of all sizes should be concerned when there is a crisis or a celebration in member families. Many larger congregations leave the planning of life-cycle celebrations to a synagogue professional. If congregations were to develop a structure where members of the community help plan a wedding, a *Bat/Bar Mitzvah*, a *Brit Milah* (circumcision) or baby naming, less emphasis would be placed on the catering and more on the religious aspects of the celebrations. How to involve congregational segments is a major challenge to the clergy. Bringing holiness into every aspect of life is critical, if a synagogue is to be a sacred community. Participation of the laity in preparation for sacred events from birth through death is a natural venue for involvement in congregational life.

The work of the pastoral counselor is to take the richness of the religious tradition and combine it with psychodynamic principles to help people live a full and rich life. Thus, to learn the words and embody the faith that God is with us in death as in life, I conclude with the last verse of the hymn *Adon Olam*:

“Into God’s hand I shall entrust my spirit,
When I go to sleep and when I awaken.
My spirit I commit to God, for God is with me,
I shall not fear!”

Appendix A

Bulletin Articles

#1

Do We Care?

(Temple Emanu-El Bulletin, October, 1998)

The question frequently comes to us, "why bother?" It doesn't matter what the subject is, it is just the usual question. The answer from me is always the same, "because I care!" Since the late 80's, our congregation has nearly doubled in size. More often than not, we are told that the congregation is not the same as it was when we were smaller. That is true. However, the person saying this does not usually mean "that we are so big, the congregation is meeting all of my needs." Rather, it is usually said when a congregant doesn't know anyone and does not have a meaningful connection to the community. The reality of any congregation is that it is made up of several groups of people. Some of these groups are involved and some are not.

I believe that we, at Temple Emanu-El really care about each other. In fact, I've had a dream to create a society of dedicated people who demonstrate the amount of empathy and caring that we do have. That society is a *Hevra Kaddisha*. Many of you may not know these Aramaic words. They translate as Holy Society. In Conservative and Orthodox congregations, it is customary to have a *Hevra Kaddisha*. These dedicated groups of people prepare a deceased person for burial in a ritual way. In our

contemporary society, we leave these tasks to professional undertakers. It was never the practice in Judaism to have strangers prepare our loved ones for burial.

The reality is that we care for each individual and family within our congregation. I am willing to stake my reputation on the premise that we can get a group of people together and even care about those who are deceased. If you are interested in participating in such an endeavor, please contact me at the synagogue.

#2

Temple Emanu-El Bulletin, February 1999

Our Own *Hevra Kaddisha*

Temple Emanu-El has its own *Hevra Kaddisha*. For months, I have been writing and talking about the possibilities of our congregation the first Reform *Hevra Kaddisha* (Holy Society which performs the final mitzvah of ritually washing and dressing the dead) in Atlanta.

On Sunday, January 17th, twenty-one members of Temple Emanu-El were trained at the Arlington Chapel and are now ready to perform the sacred mitzvot for our families who request a traditional Temple Emanu-El burial for a loved one.

It will no longer be necessary to utilize congregants from other synagogues to perform these tasks. Our own members will be taking care of our own congregants.

It is not customary to list the names of these people who fulfill this sacred task. Let me only tell you that twenty-one of your friends are currently involved. We could still use more volunteers. If you are interested, please contact me in my study.

Letter to the Volunteers

Dear Friends:

Thank you for volunteering to be part of the Temple Emanu-El *Hevra Kaddisha*. We will hold our first training on Sunday afternoon, January 17th at three o'clock in the afternoon at Arlington Memorial Chapel on Allen Road. You will have an initial training in safety and procedures in a *Taharah*. These rituals cannot be learned in one afternoon. There will be additional training sessions and as I stated during your interview, you will be expected to observe two *Taharahs* conducted by other congregations.

I look forward to seeing you at Arlington and please know that you are learning to perform an incredible mitzvah.

Sincerely,

Cantor Scott E. Colbert

Preparations For The *Taharah*

1. The *Taharah* should take place as close to the funeral as possible.
2. Where this is not possible, as when there will be no people available at the proper time to perform the *Taharah*, or in the summertime when putrefaction may rapidly ensue, the *Taharah* may be done earlier. In that event, the utmost care must be taken that the body or the *Tachrichim* (shrouds) shall not become soiled before the funeral.
3. Before the *Taharah*, the casket, the *Tachrichim*, and all the necessary utensils must be prepared and ready. Those who will participate should be assigned their functions in advance. *No conversation is permitted except that which is necessary for the washing, the cleansing and the dressing of the deceased.*
4. During the washing and the *Taharah*, the father-in-law, the mother's husband and the brother-in-law of the deceased may not be present. In the *Taharah* of a woman, the females in similar relation may not be present. The children of the deceased do not participate in carrying the casket or in any other way in the funeral of their parents.

The Washing

1. The *Hevra Kaddisha* must wash their hands in the ritual manner by which hands are washed each morning; each hand, beginning with the right hand is alternately washed three times by means of pouring water from a vessel over the hands.
2. The body (met) is placed on its back on the *Taharah* table, with the feet facing the door. At no time should it be paced face downward but it is inclined first on one side and then on the other side during the washing.
3. For the sake of decency, care should be exercised to keep the body covered at all times, particularly the sexual organs, except when the various parts are exposed to be washed.
4. A large vessel is filled with luke warm water, into which a smaller vessel is dipped and then poured upon the parts of the body that are to be washed.
5. The order of the washing is as follows: First, the entire head, then the neck, the right hand, the right upper half of the body, the lower right half of the body, the right foot, the left hand, the left upper half of the body, the left lower half of the body and the left foot. The body is then inclined on its left side and the right side of the back is washed in the same order as above. The body is then inclined on its right side and the left side of the back is washed as above.

6. The fingernails and toenails are cleansed and the hair is combed. Care should be taken that the fingers or other joints of the body do not bend or close. The body is washed completely clean.
7. Internal cleaning is not customary and should not be done.
8. Where the deceased died instantaneously through violence or accident and his/her body and garments are spattered with blood, no washing or *Taharah* is performed. The body is placed in the casket without the clothes being removed. Only a sheet is wrapped around it over the clothing.
9. Where only part of the body was injured and covered with blood, and it might be possible to perform *Taharah* on the remainder, a rabbinic authority should be consulted.
10. Only the life blood that flows at the time of death may not be washed away. Where there is other blood on the body that flowed during the lifetime of the deceased, from wounds or as a result of an operation, the washing and *Taharah* are performed in the usual manner.
11. Where blood flows continually after death, the source of the flow is covered and not washed. The clothes, which contain the blood that flowed after death, are placed in the casket at the body's feet.

