

The Sanctity of the Dead

The Role of the Executive Director Regarding Death and Burial



Thesis for Fellow of Temple Administration

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“Life is for the living. Death is for the dead.
Let life be like music. And death a note unsaid.”
~ Langston Hughes

ABSTRACT

Death is forever. Researching death is even longer.

There exists endless literature on death and dying: the religious dogma, the dying rituals, the burial rituals, the subsequent mourning rituals, and the great superstitions. It is both stunning and overwhelming.

Currently, I am privileged to be involved with a small group of individuals tasked to restore an abandoned Jewish cemetery, and as a result, I have concentrated exclusively on: the development of American Jewish burial practices into modernity, the sacred charge of Jews to preserve those graves, what my group is doing in that endeavor, and the role(s) of the Executive Director in his/her congregations regarding death and burial.

INTRODUCTION

In March of 2007, I began my employ as the Temple Administrator of Beth David Reform Congregation in Gladwyne, Pennsylvania, just outside of Center City Philadelphia. During my first week there, the then Rabbi asked me if I knew about ‘*the cemetery*,’ which I had not. So we got into his car, and we drove about 300 yards up the busy street, turned onto a long and winding private driveway, and then all at once, we came upon two crumbling stone piers.





We parked just in front of the two pillars and proceeded to cautiously cross through them. Just inside, to my horror and amazement, were hundreds of graves whose markers were mostly fallen over in varying degrees of disrepair and littered with broken tree limbs and weed overgrowth. As we began to walk the site, there were toppled headstones, footstones, and cradle graves as far as the eye could see, along with different sorts of wrought iron gates and fencing lying flat on the ground or propped up against trees presumably near the family plots they once designated.

I was aghast at what I was seeing. The markers were predominately written in Yiddish, but the English dates of birth and death were clear; mostly from the nineteenth century, and many were children.



The rabbi informed me that the cemetery had been caught up for years in litigation with attorneys from Beth David representing pro se the descendants of those buried, versus a building contractor who had planned to disinter the graves and build homes on the land. That land in Gladwyne would fetch a million dollars an acre. A court battle ensued, and in the end our congregation was awarded the cemetery with the provisions that there were to be no more interments and Beth David was required to form an independent maintenance association.

By the looks of things it was obvious that the maintenance part had not yet happened. When I inquired why, the rabbi informed me that it had been many years since Beth David was given the cemetery and that for reasons he did not know the maintenance organization never got off the ground. There and then I made it my mission to learn all that I could.

After speaking with several past presidents of the congregation, I discovered that one of them, Stephen Finkelman (who later became the historian of the cemetery) had drafted a Management Services Agreement along with Articles of Incorporation, but that the documents had been in the hands of a lawyer for review for many years who, for one reason or another, was just sitting on them. For months I nagged and pestered the attorney who finally agreed to turn them over to me. From there I contacted an abstract company to do a title search and acquire Title and Deed for the cemetery. I turned over all of my research to Stephen Finkelman who had amassed a large history of his own, and together we set out to accomplish what Beth David had been tasked to do so many years prior.

I. EVOLUTION OF JEWISH BURIAL PRACTICES IN NORTH AMERICA

A Brief History

Biblical and Talmudic Roots

For centuries, people have marked graves and commemorated the dead. Stones were originally used by prehistoric man to keep wild animals from digging up the gravesites.

In Biblical times, the general custom for the disposal of the dead was typically by burial in family owned caves. The burial of Sarah is the first account mentioned in Torah, the Cave of the Patriarchs or the Cave of Machpelah that Abraham purchased for his family after Sarah died (Genesis 23:8-17). The next described burial in the cave of Machpelah is that of Abraham, who was buried there by his sons Isaac and Ishmael (Genesis 25:9), and later the deaths of Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah, all of whom were buried in the cave (Genesis.49:31). The first assertion of the use of a tombstone is when Rachel died on the road to Bethlehem, Jacob "set up a pillar upon her grave" (Genesis 35:20).

In Talmudic times, Babylonian Jewry constructed cemeteries in open fields. These cemeteries were never considered hallowed ground; rather they were established to "isolate corpses from the kohanim," (Schneider 87) and as such, it became necessary to somehow mark the graves to keep the Kohanim from stumbling onto them. The Mishnah Shekalim 1:1 says that on the first of Adar each year, "the graves were marked with white plaster so that the priests should see them and avoid them, and since the white plaster would wear away it was necessary to re-mark the graves every year" (Freehoff 148). Perhaps these markings were tombstones.

According to Alfred J. Kolatch in *The Jewish Book of Why*, the establishment of a separate location for the burial of Jews is not specifically cited in the Bible, Talmud, or in any of the codes of Jewish law. In Talmudic times, while ancestral tombs continued to be used, public burial plots had been established. In one reference, the Talmud suggests that a righteous man may not be buried next to a sinner/worshiper of idols. Since idolatry was a practice of non-Jews, this is probably the rabbinic foundation for insisting that Jews be buried in their own cemeteries. Traditionally, the establishment of a burial place for the Jewish dead became the highest priority in every Jewish community, even more so than the building of a synagogue" (Kolatch 89-90).

