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Chevra Kadisha Practice: An Interrelationship with the Afterlife in Judaism

The perspectives of the afterlife in Judaism have had a reciprocal relationship with chevrot kadisha and the chevra kadisha movements throughout history. The specific rituals that the chevrot kadisha implement reflect a belief in the afterlife.

Biblical roots of the afterlife and the belief systems therein can be traced throughout the narratives in the Torah. This also includes the Psalms and the Prophets. I suggest that this is the starting point from which all belief systems emerged as we know them in the Western world (as well as other areas of the globe). During Biblical times, decades after the characters in these narratives lived, the historical events and societal transformations informed subsequent transformations in the views and actions associated with the afterlife. Talmudic times, notably what was written in the *Sefer Ha'Aggadah*, also demonstrate these assertions. A drastic uncovering of Jewish Mysticism in the 1300s allowed for accessible learning about, and opening up, to the probable potentiality of the afterlife. The events that took place during overt times of generalized oppression against the Jews also affected the public perception and belief systems surrounding the afterlife. Examples of these times were the Spanish Inquisition, the Pogroms in Eastern Europe and Nazi Germany. During the twentieth century there was a widespread movement which uncovered, revolutionized and made more steadfast the public's opinions about the afterlife. There is still a strong movement, the goal of which is to bring back ancient Jewish tradition through various modalities in order to care for the elderly, sick, and bereaved. This movement is re-examining concepts about the afterlife. From an intellectual and religious perspective, Arthur Cohen, in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, writes:

Eschatology signifies the doctrine of the last and final events that will consummate the life of man and the cosmos and usher in the "day of the Lord." Such a definition, broad and general as it is, encompasses a considerable variety of classic Jewish belief and undergirds the language of the prayer book insofar as these convey teachings regarding the life that succeeds death, the coming of the Messiah, and the establishment of G-d's kingdom. Eschatology reflects a constellation of Jewish hopes and expectations of G-d's working the miracle of the end as he wrought the miracle of the beginning... (Eschatology) reflects a coherent movement of Jewish conviction and elicits a credal reflex that, as often as often as it is obediently delivered, remains nonetheless obscure. There is a thoroughgoing Jewish eschatology, but there is certainly no normative clarity as to the meaning or intention if its formulas. The language of eschatology- promising the gifts of eternal life, the transformation of history, the bringing of the nations to the worship of the G-d of Israel, the emergence of the messianic personage, the apocalyptic end of time and nature, the promulgation of divine kingship and sovereignty, the

ransoming of the dead and their restoration of physical and spiritual vitality- all these represent elements of eschatological teaching.

During *shmira*, *shomrim* typically recite psalms. One intention is to comfort the soul of the recently deceased. It is thought that the soul is in turmoil, and not able to detach itself from the body. During *tahara*, the participants are cleansing the body of its impurities, preparing the body to resemble the High Priest who is entering into a space to meet G-d. One intention behind the *tahara* is to prepare the soul to return to its source and to midwife the soul from this life to the next.

The biblical roots of *chevrot kadisha* and the belief in the world-to-come lay the groundwork and identify the basic elements therein. “The biblical text is a historical amalgam, a *mélange* of centuries of experience, and it is very common to encounter early and later conceptions of the afterlife subtly interwoven within the various strata of sacred writings” (*Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, Simcha Paull Raphael 42). While exploring the Torah and the biblical time period in order to understand the Jews’ beliefs about the afterlife, it is efficacious to examine the pre-death narratives as well as the burial practices illustrated through the biblical narratives.