The Taharah

1. After the body has been thoroughly washed and cleaned, the *Hevra Kaddisha* must again wash their hands as before. (Now the ritual washing begins, thus a ritual washing of the hands is required). A clean sheet and the *Tachrichim* are made ready.
2. The *Taharah* table is elevated so that the feet of the deceased are pointed downward. Two members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* support the body. Straw or wood is placed under the feet.
3. Nine *Kavim* (24 quarts) of water are poured over the head of the deceased so that the water runs down over the entire body. According to Rav Moshe Feinstein, the stringent ruling is that a *Kav* is equal to 16 *Revi'it* or 16 times 4.42 fluid ounces. (Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, Ganzfried, Page 442.)
4. This is the major *Taharah* and enough members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* should participate so that it will be performed in this way.
5. Where this is not possible, the body is raised by placing three pieces of wood underneath and the nine *Kavim* of water are poured over the entire body.

6. The nine *Kavim* of water do not have to be contained in one vessel or poured at one time. The usual procedure is, that two members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* each take a pail of water each containing a minimum of twelve quarts or three members take a pail containing eight quarts. (Either way, the total is twenty-four quarts). The water is then poured slowly in a continuous stream over the deceased from the head to toes, not simultaneously but in succession. Before the first vessel is emptied the second vessel starts and the pouring of the third vessel begins before the second has been emptied. No more than three vessels may be used and at no time may the flow cease until the vessels have been successively poured over the body.

Tachrichim – The Shrouds

The following garments should be prepared in advance. They should be made of white linen (or cotton), by hand, sewn with linen thread, and shall have been made for the exclusive purpose of burial. The garments are to have no decoration, no binding no seams, knots or pockets. In dressing the body, only bows or slipknots are tied. The garments should be absolutely clean. If they are soiled they should be laundered before being used.

For Men:

1. *Mitznefet* – a head dress. This is a cap that fits over the entire face and back of the head to the neck.
2. *K'tonet* – a pullover chemise with sleeves that reaches at least to the waist.
3. *Michnasayim* – trousers, preferably with closed feet. These reach up to the waist and cover the *k'tonet*. If the feet are exposed then the linen socks should also be part of the shrouding.
4. *Kittel* – an upper garment, extending to the thighs or knees, and having a collar and sleeves. This may be of either a pullover type like the *k'tonet* or open fronts like a robe. If the deceased wore a *kittel* during his lifetime, his own *kittel* should be used if it meets the requirements of shrouds.
5. *Chagorah* – a sash, which is wound around the waist over the *kittel*.
6. *Tallit* – a woolen *tallit*, preferably one which the deceased used during his lifetime. All ornamentation is removed and one of the *tzitzit* is cut off.
7. *Sovev* – a linen sheet to be wrapped around the entire body.

8. A small linen bag to be used as a headrest.

For Women:

1. A Hair Cap - which fits over the hair and is tied with a slip knot.
2. A Face Cover - which is tied around the neck with a slip knot.
3. A Blouse - which fits over most of the body, and is tied with a slip knot near the neck.
4. Pants - which are footed. These fit over the legs up to the waist.
5. Skirt - which fits over the blouse and is tied on the right side.
6. Apron - shorter than the skirt and fits over it. This is tied on the left side.
7. *Kittel* - similar to the blouse but longer and with a collar.
8. *Chagorah* - a sash which is tied around the waist.
9. A Cap - which fits over the entire head and is tied with a bow.
10. A Shawl - folded into a triangle to fit around the neck and on the top of the chest.

11. An Earth-Sack - used as a head rest. Straw and earth from Israel may be placed in it.
12. A *Sovev* - a linen sheet which is wrapped around the entire body.

The Dressing

For Men:

The body of the deceased should remain modestly covered as far as possible during the dressing.

1. The *Mitznefet* is placed on the head and drawn down to cover the entire head, the neck and the nape of the neck.
2. Two participants, one on each side, put the sleeves of the *K'tonet* on the hands. The garment is then slipped over the head, and drawn down over the body as far as it will go. The band near the neck is tied with seven windings, and then a slip knot.
3. Two participants draw the trousers over the feet and up the legs to the waist, where they will fit over the *K'tonet*. The band at the waistline is wound around by two of the participants, nine times, each twist of the band is counted by a Hebrew letter, viz: *alef, bet, gimel, dalet, hey, vav, zayin, chet, tet*. Three bows, slip knots, are tied in the form of the letter *shin*. The band over the right ankle is then tied with a slip knot, followed by the band on the left ankle. (Five windings and then a slip knot).

4. The *Kittel* is put on in the same manner as the *K'tonet* (see item #2). Care should be taken when putting on the *Kittel* to see that the sleeves of the *K'tonet* are not moved from their position, and that they reach the wrists. (Nine windings and then a slip knot).
5. The *Chagorah* is placed around the body, over the *Kittel* and is wound around thirteen times by two participants, who caount as the wind: *alef, bet, gimel, dalet, hey, vav, zayin, chet, tet, yud, yud-alef, yud-bet, yud-gimel*. Three bows are then tied, in the form of the letter shin.
6. A bit of straw, and some earth from *Eretz Yisrael* (unless the burial will be in Israel) are placed in a linen bag, and placed in the coffin as a headrest. Some earth from Israel is spread around the interior of the coffin and the verses "*V'hu Rachum*" are recited.
7. The *Sovev* is placed inside the coffin, spread out and overlapping the sides. This should be put in the coffin on the diagonal.
8. The *Tallit* is put on the deceased. It should not be draped over the shoulders, rather it should be wrapped around the deceased. If during the lifetime the deceased wore the tallit over his head, it should be wrapped accordingly.

9. The deceased is placed gently into the coffin, hands at the sides.
10. Earth from Israel is sprinkled on the eyes, heart and sex organ. Care should be taken that no earth falls into the mouth. Broken pieces of earthenware dish are placed over the eyes and the mouth.
11. The *Sovev* is wrapped around the body. First around the head, then the left side, the right side and lastly, the feet.
12. All articles that are to be buried with the deceased, ie: clothing with blood, are to be placed at the foot of the coffin.
13. Mentioning the Hebrew name of the deceased, and that of his father, the head of the *Hevra Kaddisha* team asks forgiveness on behalf of the *Hevra* for any commission or omission on their part which violated the dignity shown to the dead.
14. The *Aron* (coffin) is now covered, and pegged with wooden pegs. It should not be opened again under any circumstances.