Historically from the moment of death through burial, the entire community was responsible for arranging the proper disposal of the dead. "Obligations were based on the need to fulfill the mitzvah of *gemilut hasadim*, acts of loving-kindness, toward the living and the dead. Among the community, these communal acts of kindness built up a sense of solidarity, a sense of security, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of destiny" (Schneider 92), thus planting the seeds for the creation of burial societies, or chevra kadisha.

In The Old World, the local chevra kadisha were sanctioned by both the community and the rabbis, and they were benevolent societies made up of volunteers originally established to bury the poor, the stranger and the loner. These burial societies soon established the rituals guiding the mitzvah of *chesed shel emet*, preparing a body for burial according to *halacha* (Jewish law), considered the truest act of kindness. The chevra kadisha continued to evolve, and these organizations began to visit the sick, as well as maintain the cemeteries, assign the burial plots, pay the gravediggers, stipulate the regulations for erecting monuments, and arrange rites for the house of mourning. It was a great honor to belong to a burial society (Schneider 93).

The New World

According to Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism a History*, the first known community of Jews in the New World was established in September of 1654 in New Amsterdam, a part of the Dutch Colony of New Netherland in what is present day New York State (Sarna 1). This community, made up of approximately 24 individuals, was primarily comprised of Jewish refugees that had been forcibly exiled from Portugal, Brazil, and Spain as a result of the Inquisition. In time, some ventured to New Amsterdam from the Netherlands, London, and the Dutch held islands of the Caribbean. This group knew that religious persecution, disease, etc., could result in death at any time, triggering one of the first orders of business, the establishment of a separate Jewish burial ground.

The community of Jews continued in New Amsterdam until the British took New Amsterdam in 1665 and renamed it New York. While Jews were allowed to remain, they were forced to worship only in their own homes. Public worship was not allowed until the turn of the 18th century when the Jews of New York gathered in rented space on Mill Street, today South William Street. This congregation of people became a synagogue known as Kahal Kadosh Shearith Israel (Holy Congregation Remnant of Israel) (Sarna 12) and became the one governing body that assumed responsibility for all aspects of Jewish life, including oversight of the synagogue cemetery. Until the early 19th century, this shaped the way New World American synagogues would function as the singular governing religious Jewish body, including determining who could and could not be buried in its cemetery. This overarching one authority was first challenged in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with the rise of the independent sick and burial society or chevra kadisha.

The Philadelphia Connection

In 1682, when William Penn established Philadelphia, Jewish trading agents from New York took note of the vast opportunities there, which brought many merchants to Philadelphia. According to their website written by Shirley Milgrim and the archivists of Congregation Mikveh Israel of Philadelphia, PA, one such merchant was Nathan Levy, a pious Jew who moved to Philadelphia in 1737. Less than a year later when one of his children died, Levy sought “hallowed ground in which to bury his child in accordance with Jewish law and appealed to William Penn's son, Thomas Penn, Chief of the Proprietary Government of Pennsylvania for a private place in which to bury his child” (Milgram). In 1740, the first permanent cemetery was established in Philadelphia, and it is the oldest tangible evidence of Jewish communal life in

Philadelphia. Three decades later, Congregation Mikveh Israel formally became a synagogue (and the governing Jewish authority in Philadelphia) dating its origins to the establishment of a cemetery (Milgram).

Jonathan Sarna indicates that by the end of the 18th century, there were less than 50 Jews in Philadelphia and the governing Sephardic Mikveh Israel listed among its rolls, “fewer than a dozen paying members” (Sarna 52). By virtue of its small numbers, Mikveh Israel forfeited its authority, giving rise to a new governing authority in 1795, the chevra kadisha Hebrew German Society, an Ashkenazic independent sick and burial society for immigrant German Jews. In 1802 this chevra kadisha became known as Congregation Rodeph Shalom, which still stands as a Reform Temple in Philadelphia (Sarna 52).

The 19th and 20th Centuries

In 1877 when the first census of the Jewish population was taken, America’s Jews increased to 250,000, which represented “a rate 15 times greater than that of the nation as a whole” (Sarna 63). Then in the 1880’s due to the pogroms in Russia, almost four million Jews emigrated to America, a land they believed knew “no distinction of race or faith, a country earlier where Jews from Germany, Spain and Portugal had already called home” (Schneider 106).

Once in the New World, America’s Jews encountered a new set of problems. Instead of the traditional ways of the old country where the entire community was responsible for arranging the proper disposal of the dead, these new immigrants were faced with a society in which anonymity, institutionalization, and social abandonment of the elderly, the ill, and the dying were growing in acceptance. People no longer died amidst a gathering of family members, but rather in hospitals. The moment of death was verified by doctors, not feasters, and the deceased was no longer guarded by a *shomer*; rather an institution, the morgue, took custody of the body. Then funeral directors prepared the deceased for the final rites, which included following the American practice of embalming. People were no longer buried in simple coffins, rather in fancy caskets, and burials took place in all kinds of cemeteries: public, cooperative, military, and non-sectarian. Poor unaffiliated Jews were buried in Potter's Field (Schneider 112-114).