Some examples include the pre- and post-death recounting of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Throughout the Torah is a common thread which has to do with the intrinsic intertwining of one’s progeny and one’s ancestors. When Abraham died “he was gathered unto his people” (Gen. 25:9). This describes a belief that something does, indeed, transpire after one’s body is no longer alive. In this case a human being is reunited with those who died before, thus implying that they are, indeed, still alive in some sense. Moreover, “it was after the death of Abraham that G-d blessed Isaac his son...” (Gen. 25:11). One inference is that the blessing and the death were related. Rashi states that G-d conferred upon Isaac the blessing that G-d had given to Abraham. These two images depict a reality wherein the connection between ancestors is central to both the dead and the living. This depiction is further elucidated by the fact that when a prominent character in the Torah passes away, their descendants are listed in language such as this character begot this one, this character begot that one, and so on. When Isaac “expired and died, he was gathered to his people” (Gen: 29). Jacob’s death follows his “instructing his sons” and also being “gathered unto his people” as well. (Gen. 49:33). When Jacob is dying, he asks his sons to be buried in a cave, and Joseph instructs his sons to take his bones with them when they leave Egypt. With deliberate precision, Jacob repeats the specific details about the cave, including the names of who were also buried in the cave of *Makhpelah*. “Through his parting words,” says Raphael, “Jacob communicates to his sons what is essentially a spiritual request: ‘Just as I lived my life as part of an ancestral clan, make sure I am buried with my ancestors’...For Jacob, and for the early biblical Hebrews, death meant entering the ancestral realm of the family tomb so that upon departing from this world he would be ‘gathered unto his people’” (45). Death itself was not seen as a cessation of existence. It was a passage to another realm where departed family spirits existed.

The term ‘*chevra kadisha*’ is derived from the last words of Jacob to Joseph in

Gen. 47:28-29. Before blessing Joseph, Jacob requests that Joseph “do kindness and truth with me...you shall transport me out of Egypt and bury me in their (his family’s) tomb.” Kindness and truth, “Chesed v’Emet,” is a common way to describe and name the role of chevra kadisha groups. At this point in history the tasks to be carried out by chevrot kadisha are still performed by family members.

The final resting place for their remains were of utmost importance. All three forefathers were buried in the same cave, similar to the current burial practice, in cemeteries, of being buried next to one’s family members. To die, in the language of the Torah, is to return to one’s ancestral family. Indeed, when G-d spoke to the forefathers before the birth of their children, they were promised a land, an inheritance from G-d. Since the manifestation of this land did not occur during the forefathers’ lifetimes, their children were to inherit it. The land was promised to their fathers, though, suggesting that their fathers would still be a part of their world; death is therefore not a finality.

No apparent time passed between death and burial, and it was the job of the family (or later, the community), to bury the body. This could be a reference point from which Chevrot Kadisha morphed into existence and held fast to the tradition of burying the dead as soon as possible after death. There are many interpretations of this custom, all of which have to do with the letting go of this world and the supposed suffering that occurs after death so as to meet the Creator and mitigate the suffering. If there was no type of afterlife, there would be no reuniting, just an endpoint.

In the later biblical periods, with the more philosophically oriented writings of the prophets and the Psalmist, one begins to see the more overt emergence of notions of immortality and postmortem survival. The words of the Prophets will be addressed later on. “Within Judaism the focus has often been on collective rather than individual eschatology- on the fate of G-d’s chosen nation at the end of time, rather than on the afterlife experience of the individual. In light of the covenant at Sinai, the Israelite people collectively stood in a direct relationship with G-d...” (19).

The lack of an overt testimony of a life-into-death life scenario does not prove or disprove anything as far as the biblical belief in an afterlife is concerned. In fact such a depiction would have been incongruent with the fact that mystical depictions in the Torah are intentionally presented in a concealed manner. Additionally, perceiving anything beyond physical form is complex in itself, let alone not being an easy fit for literature. Maurice Lamm, in *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* states, “precisely, this very silence is a tribute to the awesome concept, taken for granted like the oxygen in the atmosphere. No elaborate apologia, no complex abstractions are necessary...it was not a matter of debate, as it became in later history when whole movements...could not find (the afterlife) crystallized in letters and words...” (222).