For Women: The body of the deceased should remain modestly covered as far as possible during the dressing.

1. The hair is not combed. It is taken loosely, not tied, pinned, clipped or braided. It is placed in the cap that fits over the hair. The cap is then tied with a bow.
2. The face cover is put over the face and a bow is tied at the neck.
3. Then the blouse is put on. Two women, one on each side, put the sleeves on the hands. The garment is then slipped over the head and drawn down over the body to cover most of the body.
4. Two participants, who draw them over the feet and legs up to the waist, put on the pants. The pants fit over blouse as well. There is a band in the waistline, which is wound around by two participants nine times. Each twist of the band is counted by a Hebrew letter: *alef, bet, gimel, dalet, hey, vav, zayin, chet, tet*.
5. Three bows (slip knots) are tied, in the form of a letter *Shin*.
6. A band is tied below the right knee and another below the left knee.
7. The skirt is then put on, and the band is tied on the right side with a slipknot.

8. The apron is put on and tied on the left side with a slipknot.
9. Two participants in the same manner as the blouse (see #3 above) put on the Kittel. Care should be taken when putting on the *Kittel* that the sleeves of the blouse are not moved from their position and that they reach the wrists.
10. The sash is not just tied around the *Kittel* at the waist, rather it is wound thirteen times by two participants, who count as follows: *alef, bet, gimel, dalet, hey, vav, zayin, chet, tet, yud, yud-alef, yud-bet, yud-gimel*. Three bows (slipknots) are tied in the form of the letter *Shin*.
11. The cap is put on the head and tied with a bow.
12. The shawl is folded into a triangle and placed around the neck. This shawl covers the upper part of the chest.
13. A small linen sack is filled with straw and earth from *Eretz Yisrael* is placed in the coffin as a headrest.
14. Some of the earth from *Eretz Yisrael* is spread around the coffin.

15. The *Sovev* is then spread over the inside of the coffin on a diagonal overlapping the sides.
16. The body is then laid gently into the coffin. The verse *V'lo Yavo'u* is then recited.
17. Some earth from *Eretz Yisrael* is then sprinkled over the eyes, heart and sex organ (on top of the garments). Care should be taken that no earth falls into the mouth.
18. Pieces of earthenware are placed over each eye and over the mouth.
19. If a woman prayed with a *Tallit* during her lifetime, it should be carefully wrapped around her and not draped over her shoulders.
20. All articles of that must be buried with the deceased such as items of clothing with blood, loose hairs, etc. are placed in the coffin at this time.
21. Mentioning the Hebrew name of the deceased and that of her father and mother, the head of the *Hevra Kaddisha* group asks forgiveness on behalf of the *Hevra* for any commission or omission which violated the dignity shown to the deceased.
22. The casket is now closed and pegged. It should not be opened again under any circumstances.

NOTE: The ritual washing and dressing apply to anybody above the age of one year, except that a minor does not use a *tallit*.

A child older than thirty days, but less than one year, is dressed in a shirt and then covered with a sheet. A head covering is placed on the head and then the entire body is wrapped in a *Sovev* and placed in a coffin.

In the case of an infant less than thirty days, a stillbirth or an embryo, only two sheets are used but no head covering. The washing, however, is still performed.

After the Taharah

1. Before removing the coffin from the *Taharah* room, all *Taharah* vessels and implements except those that are permanently there, are removed.
2. The coffin is carried or wheeled from the room feet first, followed by members of the Hevra.
3. Someone, usually a member of the Hevra, should remain with the coffin as a *Shomer* until after the funeral.

Traditional Prayers and Translations

The members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* should study the translation of the prayers and verses recited during the washing and *Taharah*, so as to be familiar with their meaning. The prayers and verses are recited word for word by a member in Hebrew, and altogether recite them in English.

A *Taharah* for a man may be performed only by men and a *Taharah* for a woman only by women.

Rechitzah-The Washing

The members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* wash their hands. Each hand beginning with the right is washed three times by pouring water from a vessel, alternating from right to left. No benediction is recited. Double gloves should be put on this time.

The following prayer is recited mentioning the name of the deceased and that of his/her parents at the appropriate point in the text.

Ribono Shel Olam! Have compassion for _____, the son (daughter) of _____ and _____, this deceased, for he/she is a descendant of Abraham,

Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel, Your servants. May his/her soul and spirit rest with the righteous, for You are the Eternal God who revives the dead and brings death to the living. Blessed are You who pardons and forgives the sins and trespasses of the dead of Your people, Israel, upon petition. Therefore, may it be Your will, Eternal our God and God of our ancestors, to bring a circle of angels of mercy before the deceased, for he/she is Your servant, the son/daughter of Your Maidservant. And You, Eternal our God and God of our ancestors, who is concerned with the poor, save him/her from all misery, from a day of evil and from judgment to Gehenna. Blessed are You, great in lovingkindness and Master of mercy. Blessed are You who makes peace in the in the heights for Your servants and for those who revere Your name. Blessed is God who mercifully redeems the people Israel from all kinds of suffering. (The following two sentences are omitted for women). Therefore, may it be Your will, Eternal our God and God of our ancestors, to remember the sacred covenant which is in his flesh, and may it be for him a ransom from the flames of Hell, so that you may deliver him. Blessed are You who establishes the merciful covenant with mercy. Through mercy hide and disregard the transgressions of your servant. Deliver him/her from consumption from fire, for she needs your great mercy, and Your, Eternal our God, are good and forgiving to all who call upon You. Blessed are You, great in counsel and mighty in achievement in mercy. May he/she tread with righteous feet into the Garden of Eden, for that is the place of the upright, and God protects the feet of the pious. Blessed are You who gives great mercy and abundant grace to the departed of Your people Israel. Amen. May this be God's will.

The deceased is then placed on the *Taharah* table with the feet facing the door. As the group leader removes the covering sheet the following verse is recited.

And the angel of God raised his voice and spoke to those who were standing before him, saying, "Remove the soiled garments from him (the High Priest)," and he said to him, "Behold, I have removed your iniquity from you and I will clothe you in fine garments."

The body is then washed (see page 40).

During the washing, the following verses are recited while washing the respective limbs of the deceased.

