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Final Project

Gamliel Institute Course #3: Education, Organizing, & Training

Topic: Organizing a Chevrah Kadisha

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## **If You Were a Chevrah Kadisha, What Type Would You Be?**

### **Criteria to Consider**

#### **When Choosing an Organizational Structure for a Chevrah Kadisha**

##### **That is Best for Your Community**

If you're reading this, you're already interested in forming a *Chevrah Kadisha*. This article will help you learn a bit about the organizational structures of *Chevrei Kadisha* and will suggest some questions to consider to help you determine the type of *Chevrah Kadisha* that makes the most sense for your community.

According to the Gamliel Institute, *Chevrei Kadisha* come in three varieties: community-based, synagogue-based, and facility-based. Variations exist within these three types, as well, and there are examples of hybrid models, which will be addressed after the three primary models are described.

#### ***Community-based Chevrei Kadisha***

These *Chevrei Kadisha* are based on the model of the old *landsmanschaften* (or *landmanschaftn*), community groups that were created to meet new immigrants' needs. They were organized around the community from which the particular immigrants originated, so the immigrants essentially transferred their community organization services from "the old country" to the U.S. and Canada. These *landsmanschaften* provided burial services to members, and this was often the first service set up in the new country.

These structures often had a formal structure, with elected officers drawn from the membership of the group. The officers were the decisors. In some instances, the decisors were the clergy of the community, but in many others they were lay people.

The landsmanschaften model has tended towards disuse of late because in North America people are often far more mobile today than in past, and frequently do not remain in one community throughout their life. This works against the common origin or common location structure. Many of the landsmanschaften organizations have had to be subsumed into other structures or organizations as their membership has declined or disappeared.

While many the landsmanschaften of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries haven't survived into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are still community-based *Chevrei Kadisha* in operation, with new ones forming all the time. The community may come together as a group of Jews interested in reviving Jewish burial practices in an area where there is no *Chevrach Kadisha*, or it may come together with the goal of forming a "progressive" alternative to the existing (often primarily Orthodox) *Chevrei Kadisha* available in an area. Quite often, when no structure is in place, the impetus is that a respected member of the community becomes ill or dies, and there is a push to 'do something' about it.

Community-based *Chevrei Kadisha* may operate in cooperation with one or more funeral homes in the area, where *taharot*, and - if provided, *shmirot* - will be performed. Some groups are starting to perform *taharot* and/or *shmirot* in individuals' homes (rather than at a mortuary or funeral home).

The community-based *Chevrach Kadisha* may take on other aspects of preparations; for example, it may choose to sew its own *tachrichim* (shrouds) or make its own caskets; it may create its' own liturgy or prayers, and develop its' own procedures; and in general it will train its' own members.

Community-based *Chevrei Kadisha* may hold information and education sessions in the community.

Typically, a steering committee composed of those starting up the *Chevrach* is formed at the outset. This group will make the initial decisions about and for the *Chevrach*, and will also organize the educational and outreach efforts for the group. In many cases this committee, or some part of it, may continue to be the group that runs the *Chevrach*, but it may also be replaced with another structure, sometimes appointed, other times elected, and usually selected from within the membership of the *Chevrach*. This type of organization can provide stability, if it is well run, and the people selected are well qualified. In some instances, where there is not general agreement on how the *Chevrach* should run and what values it represents, this structure can lead to dissension, and even

splitting, or disintegration of the group. Such a structure can also tend to exclude newcomers from decision-making positions.

The more modern version of a community based structure tends towards a regional focus, and includes those living in that community at a given moment, with “membership” being fluid. Those who move into the area are welcomed into membership, and may take advantage of the services offered (usually at a cost). Those who move away from that location usually have no expectation of burial in that location, and rarely maintain any aspects of ‘membership’ such as voting rights, or any decision making role.

### ***Synagogue-based Chevrei Kadisha***

Within the past twenty or thirty years, increasing numbers of non-Orthodox synagogues have been forming *Chevrei Kadisha*. These groups may offer services to their members including liaising with the family from the moment of death through the funeral arrangements, *taharah*, *shmirah* and supporting the family after interment, and through *shloshim*, and in some cases the year of mourning. Some synagogue-based *Chevrei Kadisha* send all of the congregation’s members a form for facilitating the care of the deceased members which is then kept on file at the synagogue, so the team can move into action as soon as the death of a congregant occurs and is known. The *Chevra Kadisha* members are frequently among the first people contacted after death occurs, and they work closely with the congregational rabbi, relieving her/him of some of the work the rabbi tends to do when a *Chevrah Kadisha* isn’t involved, such as liaising with the funeral home and cemetery. In some cases, small congregations have formed a *Chevrah Kadisha* together, availing each congregation’s members of its services.

Synagogue-based *Chevrei Kadisha* often hold information and education sessions for congregants.