The new immigrants coped with the realities of the New World in a variety of ways, including the creation of Reform and Conservative Jewry. But there were those indifferent Jews who wished to identify as Jewish but were far removed from the synagogue and uninterested in practicing Judaism, rather “people hood as the unifying element in Jewish Life” (Sarna 88). They chose to raise their children in a non-affiliated, non-religious, non-Jewish way but still wished to preserve their identity and so established *landsmanschaften*, or voluntary associations of mutual aid and beneficial societies. These were most often comprised of people from the same old country hometown to help the immigrant Jews cope with the new culture while retaining ties with the old country and its traditions. Mareleyn Schneider states that if a stranger was able to call himself a landsman, he was welcomed into the community immediately. The *landsmanschaft* drew on that tradition and provided a wide range of services including the establishment of a *chevra kadisha* which offered a proper Jewish burial as an integral component of their organization's activities allaying the fear of being buried among strangers (Schneider 113-114).

Jonathan Sarna further adds that, “a few individuals, usually such as came from the same town or district, feeling the necessity of some concerted action, banded themselves together to form a beneficial society

ordinarily bearing the name of the town or the district whence most of the members came. The aim of such societies, in the first instance was to assist financially any of the members who might be sick, to provide burial for the dead, and a death benefit for the widow or orphan of a deceased member” (Sarna 167).

By the turn of the 20th Century, more than 600,000 Jews immigrated to the new world, mostly settling in New York, where approximately 300 Jewish landsmanschaften were established. As the immigrant population started to diminish, so did the number of chevra kadisha/burial societies. By 1910 funeral directors/funeral homes had mostly taken over, which drastically changed the role of both the synagogue and the chevra kadisha (Sarna 174).

The Chevra Kadisha in Modern Times

What does Reform Judaism say about the chevra kadisha in modern times? Today, it is customary to engage a Jewish funeral director to be responsible for preparing the corpse for burial; however, some locales still engage the use of a chevra kadisha. Solomon B. Freehof, D.D. ZT"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Rodef Shalom Temple, Pittsburgh declares in The New Reform Response (Freehof 114-115) that it must be understood that the status of the chevra kadisha in the United States today differs from what it once was. Freehof further concludes that while the rituals of the chevra kadisha: tohorah (washing the corpse), shemirah (watching it) and tachrichim (dressing it properly) are considered important and perhaps highly desirable, they are not Halachicly imperative.

In the survey conducted of Executive Directors, 5 out of the 96 respondents mention utilizing a chevra kadisha located in: Arizona, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Washington (state).

In the Philadelphia five-county region, there only two synagogues that own and maintain their own cemetery, and there are 16 privately owned Jewish Cemeteries. There are two Jewish Funeral Homes that are primarily utilized by local Jews: Joseph Levine & Sons and Goldsteins' Rosenberg's Raphael-Sacks. According to Albert Mendel of Goldsteins', there is only one Mutual Aid and Beneficial Society still in existence in the area, The Pannonia Beneficial Association, of which Mendel is a former president. According to its website, “The Pannonia Beneficial Association grew from a very small group of men in 1896. Its membership is open to Jewish people of both genders. For over 110 years, it has served the Jewish Community raising funds for various charities. Pannonia Beneficial is a philanthropic organization. All of its members are offered burial and death benefits as well as its membership in our Credit Union.” Mendel further recounts that as individual burial societies became obsolete, they turned their records over to Goldstein’s or to Levine’s.

II. MODERN RESPONSIBILITY OF BURYING OUR DEAD

Sacred charge of Jews to preserve graves

According to Alfred J. Kolatch, in *The Jewish Book of Why*, Jewish death rituals are governed by two basic principles: *kevod ha-met*, respectful treatment of the dead, and *kevod he-chai*, consideration for the feelings of the living. For example, when traditional Jewish law mandates that a funeral take place within twenty-four hours after a death, it is concerned with *kevod ha-met*, for to leave a body unburied for an extended period of time is considered disrespectful. And when Jewish law mandates that a person be buried in the earth rather than be cremated, its intention is also to show respect for the dead, who in Jewish tradition must be returned to the earth from which man was created in which God says to Adam, “For dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3:19). In modern times, the mandate of 24 hours may not be practical, but burial as soon as possible is well within the norm.

Preparation

The preparation of the body is conducted in the mortuary/funeral home. Trained employees of the mortuary will bathe and dress the body with care and respect, according to traditional *halacha*, Jewish law. *Kevod ha-met* dictates that tampering with the body unnecessarily is forbidden, thus prohibiting embalming as well as autopsies, unless required by civil law. Autopsies are permitted, though, if another person suffering from a similar illness may be helped by what is learned from the autopsy, and embalming is allowed if an unavoidable delay in burial beyond three days occurs (Kolatch 5) or is required by some local laws.

