

On the Beginnings of the Chevra Kadisha (Sacred Burial Society) - November 1997-Present
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By Miriyam Gevirtz, June and July 15, 2015

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The following essay describes how members of Congregation Beth Ami began in November of 1997 thinking about and soon after began into the noble mitzvah of preparing a Jewish person for burial according to the laws in our tradition. We were assisted in our learning and performing these *mitzvahs* initially by Interim Rabbi Elisheva Saks who was standing in for Rabbi Jonathan Slater when he was on sabbatical for the first six months of 1998. We shall be forever grateful to her for the gentleness and the knowledge of the prayers she taught us, the “how to”, the knots and the supervision she gave us at that time. We are also indebted to Ms. Carol Daniels of Daniels Chapel of the Roses for her understanding and respect for our needs for a private room for the *tahara* (ritual bathing of the person who has died), one of the beautiful rooms where we were allowed to sit all night in two hour shifts for the *shomer* (watch) saying prayers for the person laying quietly in a beautiful light wooden casket with just a simple but beautiful Jewish star on it and a candle’s burning. Later we moved to a room in the back that was accessible for us from the outside. Eggen and Lance also gave us a place to hold the *tahara* and *shomer*. This article is going to be a part of the history of Congregation Beth Ami. I said a year and a half ago I would write it and said so again at the annual meeting a couple of weeks ago. Here it is at last.

I am writing to urge people whether or not they ever participate in doing a *tahara* or a two hour stint doing a “watch/*shomer*” over the closed casket, to be sure to tell or better yet, write their last wishes for the time between death and burial so that their children or spouse don’t/doesn’t have to fight family for their father to be buried in his *talis* and *yamulkeh*; or to have to fight the family for “*El Mole Rachamim*” (The Prayer for Peace for the departed) to be recited: “God, full of mercy, Who dwells above, give rest on the wings of the Divine Presence, amongst the holy, pure and glorious who shine like the sky, to the soul of ---- daughter of ----, for whom prayer was offered in the memory of her soul. Therefore, the Merciful One will protect her soul forever, and will merge her soul with eternal life. The Everlasting is her heritage, and she shall rest peacefully at her lying place, and let us say: Amen.” -- from an article on this prayer in Wikipedia; and *kaddish* as the casket is lowered into the ground forever as I had to.

But, first, I want to tell you how it started. I actually learned what the *Chevra Kadisha* is and does from my son’s first grade Orthodox teacher at Akiba-Schechter Jewish Day School in South Shore in about 1968, Chicago who I happened to meet in a super market one day. For some reason I don’t recall, but shall always remember later, we began talking about where she had just been—participating in the *tahara* for someone. She told me what a *tahara* is, that women wash women and men wash men, preparing the body ritually for burial and getting the person ready. It is thought, I believe, that the soul stays around after death and for the next eleven months and that we must take care of it, not to leave it alone.

Sometime later, we did a *tahara* and *shomer* for her, wonderful Mrs. Goldberg.

Some thirty years later in November of 1997--I had just moved up to Santa Rosa that June before and immediately joined the *Bikkur Cholim* (Visiting the Sick) Committee—we had a meeting, the four or five of us. Sad to say, I do not remember but am still trying to find out if anyone remembers the name of the man who chaired the committee, especially because of what happened.

I had been interested in joining Congregation Beth Ami before I moved to Santa Rosa. I'd talked to Rabbi Slater about my hope of becoming a para-rabbi to help him and because of my interest in healing and Jewish traditions. He had suggested when I come I could join the *Bikkur Cholim* Committee or the Religious Practices' Committee. I decided on the former. I contacted the chairperson and we talked. He was looking for work also. He was a mechanical engineer, mid-life laid off. I suggested he try to be an expert witness which he did and this was to form an important part of the story.

At that meeting in November of 1997, four or five of us were discussing what we might like to do when we visit the sick. I am always interested in singing. But, there was something really big on my mind: My father had died suddenly the year before and no one in the family—he had died in Florida and was to be buried in a suburb of Chicago—would allow a *tahara* or watch which grieved me deeply.

