



The Chevra Kadisha of Central New Hampshire

by Ruth Chevion and Jeff Klein

The “Chevra Kadisha of Central New Hampshire” is called by this long name to distinguish it from three other holy societies in New Hampshire. There is one near the seacoast, one in Nashua, and one in Bethlehem New Hampshire. Each is a volunteer group committed to providing *tahara* for the people in its geographic area, or for the members of one specific temple.

There are about 300 such Chevraot in the United States and Canada. They all do essentially the same thing - they recruit and maintain a group of trained individuals, men for men and women for women, who know how to do the physical aspects of preparing a deceased person for burial. This includes washing in a particular way, dressing in white linen garments, saying prayers and psalms, placing in the wooden coffin, and closing the coffin on its wooden pegs.

The Chevra that serves Temple Israel also serves Temple Adath Yeshurun and Temple Beth Jacob, and will perform when called upon for Jews who are unaffiliated, whether in the central New Hampshire area or beyond. A *tahara* was once performed in a backyard by the women of this Chevra for a family that wanted the ritual done at their home.

But usually, *tahara* is performed in the preparation room of a funeral parlor. The cooperation of our local funeral homes is essential.

The Chevra Kadisha of Central New Hampshire currently has 14 members, with representation from all the local congregations. The group was initiated in 1998.

Our initial training was provided by the members of the long standing Chevra Kadisha at Temple Beth Abraham. That training consisted of day long demonstrations, explanations, and practice, followed by observation in their funeral home in Nashua.

After that, their members came to our first few *tahara* calls until we were ready to go on our own. We still maintain a mentor/mentee relationship to the Temple Beth Abraham Chevra Kadisha.

We are now doing our own training sessions for new members as they come in. We are always interested in

interviewing new members. What does it take? Basically we look for a certain *kavanah*, feeling, in our members. We don't ask people to keep strict kosher, or to be in temple every week, but we seek out individuals with a commitment to Jewish tradition and a willingness to look past what others might find uncomfortable, to provide this meaningful service to others and their families.

What can you expect as part of Chevra Kadisha? Basically it's being willing to drop everything when called. For example, Gary Singer told us an anecdote about his father Irving Singer z"l getting up in the middle of dinner, dropping everything when he was called to perform *tahara*.

We are not usually in such a hurry, but within a day or two of the call, members gather to do their duty to the deceased. Jeff Klein sends out texts to reach men. Ruth Chevion gathers the women. Ruth or Jeff coordinate with the family and the funeral director as far as setting the time ahead of the funeral. Our Chevra once reached out for a rabbinical ruling on whether to perform on *shmini atzeret*. *Tahara* may not be performed on Shabbat or holidays.

What else? *Tahara* is famously the only gift you give someone without getting any thanks. The deceased cannot thank us, and because the identities of the members is not public knowledge, we are not thanked by the family either. For some reason, not receiving thanks becomes part of the special joy of performing this mitzvah.

Once a year, on or about Adar 7, we celebrate the birthday of Moshe Rabbeinu, by meeting together, men and women, for a social event. We've been hosted in some beautiful homes. Last year it was dinner together at Piccola Italia Ristorante with spouses and partners of members, and what a good time we had. This year, we plan to show a movie at the Red River Theatre in Concord followed by discussion and refreshments.

Interested? Contact:

Jeff Klein (jklein@comcast.net) or

Ruth Chevion (ruth@mcttelecom.com).