I suggest that psalms are important to look at if only to expose the Jews’ diversity of questions, opinions, and perspectives. To justify his argument that the Torah does not allude to life after death, Neil Gillman, in *The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought*, references Psalms 49, 115, and 146. In Psalm 49, the Psalmist writes “...the price of life is too high; and so one ceases to be, forever...” The Psalmist states, in Psalm 115, “...The dead cannot praise the Lord, nor any who go down

into silence...” In Psalm 146, it is written, “...His breath departs; he returns to the dust; on that day his plans come to nothing”. One can infer, therefore, that during the above Psalmist’s time reincarnation was not a mainstream notion. Also, when Job was written, there was clearly no wide-spread belief in the afterlife. “...There is hope for a tree; If it is cut down it will renew itself...But mortals languish and die; Man expires...” I suggest that since Job is only referring to life on earth, his writings do not necessarily reflect any lack of consideration for an afterlife. In contrast to the Psalms, which are generally intended to offer solace, Job is writing in response to earthly trials and tribulations. Furthermore, if he was insinuating that there was not an afterlife, a world to come, then he would not work so hard to live an honorable life while going through so much turmoil. Instead, his determination to please G-d reveals a belief in something higher than life on earth. I also suggest that these psalms do not necessarily imply that there is no afterlife, just not in bodily form. While Gillman does not mention it, there are psalms which do address life after death. For example, Psalm 88 questions the possibility of the afterlife: “...Shall the dead arise and praise you? Shall your lovingkindness be declared in the grave? Shall your wonders be known in the dark?” (11-13). This particular psalm may infer that there is not afterlife, it still addresses the issue. I assert that the very questioning of an afterlife assumes this possibility.

The concept of Sheol is not one that we will explore in this document, but it is worth mentioning since it does assume the cloak of an afterlife and resonates with the prominence, in chevra kadisha work, of the grave. It is the place where one goes down (Num. 16:30; Job 7:9; Isa 57:9), and often refers to the lowest place imaginable (Deut. 32:32; Ps 86:13). It is unclear whether Sheol and the grave are used as synonyms in the Hebrew Bible, but there is a definite link between the two ideas. In some passages, Sheol is the place where those who have lived despicable lives on earth spend their afterlife (Isa 14:12). The subject of Sheol relates to our topic in that we are testifying that G-d’s power extends to the depths, and, if G-d wills, causes one to ascend back into G-d’s presence. Here, in the idea of Sheol, we may see rudiments of a life after death, in that, as the Bible presents, people can live in a form of existence in the shadowy world of Sheol. Psalm 49:16 reads, “But God will redeem my life [soul] from the clutches of the Sheol, for He will take me.” Psalm 73: 23-24 likewise speaks of the pious being taken to enjoy nearness to G-d’s presence: “Nevertheless I am constantly with You. You hold my right hand. You will guide me with your counsel and afterward take me with glory.” The language in the Psalms suggests that the human being is more than merely a body. It advocates that there is an extra dimension of the personality which continues after death. Though certainly not all or even a majority of them, the words of the Prophets also attest to there being some sort of afterlife. Conceptions about divine judgment and the end-of-days abound. However the textual depictions of the collective notion do not impart information on the individual postmortem experience. In the pre-exilic biblical period, conceptions about the end of days were exclusively nationalistic; The prophets spoke of a group consciousness. However they are important philosophical and eschatological dimensions of the world during the Prophetic age. The Prophets often spoke of the kingdom that would come, and made promises about this time, but not in the context of

another dimensionality which would encompass a world-to-come. “After the conquest of Canaan”, explains Raphael, “the prophets envisioned a future time of blessedness for the Israelite nation. The ‘day of YHVH’ would come about” (65). This suggests a time and space within which the nation’s souls would enter a different realm, transcending the human condition. Furthermore, during the eighth century B.C.E. the (as yet unnamed) doctrine of the coming of the Moshiach, or more literally the kingdom of G-d, entered prophetic literature. This literature furthered the communal possibility of a world-to-come. With regard to the prophets in general, Abraham Joshua Heschel, in *The Prophets*, says that they were “Confronted with an unconditional and absolute will of G-d, with eternity and perfection...” (9). He also states, “the divine pathos (of prophesy) is the unity of the eternal and the temporal...of the metaphysical and the historical” (11). Heschel’s repetitive statements about the juxtaposition of eternity and life on earth implies that there is more than life on earth. The prophets used this language in an attempt to lure the people of their time away from their sinful ways.

