

Brief History of Congregation Agudas Achim's Cemetery

The origins of Congregation Agudas Achim's Cemetery and *Chevra Kadisha* are shrouded in mystery. We have no documentary evidence of their beginnings, but we can make a few inferences. Because the congregation was founded as an Orthodox synagogue in 1914, it is assumed the congregation formed a *Chevra Kadisha* at its inception. Not only do we lack documentation regarding the *Chevra*, we have no records of a Jewish cemetery from that period.

The oldest living member of the congregation who is also a native Austinite is 89-year-old Estelle Kogut. She remembers when she was seven (ca. 1932), her parents bundling her in the car on Sunday mornings and driving to small towns throughout central and south Texas, selling cemetery plots to Jewish families, as a way to raise money for the newly-acquired Jewish section of Austin Memorial Park, at that time a privately-owned cemetery which was taken over by the City of Austin in 1941.

Since the earliest recorded interment in the Agudas Achim section of the cemetery occurred in April or May 1933 (the record is unclear as there are two dates given for the death of Ella Schmidt, one in April and one in May), it is probable the congregation purchased the land in 1932 or early 1933. And, given that there were three additional burials that year, as well as burials in each subsequent year thereafter, it seems highly unlikely that Ms. Schmidt was the first member of the congregation to die since its founding nineteen years earlier. Nevertheless, we have no institutional memory of where deceased congregants were buried before Agudas Achim bought its section of Austin Memorial Park.

While the origins and early history of the congregation's cemetery and *Chevra Kadisha* are equally vague – that is to say, non-existent – we have records from the mid-1940s that are as interesting for what they do not document as for what they do. In short, we have documentation for the chairmen (and they were all men) of the cemetery committee and, since the chair of the committee is also the *Rosh* of the men's *Chevra Kadisha*, we know them also. What we do not have are records of the women who led the women's *Chevra Kadisha*.

For the men's *Chevra*, the first *Rosh* we know of was Louis Rose who moved to Austin from Philadelphia in the early 1940s. He led the *Chevra* from some time in the 1940s until his death in 1966. He was succeeded by Morris Shapiro who served from 1966, until he retired in 1981. Marion Stahl took over from Morris and led the *Chevra* until 1986. Marion was followed by Ira Panzer who served briefly until Leonard Hyman became *Rosh* in 1987. Leonard's tenure as *Rosh* was second only to Louis Rose's, lasting almost twenty years, until 2006, when, at the age of 89, he turned the job over to Danny Fleschman. Danny, in turn, named Fred Helms to succeed him, and Fred became *Rosh* upon Danny's death in February 2014.

As noted earlier, the record for the women's *Chevra* is even less complete than the men's. The current *Rosh* is Joanne Senyk who has served as *Rosh* for over fifteen years. Her predecessor was Augusta Gelfand. Augusta began working as a member of the *Chevra* around 1982, and served until about 1999. Although Augusta had a predecessor, she did not have an immediate predecessor. In 1981, Congregation Agudas Achim became an egalitarian congregation, and a small group of people, including the cemetery chairman and men's *Rosh*, Morris Shapiro, left. Although Marion Stahl

stepped in to head the men's *Chevra*, the women's *Chevra* temporarily ceased to function. At the behest of the congregation's rabbi, Marc Sack, Augusta and Helen Schmookler revived the women's *Chevra*, and built it into a functioning organization that eventually surpassed the men's *Chevra* in membership and expertise.

This short history is based on interviews or emails with:

Milton Simon
Estelle Kogut
Joanne Senyk
Carol Carl
Sarah Fleschman
Hannah Hyman
Augusta Gelfand
Helen Schmookler

Subverting the Old, Inaugurating the New, and Keeping It Going

As a member of a *Chevrah Kadisha* for the past five years and its *Rosh* for the past year-and-a-half, I have learned that it is sometimes necessary to subvert the old way of doing things, and inaugurate a completely new *modus operandi* if you want to perpetuate an institution.

When I was appointed to be the chairman of Congregation Agudas Achim's cemetery committee and head of its men's *Chevrah Kadisha* in February 2014, both the men's *Chevrah* and the women's *Chevrah* had six members, whose ages ranged from the mid-fifties to eighty. Moreover, while I cannot speak about the women's *Chevrah*, the men's *Chevrah* performed *Taharah* in a perfunctory manner that seemed to me to lack any true spirituality. Therefore I set myself two goals as the chairman of the cemetery committee and *Rosh* of the men's *Chevrah*. The first was to increase the membership of both the men's, and women's *Chevrot*. The second was to imbue our *Taharah* with greater dignity and spirituality.