Synagogue-based *Chevrei Kadisha* are most often auxiliaries of the synagogue, and operate under the auspices of the board of directors, or the trustees of the synagogue. Decisions are made either by a board of the *Chevrah Kadisha*, where one is established as a separate entity, or by the board of the synagogue or the board of trustees when no separate board exists.

### *Facility-based Chevrei Kadisha*

Some synagogues and some community *Chevrah Kadisha* groups have decided to operate, in effect, a funeral home. Often, when this occurs, it is structured as a not-for-profit organization. Where there is not a formal organizational connection, some Jewish institutions have a close working relationship with a single *Chevrah Kadisha* or funeral home (as the case may be).

Facility-based *Chevrei Kadisha* may hold information and education sessions in the community. Decisions will most likely be made by the owners of the property and practitioners of *taharot*.

### *Hybrid Models*

In smaller communities where there may only be one synagogue in the area, the synagogue may offer *taharah* not only to its members but also to unaffiliated Jews living in the area. The synagogue might consider a differentiated fee structure or request a donation to the *Chevrah* or to the synagogue for those who are not members.

Another hybrid is the community-and-synagogue-based model. The Community Hevrah Kadisha of Greater Boston, for example, describes itself as “an independent, non-denominational organization of individuals, synagogues, Hebrew College, and other Jewish Institutions committed to making the full range of burial rituals accessible and available to the entire Jewish Community.”

### *What Kind of Chevrah Kadisha Is Right for Your Population?*

What follows is a list of considerations for deciding what kind of *Chevrah Kadisha* makes sense in your situation. The assumption here is that you are starting from scratch.

- *Are you a member of a Jewish congregation?*

If you are a member of a Jewish congregation, it will be important to explore the synagogue-based model. Begin a conversation with the spiritual leader—rabbi, cantor or lay leader—to ascertain the leader’s interest. Having their ‘buy-in’ to the concept will be crucial to a successful project. It will also be important to begin conversations with other interested parties, such as members of the Board; Chairs of committees such as Ritual/Religious Practices, Caring, Bikkur Cholim, and, if applicable, Cemetery. It may be easiest to draw from existing structures in place in the congregation, rather than

starting from scratch. One example of this would be to recruit members of the Caring committee to take part in *Shmirah*. There is also the benefit of working within the Jewish spiritual year as a framework to do teaching about Jewish death practices, including giving *divrei Torah* for specific Parashiot, using Shabbat “lunch and learn” times to educate, and asking the rabbi to speak about Jewish death practices at the High Holidays.

The synagogue-based model already assumes that the congregational community will take care of its own. For example, most synagogues will provide siddurim and other support for *shiva minyanim*. So, it may not be a huge leap for the synagogue to consider including *Chevrah Kadisha* services.

- *Are there other Chevrei Kadisha in the area?*

If you are in an area in which *Chevrei Kadisha* are already operating, it would be important to learn what they are doing, who they are serving, and whether or not your community might join with an existing group, both as service consumers and to be trained in *taharah* and *shmirah*. If you are starting a *Chevrah Kadisha* where other *Chevrei* exist, determine what will differentiate your *Chevrah Kadisha* from those already available. Recognize, too, that starting your own group may ruffle feathers of established *Chevrah Kadisha* groups, which could impact your relationship with some other institutions such as specific cemeteries or funeral homes, so prepare for that.

It seems that until recently, most *Chevrei Kadisha* worked within a very traditional framework. That framework may work just fine for your group, or your group may want to expand beyond the traditional framework. For example, many traditional *Chevrei Kadisha* will not prepare bodies for eventual cremation; some progressive *Chevrei* may choose to do so.

- *Is there a suitable facility available, will you work with a funeral home (or multiple funeral homes), and/or will you do in-home taharah and shmirah?*

If your group has access to its own space, or you have exclusive use of a space in a facility, you may need to make alterations in the space for it to work best. Visit funeral homes to see what you might want to replicate and what you might want to alter. Think about equipment, space, storage, movement, access to water, drainage, and other factors. Find out what the local and state laws are pertaining to the care of bodies after death. Learn about caring for the health and well-being of the *taharah* and *shmirah* team.

If you are going to work with an existing funeral home, be sure to meet with the owners/directors to let them know your needs and to learn theirs. Can you leave your equipment in their space; will they provide you with supplies (disposables, safety equipment, linens, etc.); will there be a designated space for your team; what kinds of accommodations, such as parking, outdoor lighting, and after-hours accessibility, are available to *shmirah* teams, etc.?

If you are going to do in-home *taharah* and *shmirah*, you'll need to learn the local laws for caring for a body after death, and any rules relating to storage or transportation. This may be challenging.

- *How many taharot/shmirot do you anticipate doing in a year?*

Some communities perform hundreds, some dozens, and some a handful of *taharot* in a given year. If you anticipate dozens or just a handful, it may make sense to team up with other groups in your area.

- *Age of community members.*

Is your community young, healthy and strong, aging, or a combination? There is a significant amount of physical work involved with *taharah*, and while communities have made accommodations in how they perform *taharot* so that their less physically able members can participate, a traditional *taharah* takes some strength and agility on the part of the team members. Your facility may have access to lifts, which helps, but there is still physical exertion involved.