The Elijah and Elisha narratives in 1 and 2 Kings are set in the northern kingdom of Israel in the 9th century. While these prophetic narratives differ in linguistic structure and style from the previous songs, they too offer evidence of resurrection, but in a different form. What has been theoretical in biblical literature up to this point is, at this point, made concrete in the Elijah/Elisha narratives. In the passages we have examined thus far we have seen that G-d has the power in theory to bring people back to life after death. In the narratives we will study now we see G-d’s theoretical power in action. In the Elijah/Elisha stories we are given concrete examples of people who are brought back to life, immediately upon death. The narrative of Elijah’s death is that he was taken away, into the heavens, by a fiery chariot that descends from the sky. Elijah enters Jewish folk tradition, where he serves as the savior of the poor and oppressed Jews, attends each Pesach seder, and each circumcision.

Hosea’s prophecies are set against a backdrop of social, moral, and religious decadence coupled with political instability. Hearing about Sheol would certainly coincide with the times. In Hosea 13:14, G-d promises him “From Sheol itself I will save them, redeem them from very Death. Where, O Death, are your plagues? Your pestilence, where, oh Sheol?” In this instance, G-d can actually save the sinners from Sheol, if they will only change their ways. This illustrates that the soul does, indeed, travel to another destination but that G-d can save them. Taken further, we can deduce that there is, indeed, another location for people after death. The prophet strikes out against Israelite idolatry and attachment to Baal-centered worship, and points out that God, like Baal, has the power to resurrect. Just as Baal was able to overcome the grave and rise again, Hosea seemed to want to show that G-d too could give life after death.

Moreover, Ecclesiastes (3rd or 4th century BCE) 12:7 says “...And the dust returns to the ground, as it was, and the lifebreath returns to G-d...”

Talmudic interpretation built a communal framework, and a collection of laws and customs which document a variety of practices among communities. Communal compilations developed traditional chevrot kadisha. The notion of a divine postmortem

judgment, which is central in Rabbinic Judaism's teachings on life after death, has its roots of eschatology in the Biblical period. The *Sefer HaAggadah* dedicates an entire chapter on the "Time-To-Come" (3:6), which thoroughly describes what it will be like, including the avenue of resurrection.

Gillman, states "From the age of the Talmud to our own day, Judaism has taught that human beings can anticipate some form of life after death" (59). While he argues that very few allusions to this doctrine can be found in the Torah, he brings to mind two "enigmatic" exceptions to this rule: Genesis 5:21-24 recalls that Enoch, instead of dying, as it were, "walked with G-d; then he was no more, for G-d took him." Gillman reminds the reader that Elijah is never explicitly reported to have died either.

As we have seen, Judaism asserts an inexorable connection between death and the afterlife, albeit one whose exact nature remains somewhat nebulous. Nevertheless, there is a long-standing tradition, expressed first in the Mishnah, (Avot 4:14), that this world is simply a vestibule in which one prepares to enter The World to Come. Within Mishnaic analogy, death is seen not as an outlet from this life as much as it is a portal into the next. Rites, customs, and regulations of religious law provide a formal structure for dealing with death. The fellowship of communal involvement, as opposed to simply that of familial, pervaded the Jewish approach to death and dying. Indeed, in the Talmud, R. Judah commanded all citizens to suspend work, prayer, and important mitzvot in order to honor the dead by accompanying the funeral procession and helping to bury the dead. Burial has always been considered by the Jews as the greatest act of benevolence. R. Hama ben Hanina explained the necessity of the act in Sotah 14a: "...The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick, for it is written: And the Lord appeared unto him by the oaks of Mamre, so do thou also visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners, for it is written: 'And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son,' so do thou also comfort mourners. The Holy one, blessed be He, buried the dead, for it is written: 'And He buried him in the valley,' so do thou also bury the dead."