And, so I said, "You know, some of these people we are visiting are not going to get better. They are going to die. And, we should be sure to make available to them and their loved ones the opportunity to have a *tahara* and watch before the funeral." We began talking about burial. The chairman whose name I hope somebody remembers and we can insert here out of love, began saying he had thought he would be cremated, to save space. Very carefully and softly, I said, "If you had a grave, your children could come and visit and put rocks there to show you have been remembered."

He said very quietly, "I never thought about it that way" and he began to cry.

I told them about the terrible pain that I had fighting my mother and her family for a Jewish burial for my father and later we arranged for an evening with Carol Daniels and urged people to write out their wishes before the fighting starts, choosing someone one trusts to carry out one's wishes. Eventually, with the help of my son who argued with me and who was going to conduct the services for his beloved grandfather, and with the assistance of the funeral director I knew from when my grandparents had died and been prepared for burial in the same funeral home, I was able to persuade my mother to allow my father to be buried with a *yamulkeh*.

Then, we set about talking first to Rabbi Slater—who was getting ready to leave—who suggested we ask Rabbi Saks to help us which we did. We made arrangements with Daniels Chapel of the Roses and Eggen and Lance for space and things we needed for the *tahara*. I participated in the *shomer*. I never did find out who left the prayers for us in that beautiful rose-colored quiet room where the person lay in the casket who did the *shomer*. People who did and have done the *tahara* for years I hope will add their memories and information to this article. For example, I don't know how or where the implements for the *tahara* were obtained. Later we joined a nation-wide group of people all involved in the *Chevra Kadisha* near them. People were asked if they would like to participate and were eager to join in the mitzvah. Patti and Marc Bernstein, John Metz, *aveveh shalom*, the Batzdorff's, Bob Rafuls. Oye-please forgive me if I've forgotten someone(s), I'm hoping to find a list of the original group and most are still participating, *kol kavod (all honor due them)*. I couldn't do the *tahara*, but I felt a very strong desire to be in the *shomer*, liking taking the last one before the funeral so that I could be sure the person was watched over, going over in the funeral car sometimes with the casket, sometimes in my own car, saying prayers, reading the person the *Torah* he or she died on, sometimes reading the newspaper to the person (an idea I got from one of the first persons we did a *tahara* and *shomer* for), always interested in answering a question from the family as to who I was, what was I doing there, explaining that I was one of a number of people involved in a ritual cleaning and watch over their loved one through the night and hearing their great gratitude at this honoring of their parent/friend/child God forbid. And, adding to my very grateful learning of how for some reason the *Torah* portion ALWAYS connected to the person who had died. ALWAYS.

Rabbi Slater had observed to me some time before at a *bat mitzvah* that no matter how far in advance a *bar* or *bat mitzvah's Torah* portion is scheduled, there is ALWAYS some connection to the *bar* or *bat mitzvah's* life when the time comes.

But, going on, we got our first call for the wonderful Carol Rubin, a young mother with two little children and a sweet husband, who had died of a cancer. We did a *tahara* and *shomer*. It seemed like so many people came to the shiva, especially those who had taken part in the rituals felt a deep connection. Then, on a morning shortly after—this was already early 1998, I was on the phone saying to someone about the *shomer*, “men wash men; women wash women...” when I received a call. There was another death and we were needed.

It was the chairman of our committee. I gasped. “Oh, no !”, I uselessly exclaimed. He had died while on a trip to be an expert witness in a case, just as we had discussed. And, he apparently had changed his mind about preparations for his burial and told his wife and family so that they were able to let us know that he wanted a *tahara* and *shomer*.

So, he was our second. There followed many others to this day. I stayed with being a *shomer* for the next six years. Many people in the original group are still performing the *mitzvahs*, *kol kavod*, all honor is due them. To my knowledge, they are never acknowledged, but I think they should be. Please think about joining in this wonderful mitzvah.

Rabbi Slater (and other rabbis) used to tell us on the Sunday between Rosh Hashona and Yom Kippur when we bury prayer books, and at funerals, “It is the greatest and most holy *mitzvah* to accompany a person to his grave because it is the only *mitzvah* that cannot be returned.”

B'shalom, Miriyam