Traditionally, a Jewish body is not left alone before burial. A shomer/shomeret, or guard, can be engaged through the Jewish mortuary to watch over the body, often while reciting psalms. Although family members may be willing to serve in this role, it is not necessary that the shomer/shomeret know the deceased person (though it is considered best if he or she is Jewish).

Burial

A traditional burial will include dressing the body in a plain white shroud (*tachrichin*). Local funeral director, Albert Mendel, shared that most families select to not engage body washers or shomrim due to the cost but most select to bury their loved ones dressed in a white shroud. The Reform community most often dresses their deceased in street clothes over the shroud.

Casket

A traditional burial includes an untreated wooden casket that has no metal parts. Two legends attempt to explain the use of inexpensive wood for coffins. First, the Bible tells us that Adam and Eve hid in trees in the Garden of Eden when they heard the Divine judgment from having eaten of the forbidden tree. According to the Talmudic scholar, Rabbi Levi, “This was a sign for their descendants that when they die

and are prepared to receive their reward, they should be placed in coffins made of wood” (Lamm 19). Second, the use of wood permits the body, shrouds, and coffin to deteriorate into dust, referring to Genesis 3:19 “...until you return to the ground- For from it you were taken. For dust you are and to dust you shall return” (Plaut 36).

Cremation, Embalming, and Organ Donation

According to Rabbi Victor Appell in *What is Reform Judaism's Position on Cremation?* It is a mitzvah to bury the dead with all proper respect. Jewish tradition defines this mitzvah as the burial of the body in the earth. Some Reform Jews have adopted the practice of cremation. While this method of handling the dead is certainly contrary to Jewish tradition, there is no clear-cut prohibition of cremation in the halachic literature. The Reform rabbinate seeks to encourage the traditional practice of burial in the earth whenever possible. Some Reform rabbis do not officiate at memorial services for those who have chosen cremation.

Al Mendel shares that while much tradition remains in modern Jewish burial rites, much has also changed. Goldsteins’ performs roughly 2000 funerals a year, and in Reform Judaism cremation has risen from less than 2% to 15%.

Opinions vary among the different streams of Judaism regarding organ transplant, but Reform Judaism has long been an advocate of organ and tissue donation. A 1968 Reform responsum commented that the use of such organs to heal or save a life is in keeping with the Jewish tradition and a positive act of holiness (URJ brochure *Matan Chaim: The Gift of Life*). *“If you save one life, it is as though you save the world”* *Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5*.

Burial Service

The preeminent authority on Jewish death rituals, Alfred J. Kolatch states that traditional observances and rules pertaining to the cemetery service itself vary according to the different streams of Judaism and Ashkenazim vs. Sephardic. For example the processional to the grave and the prayers recited, an infant not yet 30 days old vs. an adult service, and whether only women or men are permitted to attend, are but just a few derivations.

According to Al Mendel, graveside funerals are on the rise. Mendel attributes this to the rising costs of funeral arrangements. This also explains why, in Mendel’s estimation, the biggest change over the years is the number of people who have pre-arranged and pre-paid for their funerals. Goldsteins’ currently has over \$25 million in its irrevocable trust account.

Once the casket is lowered into the ground, the first shovelfuls of earth are thrown on the coffin by family members and friends. The entire grave may be filled in while the family is present or it may be partially filled in and then completed by the cemetery crew. Each cemetery has its own rules as to how shoveling can take place (Kolatch 87-89).

Erection of Monuments

While it is not mandatory that a monument be erected, it is traditional to do so in their memory. American Reform Responsa indicates that while there is no fixed time period that must elapse before a monument can be set; in America it has become customary to wait a year. However, there are many opinions which state that a tombstone can be set as early as the conclusion of the Shiva period. In Israel, it is often the practice to erect a tombstone at the conclusion of Sheloshim (Jacob 359).

In *The Jewish Mourner's Book of Why*, Kolatch writes that the monument should not be ostentatious, and commonly includes Hebrew letters that represent longer phrases, such as pay and nun, for *po nikbar* meaning *here is buried*. Or among the Sephardim, it is common practice to place the letters mem and kuf on the gravestones for *matzevet kevurat*, meaning the *tombstone of the burial place of [so and so]*. Ashkenazim inscribe the Hebrew name of the deceased and the Hebrew name of the deceased's father. Sephardim record the Hebrew name of the deceased's mother, rather than that of the father. Inscriptions should also indicate the Hebrew name of the deceased and the Hebrew date of death. Some authorities contend that it is improper to inscribe the secular date of death on a monument and that only the Hebrew date may be used. They maintain including the secular date is an acknowledgment of the birth of Jesus. However, in 1992, the Supreme Court of Israel ruled that in addition to the Hebrew inscription a gravestone may be inscribed in any foreign language, with the dates of birth and death according to the secular calendar (Kolatch 227).

From the seventeenth century onward, it became popular in Jewish communities to engrave monuments with symbols representing the actual occupation of the deceased. A neck chain, for example, would be engraved on the tombstone of a jeweler, a parchment with a goose feather on the tombstone of a sofer, a book or books on the tombstone of a scholar or writer. The tombstone of a Kohen was usually engraved with two outstretched hands representing the Priestly Benediction, and the monument of a Levite, those who served the Kohen during Temple times, would be decorated with a basin like those used in washing the Priest's hands before the Priestly Blessings were pronounced. Occasionally, tombstones would have engravings symbolizing the name of the person buried there (Kolatch 227-228).