As many have experienced in the tahara room, a variety of Talmudic anecdotes suggest that the dead are aware of the living. The Babylonian sage Rav told his colleague Rabbi Samuel ben Shilath: "Be fervent in my funeral eulogy, for I will be standing there" (*Shabbat* 152b). Rabbi Abahu contended that the deceased could hear all that was said in their presence until the lid of the grave was sealed. Other Rabbis asserted that the dead continued to hear the living until the process of decomposition had taken place (*Shabbat* 152b). That the dead person is still aware of the living world could very well be the reason that a speedy burial was institutionalized, or vice versa. Decomposition is related to a prompt burial as well, and could be the source for a kosher casket having holes to speed up this process.

The concept of the resurrection of the dead is overtly discussed among the Talmudic rabbis. The rabbis in Sanhedrin 91b picked up on an unusual word order of Deut.32:39, which has death preceding life, and they cited this passage to strengthen their argument that resurrection (*tehiyyat hametim*) is indeed intimated in the Torah. The language hints

at the possibility of a resurrection motif, one of the many aspects of the afterlife. The Song of Moses reads “I cause death and make alive; I wound and I heal; None can deliver from My hand” (Deut. 32:39). The Hebrew phrase “I deal death and give life” was eventually incorporated into the daily rabbinic liturgy, where it is clearly understood to mean that G-d has the power to bring death and to resurrect the dead after their death. This word order- death being mentioned prior to life- is further embellished in the Song of Hannah: “The Lord causes death and makes alive, Casts down into the Sheol and raises up” (1 Sam. 2:6). Another statement by one of the Rabbis strengthens the argument about the potentiality of resurrection, or at least the belief of their being an afterlife. R. Hama bar Hanina said, “The Righteous are more powerful after death than during their life” (B. Hul 7b). Another teaching that the Rabbis offer is the notion of Gehennah, the biblically derived appellation for the realm of postmortem punishment. Obviously, if the soul did not live on then there could be no punishment. During the course of a lifetime, a soul forms an attachment to the body. Part of the punishment for sins committed out of a pursuit of the physical is the subsequent disillusionment with the body and with the values that lead to that pursuit. This is called "chibut hakever" (attachment to the grave). Burial hastens the end of this punishment, by bringing the soul "closure" in its relationship to the body. It is therefore a merciful practice to the deceased to bury as soon as possible. Rites and rituals that ensue from the instance of death until the burial reflect the reverence of Judaism for the body of the deceased, thus implying something bigger than just punishment. The first historical records of formal chevrot kadisha were primarily in Eastern Europe. By the late 1300s the evolution of the full-fledged chevra kadisha began in earnest. Ironically, (or not), “two radically disparate sets of events- the killing, expulsion and emigration of Spanish Jews, and the rise of Lurianic Kabbalists- set the stage for the chevra kadisha to expand and develop” (Jewish-funerals.org). Face-to-face with unwarranted displacement and mass murder, it may have been that questions about death and the deeper meaning of life would arise. In turn, what would arise is a wider societal openness to the mysteries of death hidden within kabbalistic teachings. I do not want to do more than just dabble into Kabbalistic teachings, so I will offer just a bit: Daniel Matt states that death is a transition. He elucidates that the “Kabbalah says the good deeds one performs throughout one’s life serves as a garment for the soul. When a person dies, the soul, clothed in these garments, sails on to the next dimension of reality.” Gershom Scholem, in his book *Kabbalah*, states:

In the kabbalistic commentaries on the Bible many events were explained by such hidden history of the transmigration of various souls which return in a later gilgul [reincarnation] to situations similar to those of an earlier state, in order to repair damage which they had previously caused. The early Kabbalah provides the basis of this idea: there Moses and Jethro, for example, are considered the reincarnations of Abel and Cain; David, Bathsheba, and Uriah, of Adam, Eve, and the serpent; and Job, of Terah the father of Abraham. The anonymous *Gallei Razayya* (written 1552; published partly Mohilev, 1812), and *Sefer HaGulgulim* (Frankfort 1684)

and *Sha'ar ha-Gilgulim* (1875, 1912) by Chayim Vital present lengthy explanations of the histories of biblical characters in the light of their former gilgulim. Luria and Vital expanded the framework to include talmudic figures. The transmigration of many figures are explained, according to the teaching of Israel Sarug, in *Gilgulei Neshamot* by Menahem Azariah de Fano (edition with commentary, 1907). Many kabbalists dealt in detail with the function that was fulfilled by the several gilgulim of Adam's soul; they also explained his name as an abbreviation of Adam, David, Messiah (first mentioned by Moses b. Shem-Tov de Leon)...In the Lurianic school, a righteous man who fulfilled almost all of the 613 mitzvot but did not have the opportunity to fulfill one special mitzvah is temporarily reincarnated in one who has the opportunity to fulfill it. Thus the souls of the reincarnated men are reincarnated for the benefit of the universe and their generation (348).

While the specific events may have occurred far away from each other geographically, alongside times when the kabbalistic worldview was generally ostracized, so were the traditions inherent in chevra kadisha work. In the early 1900's the leader of an entire generation of neo-Kantian Jewish thinkers, Hermann Cohen, wrote *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*. In it, Cohen reinterpreted traditional Jewish conceptions of immortality. He declared that only a person's legacy survives after death, as part of the evolution of humanity. He stated that "the biblical metaphors for death, such as "You shall go to your fathers" (Gen. 15:15) and "He gathered to his people" (Gen. 49:33) were symbolic of the individual living on in the historical continuity of the people" (308). His interpretations of the biblical accounts communicate different perspectives of the afterlife than former commentators, as seen above. "...In the same vein, those in the medical profession, such as the influential Jewish pastor Rabbi Terry Bard, explained that after the individual dies, what lives on are the children and a legacy of good works" (502). In 1903, the philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote, "All the evidence goes to show that what we regard as our mental life is bound up with brain structure and organized bodily energy. Therefore it is rational to suppose that mental life ceases when the body ceases" (45). According to the modern scientific worldview, then, the notion of the survival of the soul is a non-option. In 1913 Freud published *Totem and Taboo*, within which he examines early humanity's response to death. He explains that the so-called primitive individuals could neither understand nor conceive of the idea of physical death. For Freud the very notion of life after death is a psychological creation of the human mind- a defense against the inherent fear of annihilation and extinction. Since Freud had such a wide-spread influence on an entire generation of social scientists and those in the helping professions, the whole topic of postmortem survival had been disregarded. In 1927 Freud, in *The Future of an Illusion*, suggests that religion should, and will, be superseded by rationalism, empirical science, and psychoanalyses.

"The Holocaust obliterated the traditional Jewish life of Eastern Europe, wiping out so many of the spiritual leaders who had direct access to Judaism's sacred legacy of mystical teachings about the soul and its afterlife pilgrimage...It is almost as if the