His/her head is like the most fine gold; his/her heaps of curls are black as a raven.

His/her eyes are like doves beside the water-brooks, bathing in milk and finely set.

His/her cheeks are like a bed of spices, towers of sweet herbs.

His/her lips are roses dripping flowing myrrh.

His/her arms are golden cylinders set with beryl,
his/her body is as polished ivory overlaid with sapphires.
His/her legs are pillars of marble set upon foundations of fine gold,
His/her appearance like Lebanon, as select as the cedars.
His/her mouth is most sweet and he/she is altogether precious.
This is my beloved and this is my friend, daughters of Jerusalem.

.....

The fingernails and toenails are cleaned with a wooden implement, and the hair of a man is combed. Care should be taken that the fingers and other joints of the body do not bend or close. The body is washed completely clean.

Where the deceased died instantaneously through violence or accident and his body and garments are spattered with blood, no washing or *Taharah* is performed. Without removing the clothes of the deceased, a sheet (*Sovev*) is wrapped around him and he is placed in the casket. The blood-soaked earth from the accident site is should be placed in the casket if possible.

Where only part of the body was injured and covered with blood, and it might be possible to perform a *Taharah* on the remainder, a rabbinic authority should be consulted.

Only the life-blood that flows at the time of death may not be washed away. When there is other blood on the body that flowed during the lifetime from wounds or from an operation, the washing and *Taharah* are performed in the usual manner.

Where blood flows continually after death, the source of the flow is covered and bound carefully and is not washed. The cloths, which contain the blood that flowed after death, are placed in the casket at the body's feet.

Care should be taken in the case of bedsores and open wounds not to break the skin or cause blood to flow.

The Taharah – Purification

After the body has been thoroughly washed and cleansed, the members of the Sacred Society again wash their hands as above, without drying them or reciting a blessing. Double gloves should again be put on at this time. Two clean sheets, the *Tachrichim* and the casket should be readily available. The door is closed. The following is recited.

אָמַר רַבִּי אֶקִּיבָא אֲשֶׁרִיכֶם יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְנֵי מִי אַתֶּם
מְטַהְרִין וּמִי מְטַהֵר אֲתֶכֶם אֲבִיכֶם שְׁמַשְׁמִים
שְׁנֵאִסְרִי וְחִקְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם מִיָּם מְהוּרִים וּמְהוּרָתָם מְבַל
מְטַהֲרֵיכֶם וּמְבַל גְּלוּלֵיכֶם אֲסַתֵּר אֲתֶכֶם וְאוֹסֵר
מְקַנֶּה יִשְׂרָאֵל יְיָ מִהַ מְקַנֶּה מְטַהֵר אֶת הַמַּמָּאִים אֵף
מִקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְטַהֵר אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל:
מַעֲנֵן נָגִים בָּאֵר מִיָּם חַיִּים וְגוֹלִים מִן לְבָנוֹן: אִם
רָחֵץ יְיָ אֶת צוֹאת בְּנוֹת צִיּוֹן וְאֶת רִמֵּי יְרוּשָׁלַיִם
יָדִית מִתְרַבֶּה בְּרוּחַ מִשְׁפָּט וּבְרוּחַ בָּעֵר: וְחִקְתִּי
עֲלֵיכֶם מִיָּם מְהוּרִים וּמְהוּרָתָם מְבַל מְטַהֲרֵיכֶם
וּמְבַל גְּלוּלֵיכֶם אֲסַתֵּר אֲתֶכֶם:

(Translation)

Rabbi Akiva said, "You are fortunate, Israel. Before whom do you purify yourselves and who purifies you? Your Father in heaven. As it is said: And I will pour upon you pure water and you will be purified of all your defilement's, and from all of your abominations I will purify you. And it says: God is the 'reservoir'

of Israel. Just as the reservoir of the ritual bath purifies the impure, so does the Holy One of Blessing, purify Israel.

A fountain for gardens, a well of living waters and flowing streams from Lebanon. And the Eternal shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and shall have purged the blood of Jerusalem from the midst thereof by a spirit of judgment and with a searing breath. And I will pour upon you pure water and you will be purified of all your defilement's and from all of your abominations will I purify you.

.....

At this point, the *Taharah* table is rolled to a vertical position, two of the attendants dip their hands in the clean *Taharah* water and loosely hold the body in an upright position.

Nine *Kavim*, twenty-four quarts of water are poured over the head so that the water runs down over the entire body. This is the essential element of the *Taharah*, and enough of the members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* should participate so that it will be performed in this way.

In traditional congregations, women in their time of *niddah* do not fill the pails with the *Taharah* water and do not pour the water on the deceased, although they may perform any other functions this procedure, unless otherwise stated. If there are not enough women present who are not *niddah* they may perform these functions.

The nine *kavim* of water do not have to be contained in one vessel nor poured at one time. The usual procedure is that two members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* each take a pail of water containing a minimum of twelve quarts, or three pails each containing eight quarts. The water is then poured from the buckets in succession, not simultaneously, in a continuous stream over the head and body. Before the first vessel is emptied the second begins, and the pouring of the third vessel begins before the second is emptied. No more than three vessels should be used and at no time should the flow cease until the vessels have been successively emptied over the body. Should there be any break in the succession of the pouring of the water, another twenty-four quarts must be poured properly so that there should be a continuous flow.

During the pouring of the water the words *tahor hu- He is pure!* are recited three times for a male. For a woman *t'horah hi-She is pure!* is recited three times.

Once the *Taharah* is performed, the table is dried and the deceased is completely and covered with a clean sheet.

Again only necessary talking pertaining to performing the mitzvah of *Taharah* is to occur during the *Taharah* and the dressing of the body. Handling of the deceased is to be gentle at all times. The participants should feel themselves in the presence of God, for human beings are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God.