Abandoned or Neglected Cemeteries

Sadly, many Jewish cemeteries have become neglected or abandoned, where the grave markers are broken or have fallen over. What is our responsibility to preserve these graves? Should the headstone be re-erected, or should fallen grave markers simply be left as they are? What of broken stones?

In *Contemporary American Reform Responsa*, Walter Jacob contends that it is incumbent upon the Jewish community to look after cemeteries even if they have been abandoned by their community or those who originally founded them (Greenwald, *Kol Bo Al Avelut* 164; Mosheh Feinstein, *Igrot Mosheh Yoreh Deah* 246). If all Jews have moved from a town, this duty must be borne by a nearby community (Jacob 175).

Care includes when tombstones have collapsed, it's a mitzvah and appropriate to set them up again, and if broken they should be replaced. Jacob cites, "Jewish cemeteries have long been accorded a special status

in Jewish life, and every effort has been made through the ages to protect the graves of the beloved dead. This meant that when possible, tombstones in vandalized cemeteries were restored or replaced by new stones (Jacob 176).

In one final Reform Responsa in response to a question concerning a vandalized cemetery, Solomon B. Freehof writes that if the area is to be taken over by urban renewal then the cemetery “should never be dug up for foundations for houses (which would disturb and scatter the bones of the dead), but should become one of the open areas converted into a park; and the very trees and grass would be an evidence of respect to those who sleep below the surface” (Web).

Thus becomes the future of Har Hasetim Cemetery in Gladwyne, PA.

III. HAR HASETIM

Gladwyne Jewish Memorial Cemetery

A Brief History

The origins of Har Hasetim, aka Har Hazism, in Gladwyne, PA, vary depending on whose account one reads. According to one eyewitness account written in Yiddish in 1929, and later translated, *50 Years of Jewish Life in Philadelphia 1879-1929*, Moses Freeman writes, “When the first Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe came to Philadelphia, a primary need was the establishment of a burial society/Chevrah Kadisha. In November 1892, under the leadership of Rabbi B. L. Leventhal, sixty delegates from synagogues and beneficial societies met at 733 South 6th Street in Sansom Hall and established the Independent Chevrah Kadisha, with Benjamin Cohen as Chairman and Reverend S. H. Brodsky as Secretary” (Freeman 2).

It then became necessary to purchase land to convert into a cemetery; however, the chevra kadisha had no funds at this time, so several individuals put their money together to form a stock company they called Har-Hazism Company. In 1893, they bought land in Merion Township and transformed the ground into a cemetery.

According to an entirely different account researched by Stephen Finkelman, Trustee and historian of the Board of the Friends of the Gladwyne Jewish Cemetery, Har Hasetim Association’s first officers were not Benjamin Cohen as Chairman, and Reverend S. H. Brodsky as Secretary as written by Moses Freeman, rather William Silverstone served as President, Meyer Wachtel as Vice President, Leopold Levy, Treasurer, Solomon Kraus, Secretary, and Abraham Kessler, Joseph Rosenberg, and L. Levin, Managers, as seen in *The Jews of Philadelphia* by Henry Samuel Morais.

Finkelman discovered in Deed Book 385, page 72 located in the Montgomery County Pennsylvania Archives that in May of 1893, William Silverstone, for the Har Hasetim Association, purchased

approximately 19+ acres in what was then known as Merion Square (now Gladwyne) Montgomery County from Charles Greaves at Greaves Lane and Conshohocken State Road. Finkelman further contends that shortly thereafter, in July 1893, the Har Hasetim Association had a plan for 1728 cemetery plots prepared by William. H. MacCollin, Architect. Har Hasetim Association then sold various sections and/or groups of plots to various beneficial societies who in turn sold individual plots to their members.

Judy Zalesne, in her article, *100 Year Old Jewish Cemetery Uncovered in Gladwyne*, states that among the groups subscribing to the association were Chevra Gaumel Cheshed Shel Emeth, Pannonia Sick and Beneficial Society, Chevra Ahavas Achem, Warsaw Beneficial Association, Hand in Hand Mutual Beneficial Society of Philadelphia, and the Independent Order Brith Abraham of Norristown. Burial space was offered to members of these societies and to indigent non-members as well. Families would pay less than 50 cents a month to guarantee that the chevra kadisha would prepare a body for burial, provide a plain pine coffin, conduct a religious service at its funeral parlor, and lead the funeral procession with its own horse-drawn hearse.

Over the next number of years, burials at Har Hasetim began to diminish. Judy Zalesne believes that the declining number of burials at Har Hasetim were most likely attributable to the decline of the chevra kadisha itself. As immigrant Jews became more affluent they became interested in providing their family burials in the newer Jewish cemeteries. The descendants of these immigrants associated the chevra kaddisha with the old country, and so they, too, looked to more modern memorial gardens for their families' final resting place. Plus the new cemeteries could offer a very appealing concept—perpetual care.