My first step was to attend the Gamliel Institute's annual conference in Miami, Florida in March 2014. There I learned how to conduct a meaningful, dignified *Taharah*, and gained insight on making the experience spiritually fulfilling for the members of the *Chevrah*. Shortly after I returned to Austin the men's *Chevrah* was called on to perform *Taharah* for one of our synagogue's most esteemed members. Before we began, I met with the *Chevrah* members and explained how we would perform the ritual using the techniques demonstrated by Rick Light at the Gamliel conference. After the *Taharah* we discussed our views and feelings about the ceremony. The unanimous opinion was that the new way of doing *Taharah* was vastly better than our previous one. It evinced more honor and dignity for the *met*, and it was much more spiritually meaningful for the *Chevrah* members. We have continued using the new procedure, and the morale of the *Chevrah* is noticeably better than it used to be.

Encouraged by my success in reforming our way of conducting *Taharah*, I turned next to recruiting new *Chevrah* members. My first attempt was to send an email to every congregant, soliciting volunteers for both the men's and the women's *Chevrot*. I got absolutely no response to this solicitation, and I decided I needed to confer with my rabbi who is a staunch supporter of the *Chevrot*. We met in May and developed a list of 23 men and 22 women we thought might be interested in volunteering. We drafted a letter signed by the rabbi, the head of the women's *Chevrah*, and myself, inviting each person to an orientation/training session on June 19, 2014. To enhance the formality of the invitation, we sent it via "snail mail."

Since I was out of the country until June 17, I used Rick Light's video instead of doing an actual demonstration with *Chevrah* members. Interestingly, of the 45 people we invited, 13 women attended, but none of the men showed up. Instead, three women got their husbands to attend. With a question-and-answer period following the video, the session lasted over two hours, and every attendee volunteered to join the *Chevrah*.

Counting some volunteers who responded individually, the men's *Chevrah* now has 15 members and the women's *Chevrah* has 19.

Both my rabbi and I were perplexed by the lack of response from the men we invited to the training/orientation session. We thought we had identified congregants who would be inclined to at least investigate the *Chevrah Kadisha*, and the fact that the three husbands who accompanied their wives to the session all volunteered to join made us feel confident we could convince men to volunteer if we could introduce them to the *Chevrah* and *Taharah*. On further reflection and analysis, I concluded there was one important fact we overlooked in developing our list of invitees to the training session. The 13 women who attended were already active as *shomrim*, whereas none of the men we invited were on the *shmira* list. The lesson to be drawn from this observation is that people who have already shown an interest by becoming *shomrim* are much more likely to join a *Chevrah Kadisha* than people randomly selected because of their active participation in other aspects of synagogue life.

Ideally, we want to build membership in the *Chevrah* to about 25 men and 25 women. To maintain that level of participation we now conduct annual training/orientation sessions, and encourage *Chevrah* members to participate in Gamliel Institute programs. Until this year, our last training session had been conducted in the mid-1990s. I think that was a major factor in the diminution of membership and the lack of spiritually fulfilling *Taharot*. Equally important has to be the emphasis on training successors for the heads of the men's, and women's *Chevrot*. The way our program is set up, the head of either the women's or the men's *Chevrah* is also the chair of the cemetery committee, and provides the "logistical" interface with the funeral home, assisting the family in obtaining a cemetery plot, ensuring that a tallis is available if needed, or arranging to pick one up from the family, and being present at the funeral to assist the rabbi. Therefore, at least one member of the men's, and one member of the women's *Chevrah* needs to be trained to step into the shoes of the cemetery chair when he or she leaves, resigns or dies. This training has to be conducted by the current cemetery chair on a continuing basis.

We have also developed and approved formal by-laws for the cemetery committee that should help ensure continuity in providing care for the deceased and comfort for mourners. We now include the congregation's representative on the community's *Shmira* list as well as the *Rosh* for both the women's and men's *Chevrot*, and have written procedures for nominating and electing committee members. Until now, all of this was simply done informally, orally and with virtually no written record of any decisions, procedures or policies. It was *Minhag* writ large.

In conclusion, since coming under the influence of the Gamliel Institute (and it should be noted that many members of our *Chevra Kadishas* attended the 2015 North American *Chevrah Kadisha* and Jewish Cemetery Conference), we have more than doubled the size of our *Chevrot*, lowered the average age of *Chevrah* members by more than a decade, and made real progress in establishing viable institutions for the foreseeable future.