Tachrichim – Shrouds

Before dressing the deceased in the *Tachrichim*, the following verses are recited:

שׁוּשׁ אֲשִׁישׁ בִּי הָגֵל נִשְׂשִׁי בְּאַלְהֵי בִי הַלְבִּישְׁנִי
בְּגָדֵי יִשַׁע סָעִיל צִדְקָה יְעֻשְׁנִי כְּהָתָן יִכְתֹּן
פָּאֵר וּבְבִלְתָּה תַעֲרֶה בִּי יְהוָה וְאִמְרָה יְשִׁימוּ צִנּוֹף כְּתוֹר
עַל רֹאשׁוֹ וְיִשְׁימוּ הַצִּנּוֹף הַכְּתוֹר עַל רֹאשׁוֹ וְיִלְבִּישׁוּהוּ
בְּגָדִים וּכְלָאֵךְ יְיָ עֹבֵד: בִּי כְּאֶרֶץ תּוֹצִיא צִדְקָהּ וּבְגָנָה
וְיִשְׁתֶּה הַלְבִּישָׁהּ בִּן יְיָ אֱלֹהִים וְצִדְקָהּ צִדְקָה וְתִהְיֶה נֶגֶד
כָּל הַמַּיִם: וְנִשְׁחָךְ יְיָ תִכְבֹּד וְהַלְבִּישׁ בְּצִדְקָתוֹת נִשְׁחָךְ
וְעֲשִׂיתִיךָ יְהוָה יְהוָה בִּן רִחָם וּבְסוּפָא סִימָה אֲשֶׁר
לֹא יִכְזָבוּ בִימֵיהֶ:

(Translation)

I will greatly rejoice in the Eternal, my soul shall be joyful in my God, for You have clothed me with the garments of salvation; You have covered me with the robe of righteousness as a bridegroom puts on priestly glory and a bride adorns herself with her jewels. And I said, "Let them set a pure headdress upon his head," and they set the pure headdress upon his head, and they clothed him with garments, and the angel of God stood by. For as the earth brings forth her growth, and as the garden causes the things that are sown in it to spring forth, so the Eternal God will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the

nations. And the Eternal will guide you continually and satisfy your soul in time of drought, and make strong your bones, and you shall be like a watered garden and like a spring of water whose waters never fail.

The Order of Dressing of a Deceased Male

1. The *mitznefet* (headdress) is placed on the head and drawn down to cover the entire head, neck and the nape of the neck. The following is recited: *"uv-mitz-nefet bad yitz-naf"* *"And with the linen headdress shall he be attired."*
2. The following is recited while the linen breeches are drawn over the feet and up the legs to the waist. *"U'meech-n'sei bad yih'yu al b'saro-and the linen breeches shall be over his flesh."* The ends of the band at the waistline are wound around by the two participants four times, each twist being counted aloud by a Hebrew letter: *Alef, bet, gimel, dalet*. The band is then tied with two bows pointing towards the head. A band is then tied above the right ankle and another over the left with two slip-knot bows, after twisting the ends of the band around each other four times as described above.
3. Then reciting *"k'tonet bad kadosh yil-bosh – He shall put on the holy linen tunic."* Two participants, one on each side, put the sleeves of the *K'tonet* over the hands. Then the *K'tonet* is slipped over the head and drawn down over the body covering most of it. The band near the neck is tied in the same fashion as the band on the trousers.
4. Some earth is sprinkled on the *B'rit Milah*, reciting: *"Ot brit kodesh v'khee-payr ad-ma-to amo – The sign of the covenant of holiness and*

God's land shall atone for God's people." (Care should be taken care of not to soil the *Tachrichim*).

5. The *Kittel* is put on in the same manner as the *K'tonet*. Care should be taken when putting on the *Kittel* that the sleeves of the *K'tonet* are not moved from their position and that they extend to the wrist. The *Kittel* is tied at the neck in the same manner as the *K'tonet*.
6. The *Chagorah* (belt) is wrapped around the waist over the *Kittel* while the participants recite: *Uv'av-net bahd yach-gor – And he shall gird himself with a linen belt.*" The *chagorah* is twisted by two participants four times as above, counting, "*alef, bet, gimel, dalet,*" and then tied with three bows pointing towards the head, shaped to resemble the letter "Shin." The deceased himself signifies the Hebrew letter "Yud" spelling the Hebrew name of God Almighty. The following verse is then recited: "*V'El Shaddai yee-teyn la-chem ra-cha-meem – And may God Almighty give you mercy.*"
7. The linen bag is then filled with some straw and some Israel earth and is placed in the casket as a headrest.
8. Some earth from Israel is sprinkled in the empty casket.
9. The *Sovev* is spread diagonally over the inside of the casket, overlapping the sides.
10. The *Tallit* is put in the Casket over the *Sovev* so as to be closer to the body than the *Sovev*. One of the *Tzitzit* is cut from the *Tallit* and is tucked into the *chagorah*.

11. The deceased is then gently lifted and placed into the casket, while the participants say: "*V'lo ya-vo-u lir-ot kiv-loa et ha-ko-desh va-mey-tu – And they shall not come in to see the covering of the holy objects, lest they die.*"
12. Pieces of earthenware are placed on each eye and on the mouth.
13. The *Tallit* is wrapped around the body.
14. The *Sovev* is wrapped around the body – first around the feet, then the left side followed by the right side and finally, over the head.

The Order of Dressing a Deceased Woman

1. The hair is not combed. It is taken loosely, not tied or pinned or clipped or braided. It is then placed into the bonnet that fits over the hair. This cap is tied with a bow.
2. The pants are drawn by two participants up to the waist. The band at the waistline is wound around by the two participants four times, each twist counted aloud by a Hebrew letter: "*alef, bet, gimel, dalet,*" then the band is tied with two bows pointing toward the head.
3. A band is tied below the right knee and another below the left knee.
4. Two participants, one on each side, put the sleeves of the blouse on the hands and slip the garment over the head. It is drawn down the body to cover most of it. The band at the neck is tied in the same way as the band of the pants.
5. The *Kittel* is put on by two participants in the same manner as the blouse. Care should be taken, when putting on the *Kittel* that the sleeves of the blouse are not moved from their position and that they extend to the wrists.
6. The *Chagorah* is now tied over the *Kittel* around the waist as a belt. It is twisted four times by two of the participants as above and tied with three bows in the shape of the Hebrew letter "Shin." The deceased herself

signifies the letter "Yud," spelling *Shin, Dalet* and *Yud*, the name of God Almighty. The following verse is recited: "*V'El Shaddai yee-teyn lachem ra-cha-mim – And God Almighty give you mercy.*"

7. The apron is put on over the Kittel and tucked into the *chagorah*.
8. The face cover is put over the face and a bow is tied.
9. A small linen bag is filled with straw, together with some earth from Israel and is placed in the casket as a headrest.
10. Some earth from Israel is sprinkled in the casket.
11. The *Sovev* is then spread diagonally over the inside of the casket, overlapping the sides.
12. The body is then gently placed into the casket while the participants say:
"V'lo ya-vo'u lir-ot kiv-loa et ha-ka-dosh va-mey-tu – And they shall not come in to see the covering of the holy objects, lest they die."
13. Some earth from Israel is placed on the eyes, heart and sex organ. Care must be given not to dirty the shrouds. Also, make certain no earth enters the mouth. The participants recite: "*V'khee-peyr ad-mah-to amo – And God's earth shall atone for God's people.*"
14. Pieces of earthenware are placed over each eye and the mouth.
15. If the woman ordinarily prayed with a *Tallit*, the *Tallit* is wrapped around the body.
16. The *Sovev* is then wrapped around the body – first around the feet, then the left side, the right side and finally the head.