Several sales of the cemetery and land transfers transpired, including a foreclosure and Sheriff Sale in 1913. But in September of 1914, the land was sold to the Independent Chevra Kadisha of Philadelphia, with Julius Moskowitz as its first president. Burials continued only intermittently during the 1920s and 30s with the last burial, that of Seaman Second Class Benjamin Schurr, which took place in 1945 in a family plot that had been purchased in 1934.



Decades later, the heirs of Julius Moskowitz formed a new corporation, Har Hasetim Associates, with the intention of disinterring the bodies and selling the cemetery to developers for luxury homes. However, questions arose pertaining to whether the Moskowitz heirs actually owned the land and whether or not they had the right to sell it. In 1988 a protracted legal debate ensued and Har Hasetim Cemetery became the subject of bitter dispute and litigation. In a 1999 *Jewish Exponent* article, it states that the Board of Rabbis of Greater Philadelphia issued a resolution stating its "deep concern about and opposition to "moving the remains, considering that 'a desecration and contrary to Jewish law' (Feldman).

According to historian Stephen Finkelman, in 1990, Jerome Apfel, attorney at Blank Rome and congregant of nearby Beth David Reform Congregation, filed a petition preserving the land as a Jewish cemetery and as a religious and historical site. The petitioners represented were 14 descendants of people buried in the

cemetery and 3 nonprofit organizations: Committee to Save the Gladwyne Jewish Cemetery, the Gladwyne Civic Association, and Beth David Reform Congregation.

Litigation over ownership continued for nine more years, during which time the grounds became unkempt with an extreme overgrowth of trees and vines covering most of the headstones while other grave markers had fallen and cracked. The legal battle ended on January 26, 1999 when Montgomery County Orphans Court Judge Stanley Ott declared that the Moskowitz family did not have clear ownership and instead signed an order that turned the cemetery over to Beth David Reform Congregation.

In the following years, Beth David Reform Congregation, under the supervision of its Brotherhood, managed several clean-up missions, and bits of information about those interred had been collected.

Formation of the Friends of the Gladwyne Jewish Memorial Cemetery



In 2011 a group of interested and motivated members organized and formed the Friends of the Gladwyne Jewish Memorial Cemetery, its own 501(c) (13). Bylaws were established, a Management Services Agreement was executed, and a board was named that included 4 officers and 7 trustees. Among the trustees includes a descendent with ancestors interred at Har Hasetim, as well as this author, Jill Cooper.

On 4/4/2011 an Employee Identification Number (EIN) was granted by the IRS. On 11/11/2013 under the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the Friends became established as a registered charitable organization with the Department of State's Bureau of Charitable Organizations, and on June 26, 2012 the Friends was granted a 501(c) (13) status by the United States Department of the Treasury.

As indicated on our website, the mission of the Friends of the Gladwyne Jewish Memorial Cemetery is to "ensure dignity for those interred at Har Hasetim and their families while honoring the historical, cultural and natural significance of the site. We will achieve our mission by working together with volunteers and with the support of community partners primarily through restoration and maintenance of the graves and natural features, sharing the story of the cemetery, and providing access to information about those interred at the site."

The purpose of the Friends of the Gladwyne Memorial Jewish Cemetery is:

1. To care for, maintain, restore, manage, operate and secure the property known as the Gladwyne Jewish Memorial Cemetery, located in Gladwyne, Pennsylvania on behalf of the owner of the Cemetery, Beth David Reform Congregation
2. To provide and maintain a suitable religious burial ground for those persons buried in the Cemetery
3. To stimulate public awareness and appreciation for the Cemetery as a historical site and to solicit the participation of the community in its maintenance and preservation

4. To receive and administer funds for the aforesaid purposes.

The goals of the Friends of the Gladwyne Memorial Jewish Cemetery are:

1. Creating a complete accessible on-line database of all burials, as well as an historical timeline.
2. Stabilizing the property and prioritizing an area for progress toward a final condition based on a master plan that we are developing.
3. Establish a development process including programming, membership and outreach.

Recent Accomplishments

Since its inception the Trustees of the Friends of the Gladwyne Jewish Memorial Cemetery have been working diligently to further its mission. To that end, we partnered with The Land Health Institute to create a *Master Plan*, which was voted on and passed by the board in June 2015, and is available for review upon request. The plan consists of 6 overarching areas of concern:

1. Historic Preservation Recommendations
 - Historic Preservation Strategy
 - Historic Headstone and Artifact Preservation and Restoration Plan
2. Interment Archiving and Interpretation Recommendations
 - Online Archiving Services
 - On-the-Ground Interpretation
3. Ecological and Landscape Recommendations
 - Landscape Restoration Philosophy and Approach
 - Enhancement and Restoration Zones
 - Natural Landscape Plan
4. Public Use Recommendations
 - Public Use Overview
 - Public Access and Circulation
 - Program and Amenities Plan
 - Events and Public Involvement
5. Monitoring and Maintenance
6. Implementation Organizational Structure
 - Project Phasing
 - Estimate of Probable Costs
 - Funding Sources and Program Partners

Furthermore, the Friends have partnered with several area organizations, including the Lower Merion Conservancy (dedicated to local historic preservation), Villanova University, and West Laurel Hill Cemetery. As of the fall semester of 2015, Villanova University offers a course specifically dedicated to researching Har Hasetim and those interred there. West Laurel Hill Cemetery is now a community partner

and provides annual funding as well as having donated Web Cemeteries, whereby surveyors took a photograph of each stone and marked its GPS coordinates in an online database.