In some communities, only the elder members are performing *taharot*. You will have to ascertain availability of a core group of men and women before moving forward with starting a *Chevrah Kadisha*.

*Chevrei Kadisha* based in synagogues will have the advantage of ready-made populations of potential *taharah* and *shmirah* team members; these will have to be recruited if you go with a community-based model, but there may be a much wider pool from which to draw.

- *What's the demand in the community?*

Have you surveyed the population in the area to ascertain that *Chevrah Kadisha* services are understood and desired? It's likely that you'll need to do education and outreach before you create your group to discover how desirable the service is to potential users, and that you will need to continue this after the group's formation. In many progressive communities, very few people may even know what a *Chevrah Kadisha* is,

let alone that they want to have a *taharah* themselves or for their loved ones. Often, however, once people learn about this tradition, they choose it for themselves and loved ones. Education will be key to attracting people to be trained for *taharah* teams and recruiting consumers for *taharah* and *shmirah*.

- *What is your fund generating capacity?*

There are some costs involved with *taharah*, such as the purchase of *tachrichim* or the raw materials and supplies to make them (these are the shrouds in which the *taharah* team dress the deceased). Perhaps the larger share of costs will be for educating and outreach, as well as sending members to conferences. It will be necessary to decide how the funds will be obtained. Some synagogue-based groups simply include the costs in the synagogue budget. Groups that are connected to a facility, or to a cemetery may build the costs of the *Chevrah Kadisha* into the charges levied for services. Those that are not so connected may simply ask for donations, or seek a separate fee from those using their services.

Synagogue-based models sometimes establish a set fee charged to all synagogue members that will cover or defray the costs of *taharah* and burial of their congregants. Community-based models sometimes charge no fee to individuals in advance, or they may operation on a membership model and charge a yearly membership fee to the persons who will be served by the *Chevrah Kadisha*. If either of these models owns a cemetery and/or a facility for doing *taharot*, they may charge a fee for their services, add a fee for the *taharah*, or add a fee for use of the facility.

They may also do fundraising to cover the costs of education and outreach programs to the community, if the fees are inadequate for that purpose. Both types of model also require funds to support the members of the *Chevrah Kadisha* in attending conferences, taking courses, and acquiring relevant reference materials and being trained.

Where no cemetery or facility is owned, these models may both seek to negotiate a fixed and lower fee with one or more of the funeral homes or cemetery groups in the area, and pass that savings on to those working with them.

- *Knowledge and willingness to learn on the part of potential Chevrah Kadisha members*

Your synagogue may already have a core group of individuals — there will need to be both men and women — who have some knowledge about *taharah* and *shmirah* already. Once people begin to learn about *Chevrah Kadisha* work, they may want to sign up and get trained. You will still need a core group who are at least a few steps ahead in terms

of what they know about the process and rituals. For example, will your group pray/read the liturgy during the rituals in Hebrew or English or both? If in Hebrew, reading Hebrew fluently will be a skill you'll need to find in at least some *taharah* team members. Has anyone in your nascent group performed a *taharah*? Someone will need to take the "head" role, or be the *rosh* for each *taharah*, and this would likely be the most experienced person, at least until members gain some experience.

A synagogue model has the potential advantage of having the most people available and on tap with the skill sets you'll need, plus a rabbi on hand to make certain determinations with regard to Jewish legal questions. However, as mentioned earlier, the community-based model has the potential advantage of drawing from a broader pool of people. A hybrid model has both advantages and disadvantages from each.

Examples [This is what I suggested be added to show an application of the decision process, with some considerations that would indicate when each model is best chosen.]

Scenario 1: Synagogue based

Scenario 2: Community based

Scenario 3: Facility based

Scenario 4: A Hybrid approach

### Summary

Choosing the best model for your community from among the community-based, synagogue-based, and facility-based models of *Chevrei Kadisha* depends upon: the needs and education about *Chevrei Kadisha* of the community you want to serve, what is already available in the community, the anticipated members of the *Chevrach*, and the resources you have available to you.

In places where the synagogue is the center of Jewish life in the community, it may make sense to work through that institution to form a *Chevrach*.

Where there are several synagogues in an area, as well as a known population of unaffiliated Jews, it might be preferable to join together in a community-based *Chevrach*.

If there's a suitable existing building—perhaps on the grounds of the Jewish cemetery, for example—it would be worthwhile to investigate turning that building into the facility for a *Chevrah*, essentially creating the *Chevrah* around the building.

If there are only Orthodox *Chevrei Kaddisha* in the area, some Jews won't be eligible for services, or won't choose to use them.

If there are no *Chevrei* of any kind, plan to do some educating in the community, whether in the synagogue community solely, or in the broader Jewish community, before getting started at forming a *Chevrah*. It's a lot of work, so you want to be sure that there is a need your *Chevrah* will be filling when it's up and running.