Closing the Casket

All articles that must be buried with the deceased, such as loose hairs, false teeth and clothing containing blood, are placed at the foot of the casket. Any clothes, adornments or jewelry which were firmly attached on the body at the time of death, may not be used again and should also be buried with the body.

Mentioning the name of the deceased and that of his or her father and mother, the leader asks forgiveness on behalf of the *Hevra Kaddisha* for any commission or omission on their part which may have offended the deceased.

The casket is now covered and pegged. It is not re-opened under any circumstance.

The participants then recite:

הנה מטתו של שלמה ששים גבורים סביב לה
מגבורי ישראל: כלם אהיו חרם כלמדי מלחמה
איש חרבו על גרבו כשהם בחילות: וזהו
וזהו: וארץ לפניו אלה ויהנה: ושא יי לפני
אלה וישם לה שלום: גלבו ונקמותו ויהי כונת הנדו
ורית לו בלגנו: ראיתי והנה מנורת זהב בזה ונזה
על ראשה ושבועת גרוהיה עליה שבועת ושבועת
מזקות לנרות אשר על ראשה: וסגים וחתים עליה
אחד סיסין הנזה ואחד על שבאמה:
כי אתה זה הגדול לפני ורובל מישור והוציא את
האבן הראשה תשואות הן הן לה: וזהו ונזה
גא בזה ארני באשר דברת לאמר: ואולם הו אמי
וישלא קבור יי את כל הארץ:

(Translation)

Behold, it is the couch of Solomon. Sixty mighty men are about it, of the mighty men of Israel. They are all swordsmen and expert in war. Each man has his sword on his thigh because of dread in the night. May God bless you and keep you. May God shine the Divine face unto you and be gracious unto you. May God lift the Divine face unto you and give you peace. God's branches shall spread and God's beauty hall be as the olive tree, and God's fragrance as Lebanon. Who are You, O Mighty Mountain? Before Zerubbabel You shall become a plain, and God shall bring forth the key stone with shouts of Grace, grace, be upon it! And now, may the might of God be great, as You have spoken, saying, "But as truly as I live, the glory of the Eternal shall engulf all the earth."

After the Taharah and the Dressing

Before removing the casket from the *Taharah* room all the *Taharah* vessels except those which remain must be removed. The casket is then carried out of the room feet first. The following is recited:

וּבְנִסּוּעַ הַבִּשְׁעָן יוֹרְדוּ אוֹתוֹ הַלְוִיִּם וּבְהִנּוּת הַבִּשְׁעָן
יָקִימוּ אוֹתוֹ הַלְוִיִּם וְהָיָה הַקָּרֵב יוֹסֵת: נְהִי
בְנִסּוּעַ הָאָרוֹן וַיֵּאָכֵל מִטֶּחַח קִימָה יי וַיִּפְּצוּ אוֹיְבָיו
וַיָּנוּסוּ מִשְׁנֵאִיךְ מִשְׁנֵיךְ: כִּי מִלְּאֲבִיו יֵצֵא לָךְ לְשִׁדְרִיךְ
בְּכָל דְּרָכֶיךָ: עַל כָּפֹיִם יִשְׁאֲוֶיךָ שֶׁן הַגּוֹף בְּאֶבֶן
בְּנֵתֶךָ: לֹא תֵאָמֶר אֲבִיךָ רָעָה וְנִגַּע לֹא יִקְרַב בְּאַהֲלֶיךָ
יי אִישׁ בְּלִחְמָה יי שְׂמִי: יי וְלֵהֶם לָכֵם נִאֲתָם
הַתַּרְשִׁינִי:

(Translation)

And when the Tabernacle sets forward, the Levites shall take it down,

And when the Tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up, and the stranger who approaches shall be put to death.

And when the Ark set forward Moses would say, " Rise up, O Eternal, and let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee before You.

For He will give His angels charge over you to watch you in all your paths.

They Shall bear you upon their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone.

No evil shall befall you, nor shall any plague come near your tent.

The Eternal is a warrior. God is His name.

The Eternal will fight for you and you shall hold your peace.

.....

After the casket is removed, the people leave the room.

Appendix B

Session One

On the Eve of Yom Kippur in the morning, the *Hevra Kaddisha* met in the sanctuary of Temple Emanu-El. We placed chairs in a circle on the bima and the morning began with a discussion commencing with the question: Is Yom Kippur A Rehearsal for Death? The members of the Hevra were taken aback by the question and then I began make specific points:

- All males in a traditional synagogue wear the white robe worn by the clergy in a Reform synagogue, why? It represents the shroud that one is buried in. White symbolizes purity. The term *Taharah*, or *tahor*, means pure. Since all Jewish dead are buried in white shrouds, it is a symbol of humility and a contrite heart (Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 197).
- Laws of mourning are invoked on the Day of Atonement. One is not permitted to wash, anoint, wear leather shoes or participate in sexual intercourse (Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 209).
- A final confession is recited by the dying person, as the Rabbis said: "May my death be atonement for my sins" (Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 193).

Following discussion the whole group stood before the open Ark and recited both the final confession recited by an individual near death and then the final readings from the Neilah Service on Yom Kippur.

"May God and God of my ancestors, accept my prayer. Do not turn away. Forgive me for all the times I may have disappointed You. I am aware of the wrongs I have committed. May my pain and suffering serve as atonement. Forgive my shortcomings, for against You have I sinned.

May it be Your will, Adonai my God and God of my ancestors, that I live now with a clear conscience and in accordance with Your will. Send a *refuah shlemah*, a complete healing, to me and to all who suffer.

My life and death are in Your hands, Adonai my God. May it be Your will to heal me.

Guardian of the bereaved, protect my beloved family; our souls are bound together. In Your hands lies my spirit.