Renewal of Congregation Agudas Achim's Chevra Kadisha

In November 2010, I joined Congregation Agudas Achim's (CAA) *Chevra Kadisha*, and two years later was appointed by Danny Fleshman, the chairman of the congregation's cemetery committee and Rosh of the men's *Chevra*, to be his assistant. When Danny died suddenly in February 2014, I became chairman of the committee and Rosh of the *Chevra*. Although I had participated in several *Taharas* since joining the *Chevra*, I was aware that my knowledge was limited and that my men's *Chevra* was small (seven members), and aging.

Shortly after Danny's death, Joe Steinberg, the immediate past president of CAA, saw something online about the Gamliel Institute's North American Conference to be held in Miami that year in March. With my rabbi's support, I attended the conference, and returned to Austin armed with a store of knowledge and a plan for reinvigorating both the men's and the women's *Chevras*.

On June 19, 2014, I conducted the initial recruitment/orientation program for CAA *Chevra Kadisha*. My rabbi, Neil Blumofe, and I selected 23 men and 22 women to send personal letters to, inviting them to the session. Our hope was that about half of the people would actually attend. In fact, we had 25 attendees, nine of whom were current members to the *Chevra*. To my surprise 13 of the women we invited attended, but not one of the men! Instead, three men attended because their wives attended and wanted their husbands to be there with them. Of those 16 attendees (13 women and 3 men), all volunteered to join the *Chevra*. As a result we have 26 women and 16 men in the *Chevras*.

Although Rabbi Blumofe and I initially planned to conduct another recruitment program after the High Holy Days, we changed focus after we convinced K'vod v'Nachum to hold the 13th North American Gamliel Conference at CAA on February 2015. The concentration now is on encouraging everyone on Gail Tosto's community *Shmira* list (which has over 250 members) to attend the conference and consider joining their congregation's *Chevra Kadisha*.

Nevertheless, our plan is to continue recruitment and training for CAA's *Chevra Kadisha* with an annual program to be conducted after High Holy Days every year. We will also use the annual community 7 Adar banquet to encourage *Shomrim* to join the various *Chevra Kadishas* in Austin.

Dear _____,

We are writing to invite you to join Congregation Agudas Achim's Chevra Kadisha. The Chevra Kadisha's role is to ritually prepare a Jewish body for burial, and it also assists the *neshama* (soul) to begin its journey. Since a decedent cannot thank members of the Chevra for their service, the only reward for such service is the profound spiritual sense of wonder and awe in the performance of the service. Additionally, because performing *Tahara* (ritual purification of the body) for a decedent is considered *Chesed Shel Emet* (the Truest Act of Kindness), our Sages teach that there is no greater mitzvah. The Chevra Kadisha is a centuries-old institution, and Agudas Achim's Chevra has proudly operated for over 50 years.

It is a signal honor to be a member of a Chevra Kadisha, and participate in preparing a fellow Jew for his or her final journey. Acknowledging that the current members of Agudas's Chevra Kadisha will not be here forever, and that the true spirit of *l'dor v'dor* requires us to prepare our successors, we have identified members of the congregation who we believe have the spiritual sensitivity necessary to be members of the Chevra. You are one of those people. We think you would appreciate the experience of performing *Tahara*, and would find such participation spiritually and emotionally fulfilling.

As a member of the Chevra Kadisha, you would be "on call," but not obligated to perform *Tahara*, when a congregant dies. It requires four or five people to perform *Tahara*, and the Chevra Kadisha should consist of around 20 men and 20 women, so that we can mobilize four or five members at any particular time. There is no onus if you cannot participate for a particular *Tahara*, and there is no recognition if you do participate. The Chevra Kadisha does its work quietly and anonymously – the reward is emotional and spiritual.

We will conduct an orientation/training session at 7:00 p.m. on Thursday, June 19, in the social hall at CAA, and hope you will join us. Please let us know if you are interested in becoming a member of our Chevra Kadisha. Note that attendance at the orientation session is not a requirement. Traditionally, new members of a Chevra Kadisha are trained as apprentices, and that is how most current members of CAA's Chevra Kadisha were trained. Also, if you know of someone else whom you think would be interested in participating, please let us know.

If you are interested in joining, please contact Fred Helms at 512-258-4071 (home), 512-963-0925 (cell), or fred.a.helms@gmail.com (before May 30, because he will be out of the country from that date until June 17); or Joanne Senyk at 512-323-5455 (home), 512-844-1302 (cell), or joannes@ameliabullock.com, or Jane Weiss at jane.weiss@caa-austin.org.

L'Shalom,

Neil F. Blumofe, Senior Rabbi
Fred Helms, Rosh, Men's Chevra Kadisha
Joanne Senyk, Rosh, Women's Chevra Kadisha