While there is still much left to do, our sacred work at the cemetery is attracting media attention and three separate articles about the work of the Friends was published in local newspapers in 2015. As a result of these articles, several descendants of those interred have been able to reach out to us for more information on their loved ones.

IV. ROLE OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Death/Burial in the Congregation

As Executive Directors, when there is a death in our congregation we each play a role, but what that role is differs *as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore* (Genesis 22:17).

Survey Results

Thank you to the 96 respondents from around the United States (23 states plus the District of Columbia were represented) and Canada (3 provinces were represented) who answered the following 3 questions:

1. Does your temple own/manage its own cemetery, or does your temple maintain a section in a public Jewish cemetery, or something else? What is your role in overseeing the cemetery and its upkeep?
2. If your temple owns/manages its own cemetery, what is your role in maintaining the cemetery software?
3. When there is a death in your congregation, as Executive Director, what is your role? Please address your connection with the survivors, the clergy, and the funeral home.

The results are varied:

1. *Does your temple own/manage its own cemetery, or does your temple maintain a section in a public Jewish cemetery, or something else? What is your role in overseeing the cemetery and its upkeep?*
 - **30 congregations own their own cemeteries**
 - **46 congregations own or maintain a section or sections in one or more cemeteries**
 - **7 congregations both own their own cemetery and maintain sections in others**
 - **2 do something else entirely**
 - **11 congregations do nothing at all**

Own Their Own Cemeteries

Of the 30 temples that own their own cemetery/cemeteries, there are varying degrees of responsibility for the Executive Director. Answers ranged from the Executive Director being personally responsible for all aspects of the cemetery including maintenance and landscaping oversight, plot purchases, and managing the cemetery data base, to the Executive Director having no direct role at all because someone else, e.g. a memorial park chair or cemetery management company handles it all. However, the vast majority of Executive Directors handles a portion of the cemetery management, most often the finances, and has oversight of one or more individuals who are primarily responsible for the rest. The titles and positions of these individuals vary: office admin, Assistant ED, groundskeeper, cemetery caretaker, cemetery manager, cemetery administrator, cemetery superintendent, cemetery administrative director.

Some examples:

- The office admin maintains all records but the ED oversees the cemetery and its upkeep, including managing grave diggers, landscapers, and snow removal.
- The Assistant ED has full responsibility for maintaining all cemetery records, all maintenance and any landscaping/upgrade projects.
- The ED meets the families at the cemetery and sells the lots, but turns the paperwork over to the assistant to send contracts and deeds, and record the sale.
- Along with a part-time cemetery assistant, the ED maintains all cemetery records, arranges the burials, and maintains the cemeteries.
- The temple has its own cemetery director who reports to the ED.
- The financial administrator manages the cemetery software and cemetery maintenance.
- The accounting department and cemetery manager maintain software and oversee all upkeep.
- The bookkeeper does all the billing and collection of plot fees.
- The responsibility is shared among outside professional who dig the graves and maintain the lawn, but the temple custodial staff does some of the maintenance, as well as seeding the graves, watering, etc.

Own or Maintain a Section or Sections in One or More Cemeteries

Of the 46 congregations who have a section or sections in one or more cemeteries, my congregation is included in this group. At my temple, we own the lots outright in a private Jewish cemetery and the aforementioned Al Mendel of Goldsteins' Rosenberg's Raphael-Sacks, one of my congregants, handles the sale and deeds and forwards payment to me. That is the extent of my involvement. The funeral homes and cemetery handle the rest, including maintenance and perpetual care. The vast majority of responses were similar, but here is a sampling of what others do:

- The cemetery maintains the land and the temple pays a maintenance fee. The temple sells the plots and forwards to the cemetery a portion of the plot price for each plot sold. The Executive Director is responsible for keeping all records for all plots.
- The cemetery sells the plots and the temple receives a percentage of any graves that are sold and paid for.
- The temple shares a dedicated section with several other congregations in a non Jewish cemetery.

- The congregation maintains a section of a public Jewish cemetery that is administered entirely by cemetery trustees, which have their own bylaws and bank account.
- The temple owns and manages its own section in a public cemetery, and is responsible for all care and maintenance of our section including lawn care. The city cares for the rest of the cemetery.
- The temple maintains sections in 2 different cemeteries run completely by volunteers who handle everything and turn over the financials for the audit.