Hear, O Israel: Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.

Adonai is God. Adonai is God." (Moreh Derech, D 23-24)

“Whither can I go from Your spirit? Whither can I flee from Your presence? If I ascent to the heavens, You are there! If I take up the wings of the morning, and dwell on the ocean’s farthest shore, even there Your hand will lead me, Your right hand will hold me. And if I say: Surely the darkness will conceal me, night will hide me from view, even the darkness is not too dark for You; the dark is clear as the day.

When I consider the heavens, the work of Your hands, and when I gaze at the measureless sea of space and the endless host of stars that sail in it; and when I set out to understand this marvel and its tremendous Maker – then Your greatness and power overwhelm me; Your infinite majesty makes me tremble with awe. For the worlds beyond count are but a breath of Your spirit, the lucent suns only beams of Your light. O what are we, that You have given us eyes to see something of Your truth? What am I, that You have given me thought to fathom something of Your purpose? Yet upon the earth with all its abundance and beauty, forests dancing with life, mountains rising like prayers, seas roaring their creative hymn – with all the mysteries of the boundless depths and the immeasurable heights – You have chosen us to proclaim Your grandeur and to voice the longing of all being for You, Sovereign of the universe and fountain of life! In woman and man, children of dust and offspring of heaven, You have blended two worlds: perishable earth and immortal soul; finite matter, locked into time and space, and infinite spirit, which endures through all eternity. You have given us dominion over the works of Your hands, and placed all things under our care. You have commanded us to live at peace with all living creatures, and to walk softly in their presence.

But there is that in us which darkens the soul. Called to a life of righteousness, we rebel: arrogance possesses us. The passions that rage within us drown the voice of conscience: good and evil, virtue and vice, love and hate contend for the mastery of our lives. Again and again we complain of the struggle, forgetting that the power to choose is the glory and greatness of our being. When we succumb, life loses its beauty, and within us sounds the voice of judgment: Where are you? How you have fallen, O children of the Most High!

But sure as is Your judgment, O God, surer still is Your mercy. It is not the death of sinners You demand – only that they return to You, return to life. The gates of Your forgiveness are open wide, and all who seek to enter may be at one with you.

Aware of our weakness, Eternal God, we have come before You, longing for Your presence, Your light, your peace. We have reflected with anguish on a life misused and filled with regrets, on opportunities neglected and promises unfulfilled. We have struggled to reach You, to turn back to You and to Your law. Accept then our penitent spirits; be with us as our hope for the future.

Now, as evening falls, light dawns within us; hope and trust revive. The shadow that darkened our spirit is vanished; and through the passing cloud there breaks, with the last rays of the setting sun, the radiance of Your forgiving peace. We are restored, renewed by Your love.

How can we find words to thank You for Your goodness, and how can words alone be fitting thanks? And so we make this pledge: We will thank You with our lives; we will offer to You the work of our hands. Fill then our heart, our life, our work, with a constant love for You, God of the universe, Creator of all life, Source of all being. Then shall our souls rejoice and sing: "You have turned my grief into dancing, released me from my anguish, and surrounded me with gladness: Eternal, I shall give thanks to You forever" (CCAR, pages 521-522).

Following the recitation of these two prayers we sat and began our group experience. The following is a portion of that verbatim:

C=Cantor Colbert

P1=Participant #1 and so on around the circle

C1: Can you share your feelings with me?

P1:1 If I can stop crying. I am so moved. I never put the whole thing together. I have faced my own end. I feel that I need to work on myself.

P4:1 I never give myself the time to think about what I have done. I am always so busy. To say the final confession really brings life into focus.

P13:1 I don't know what I expected. I joined the *Hevra Kaddisha* because I love this temple. I was here from the very beginning. I always wanted to give the congregation a million dollars but I knew I never would be able to. Now I can give to the congregation, something very few are willing to share. I have found this work to be the most rewarding of my life.

P2:1 I think I finally found myself. I know that life is transitory. This experience has taught me to let go of stuff and get on with life. Life is too short.

C2: Can you say more about that?

- P2:2 I have carried a lot guilt with me. When my younger brother was dying and I was being a selfish child, it wasn't until much later after he died, that I considered my behavior. I have never asked for forgiveness, yet I have felt terribly guilty about the way I behaved. Now I know that the gates of forgiveness are never closed.
- P5:1 I don't think I will ever look at Yom Kippur the same. I never understood the connection between death and atonement for sin. We don't talk about that in the Reform movement.
- P6:1 No. I never learned any of this.
- P10:1 I feel lighter knowing that there is always the possibility of forgiveness. I never remember staying for Neilah and I don't think I ever heard the final prayer. It is really beautiful. I will stay till the end of services tomorrow. I am making a commitment.
- P16:1 I never thought this whole experience would make me feel good. It does. I just feel better about life.
- C3: What does that mean?
- P16:2 There is meaning in life. We live it and with this ritual I feel that God cares. I never thought much about it before, but I have a deep sense that God truly does care.
- P18:1 I agree. The prayers we read and the idea that we prepare for our own end each year has changed me. I am not sure how yet, but I feel change. Life seems more important. Not things, but life!

The experience went on for about an hour and then we broke into small groups and we developed an opening prayer to be recited at the beginning of each *Taharah*:

Opening Prayer

Creator of Life and Death, we come before you as a humble group of people asking for your guidance as we perform the rites of *Taharah* and *Tachrichim*. We ask forgiveness for any indignity we may cause to _____. We pray that You will help us grow and become better people willing to perform Your holy tasks. Eternal God, thank You for this holy opportunity to do Your work.

Amen

The group was then asked to keep a journal of their thoughts and feelings as they prepared to do a *Taharah* and their feelings following the experience.

Session Two

The second session took place the week prior to Chanukah since many of our group would be on vacation during the winter break. After a brief discussion on what it means to give honor to the dead, we discussed a reading assignment that had been given a month earlier which was Chapter Ten in The Death of Death by Neil Gillman. In this chapter discusses his own personal belief of afterlife. We then had a very good discussion what members of the Hevra believe about afterlife. Following another group experience the members had a chance to write in their journals. Feedback was requested on the opening ritual and many felt that it gave them a greater sense of holiness when performing the *Taharah*. A small sub-committee stayed to write a closing prayer.

Closing Prayer

The soul which You God have given to _____, has returned to You. We have prepared the vessel in which the soul resided to return to the dust. May You protect the soul of _____ and may it enter the world to come. Amen.