Both Own Their Own Cemetery and Maintain Sections in Others

Of the 7 congregations who both own their own cemetery and maintain sections in others, the business aspect is handled essentially in the same manner as those above, however, one caretaker model especially stood out. At this Pennsylvania congregation, the maintenance supervisor of the temple lives in the caretaker's house on the grounds of the cemetery and is responsible for its upkeep, as well as working with the excavation company and funeral directors. The role of the Executive Director is being responsible for determining the correct section and plot number in the cemetery and communicating that information directly with the funeral home and cemetery caretaker to make sure the correct grave gets opened.

Do Something Else Entirely

Of the two synagogues that do something else, one wholly owns and operates its own Mausoleum, which is on the Temple grounds and provides no in-ground burial. The other has neither a cemetery nor its own section in one. Instead there is a Jewish section in the local cemetery, and plots there are donated to the temple by people who have inherited them or moved out of town and won't be using them, and receive Fair Market Value tax deduction. The temple then resells the plots to its members at half price. There is no secondary market in the plots so donation is the best option.

Do Nothing at All

In eleven temples, they have neither a cemetery nor a section in one, so presumably members shop on their own for cemeteries. In Cincinnati, there is a Jewish agency that has taken over most area Jewish cemeteries, and that agency is responsible for all affairs relating to such.

Record Keeping

2. *If your temple owns/manages its own cemetery what is your role in maintaining the cemetery software?*

Maintaining accurate cemetery and burial records is a daunting task. In fact WPVI, a Philadelphia news station recently reported that a local cemetery misplaced a body and buried it in the wrong grave. They have no idea where it is and will have to disturb countless graves to locate it.

For those congregations that maintain their own data base of interments, the Executive Director is responsible for either personally inputting the information or oversees the process. This is achieved in a variety of ways that include paper files and maps, Excel spreadsheets, electronic databases such as

ShulCloud, Membership Management, Chaverware, and MM2000. One Executive Director is still struggling to locate adequate software.

Personal Responsibility

3. *When there is a death in your congregation, as Executive Director what is your role? Please address your connection with the survivors, the clergy, and the funeral home.*

Answers vary widely from the Executive Director having no role at all, to being the first point of contact.

- I usually have very little or no connection with the family or funeral home.
- I am only a conduit for information.
- Although I am informed of deaths of congregants, we have an employee who handles the logistics.
- If the funeral is at the temple, then I get involved with whatever details are needed, especially if there is a meal of condolence here afterwards.
- My role is minimal, unless it is a board member then I become more involved in dealing with the bereaved family.
- Not meaningfully involved; all happens via the clergy office.
- No formal role unless a cemetery plot has to be purchased, in which case I handle that.
- I typically do not have a direct role with survivors.
- I am the first point of contact, often working to get the first level of support...rabbi, funeral home, Caring Community, etc. I am the first to get the news, because our emergency phone number rings my cell phone.

The vast majority of Executive Directors are mostly responsible for notifying their congregations about the death, including the details of the funeral, shiva, and donations. If the funeral or memorial service is taking place in the Temple's sanctuary, then the ED also coordinates the building logistics with the funeral home. It's the clergy who plan and coordinate the services with the funeral home if the service is there or taking place graveside. And it is the clergy who generally speak with the survivors to offer pastoral support.

- I am often the first point of contact, and I interface with the funeral home, the cemetery, the family and the clergy to get things arranged, and then work with the family on support during shiva.

Pastoral Care

While it is the clergy who handle the pastoral care for the bereaved, often the Executive Director offers pastoral care in both small and large ways:

- If the funeral is at temple, then I work with the family to make them comfortable and take care of whatever other needs they may have.
- I guide the family when calling the funeral home and help them with what will be expected.
- I usually receive a call from the Rabbi or our local funeral director. I then check to see if they have a plot reserved or need to purchase one. If they do not have one reserved than I call to make an

appointment to take them to the cemetery and decide on a location. (Families always talk about how I made a difficult period easier for them.)

- I am usually the first contact. I guide the family when calling the funeral home and help them with what will be expected
- I follow up with the survivors to make sure that they are doing okay. I view my role as providing a cushion, a safe, comforting space for the family and friends to mourn. When they come in to meet with the Rabbi, I will give the family a hug, ask if they need anything.
- I often meet with the grieving family.

Financial Obligation

Perhaps the toughest thing an Executive Director must do is handle the business end of dying:

- I will sometimes get involved if there is a large outstanding balance on the deceased account.
- I verify that the deceased has fully paid for his/her plot and that other outstanding charges, such as membership dues, are also fully paid-up before the grave can be opened and the interment can take place.
- I speak with a member of the family to discuss the rabbi's expected honorarium.
- I sell the plot to the family and prepare the deed once the plot is paid in full. No one can be buried until the plot is fully paid.
- ... to see if they are current on their finances
- I have no role unless there is a large outstanding balance on the deceased's account.

CONCLUSION

Each of us plays a separate role within our own institutions, but on the whole our primary role as Executive Directors is to be the liaison between the grieving family and the synagogue, the mortuary, the cemetery, shiva, sheloshim, and beyond. We have a sacred responsibility to our members, we are there when loved ones die, when the healing process begins, and every year at yahrzeit. We provide community for our families.

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