Session Three

A two-hour group session took place. We broke into five groups and each group had a facilitator from the Jewish Family and Career Services in Atlanta. During the small group meetings issues concerning practice and observance were confronted.

Session Four

The Community-wide *Hevra Kaddisha* dinner on the 7th of Adar was held at Temple Emanu-El. The Orthodox community including the *Mara d'Atra* (the head Orthodox Rabbi) of Atlanta was present. A *D'var Torah* was delivered by one of the many Orthodox rabbis in attendance and I was asked to give the principal address. Upon the conclusion of my talk, which was the story of the establishment of the first Reform *Hevra Kaddisha* in Atlanta, I received a standing ovation. All of our members, save for two, one who had surgery that week and one who had to be out of town, were present. Many of the more traditional community came forward and asked if our members would be willing to substitute when they had a vacancy. Of course, our members agreed to do so and were extremely flattered. Following the dinner we had a brief group experience and found that we have four new applicants who wish to be trained.

Cantor Scott E. Colbert
Address to the Community-wide *Hevra Kaddisha* Dinner
March 1, 2001/7 Adar 5761

My first words will be simple and in Hebrew. *Todah Rabbah. Todah Rabbah*, thank you for coming to Temple Emanu-El, a Reform congregation, and letting us host you. Tonight is truly a momentous occasion. I can hardly believe that we, the members of the *Hevra Kaddisha* at Temple Emanu-El are celebrating our second anniversary and you have come to celebrate with us. (Say *Shehecheyanu*).

Tonight is also the seventh of *Adar*. It is tonight that we commemorate the *Yahrzeit* of *Moshe Rabbenu, alav hashalom*. It was the humility of *Moshe*, I believe that gave rise to the *Hevrei Kaddisha*. When we look in our own time, the extravagance that is lavished by many on funerals, only diminishes the priceless work of God who created human beings *b'tzelem Elohim*. From its earliest days, Temple Emanu-El has frowned on such extravagance and negotiated a Temple Emanu-El package with our hosts.

Let me share with you the story of how Temple Emanu-El chose to re-institute the *Hevra Kaddisha* into our community. It didn't begin with an idea two or three years ago, rather, it was really organic to the make-up of this very unique congregation. When I arrived in Atlanta for my initial interview some fourteen years ago, my wife and I noticed that this was a congregation that appreciated tradition and enjoyed study.

Over the years, I have had the opportunity along with our Senior Rabbi, Stan Davids, to teach many different courses. But I remember when he came for his interview

in the spring of '92, that he was surprised and delighted that I was teaching a weekly course on the Shulchan Arukh. We were meeting and continue to meet each Wednesday morning at 7:30 and we study. Then we were studying Yoreh Deah, now the group which has grown, decided to study TaNaKh, not p'shat, but rather from Mikraot G'dolot. One year, we may finally finish B'reysheet.

As you can see, this congregation studies and learns. This congregation also has grown. In fact, it has doubled in size over the years. Sometimes the Rabbis and I heard rumors that said we were losing our ability to care for our members. The reality of course, is that even when the congregation was small, those who were new, did not necessarily feel a part of the kehillah immediately. Once one becomes active in a synagogue, then it is *their* synagogue. But in discussing what could be done to alleviate this perception, I was meeting with the Rabbi and suggested that maybe we should show our members how much we really do care and create a *Hevra Kaddisha*. He looked at me as though I had lost my mind. He didn't object to the rituals of *Taharah* and *Tachrichim*, in fact, many of you from other Hevrei Kaddisha have prepared many of our late members. But, he was rightfully worried, where would we ever get people to staff this holy society.

The more we discussed it, the more enthused I became. I began writing articles introducing the concept into our synagogue bulletin. Then, I was on an Atlanta Jewish Federation Mission to Israel with a delegation from our congregation. One of our members experienced a death in their family and had to return to Atlanta. I spent the

night with the family in their hotel room in Yerushalayim, the next morning, a participant came up to me on the bus and said, "do we have a *Hevra Kaddisha* at Temple Emanu-El?" When I told her not at this time, she replied, if you ever start one let me know. Well, let me now introduce you to the overall chairperson of our *Hevra Kaddisha*, R.H. R please stand up. Thank you for all you have done to bring this incredible instrument of *chesed* to our community.

I have been working towards a doctorate at the Hebrew Union College in New York for the past two years. My thesis project, which is almost complete, is entitled the Establishment and Perpetuation of a *Hevra Kaddisha* in a Reform Congregation. Word has gotten around that we have established such a group. I have received calls from a number of congregations around the country for instruction on how to set up a *Hevra*.

The manifest question I am always asked is how you get members. But that is not the real question. The real question is WHY?

During my studies, I have had the privilege to study with some of the brightest scholars in Conservative and Reform Judaism. Rabbi Neil Gillman in his book The Death of Death, underscores for me the true reason why we have established our practices. The TaNaKh does not speak of body and soul the way the Greeks influenced other cultures. The TaNaKh sees the *neshamah*, the *nefesh*, as way of speaking of the living person.

Let me tell you about *neshamah*. When we first established our *Hevra Kaddisha* I asked each person why he or she learn about and perform this sacred task. I was curious as to what drives a person to do what they do. Here are some of the answers:

At the end of life, most of us will die in a hospital. We will be in an impersonal institution. We will not be handled with love. I want to be the last one to prepare an individual for their final journey, I want to treat them with the respect and dignity that they lost during their last struggle.

Another said, I will never be a millionaire. I have always wanted to give a million dollars to my synagogue. I can't. But I can do this.

And another said I want to bring shalom, peace and healing, to one who has suffered.

After we had performed several *Taharachs*, the answer was always the same. It brought me a feeling of peace and a connection with God that I had never felt before. I don't need to be thanked or recognized. I know that I did something good for someone who could not do it for himself.

Friends, in a world where there is so much difference, the reality we know is that we are ultimately all the same. May you who bring purity and peace to this world know only blessing, for each of you are truly gifts from the Almighty.

Exit Interview

This interview is to be conducted by a member of the clergy of the congregation.

1. Why have you decided to no longer participate in the *Hevra Kaddisha*?
2. Did you find the experience meaningful at the beginning?
3. Is there anything that the professional staff of the congregation could have done to help you continue your service?
4. Did you find the educational sessions meaningful?
5. Would you participate again in a *Hevra Kaddisha* in the future?

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