Jewish afterlife, and the spiritual worldview behind those holy teachings, died in Nazi death camps” (Raphael 39). In addition to the loss of the transmission of direct knowledge from spiritual/religious leaders about the mystical aspects of Judaism, the notion of an afterlife went astray because of the stark reality of the Holocaust victims’ lives. The Jewish people as a whole were despondent and they either stopped believing in G-d all together, or were no longer able to focus on anything besides mere survival. Within this context it therefore makes sense that the afterlife would be irrelevant during this time. “...The contents of many earlier teachings have been lost due, in part, to the changing nature of modern Jewish society. Over the course of the past century, as Jews left behind the traditional ghetto lifestyle of pre modern Europe, there has been increasing assimilation and a rapid diminuation of commitment to the study and practice of Judaism. And in the twentieth century, as the center of Jewish life shifted from Europe to North America, and from a Hebrew and Yiddish linguistic environment to an English-speaking one, knowledge of and interest in pre modern Jewish teachings on the afterlife have been lost” (15). Raphael suggests that “spirituality, the experience of a personal, intimate relationship with G-d and the mystical exploration of the soul and its nature in life and death, has not been high on the agenda of the North American Jewish community. However, this is beginning to shift...evidence suggests that there is an increasing interest in spirituality and spiritual renewal has taken root...” (26). “An important cultural trend”, he says, “that forms the background to our investigation of life after death in Judaism” is the Jewish Renewal movement...there is a burgeoning interest in the mystical, mythical, and apocalyptic traditions of Judaism. As it turns out, there is so much more to Judaism than meets the eye, so much that has been covered over by rationalism, secularization, and cultural assimilation” (31, 34). After the war ended, the chevrot kadisha movement became more of a fraternal and social organization. In addition to chevrot kadisha responsibilities, it also provided social events. Additionally, these groups offered support to Holocaust survivors in the realms of housing, jobs, friendship and camaraderie. The landsmenschaft, established after the immigration in response to the Pogroms, were a group of Jews who were from the same shtetle or smaller towns in Eastern Europe. In this way, there was an effort to recreate aspects of the community-oriented life prior to the Pogroms. Chevrot kadisha did not emphasize the “old country”, as such. Some landsmenschaft communities were independently organized, but most of them were connected to synagogues, unions, extended family circles or fraternal orders. This was an attempt to reconcile their new home in North America and their identity as Eastern European Jews. Although it was a respite from the pressures of their adapting to the U.S., they eventually morphed into becoming “Americanized.” Chevrot kadisha, on the other hand, did not have all of the above as their mission. As the children of the landsmenschaft groups grew up, this generation of Jews were more acculturated than those of the previous generation. This generation grew in numbers, and was also focused on financial and social upward mobility. Inherent in this was a natural need and desire to distance themselves, to a degree, from the old ways. While the maintenance of Jewish identity and the mutual aid and community aspect of the landsmenschaft still remained central to the older generation,

there arose a need for more Jewish burial facilities because the number of congregations grew. The focus, therefore, shifted from the all-encompassing intentions of the *landsmanschaft* into the logistics surrounding the rituals of death and burial. The ensuing “transitions were not dropped, but transformed” (Arthur Goren). *Chevra kadisha* groups were therefore on the forefront of these transformations.

Embalming Jews began in the early 20th century. This coincided with the inception of the first formal, modern Jewish funeral home. The families were charged for the services rendered by the funeral homes. This impacted the Jewish community tremendously. Prior to this, Jewish funeral services were conducted in the home of the deceased. The funeral home’s existence influenced modern Jews by opening up the death, dying and mourning process into a space of no longer being in line with the ancient rituals. These rituals were ripped away from the mourners’ intimately personal involvement with the deliberately structured psychological, emotional and spiritual components of the procedures surrounding death and burial. Overtly underlying these components were mystical, kabbalistic elements of Jewish beliefs. Many of these have to do with angels who surround the body and the soul of the met shedding its earthly attachments. One of these beliefs directly related or affected by embalming is *kapparah*. The Babylonian Talmud teaches that proper burial aids in the “reconciliation of the shade, which finds no rest before being (re)united under the earth” (b. *Kethuvoth* 20b). Bodily decay was thought to be painful, and this pain was thought to be a way to atone for one’s sins. As *Devarim* 32:43 states, “The earth shall atone for its people.” Embalming and placing a body in a non-traditional casket considerably elongates this process. All in all, the dispelling of tradition paralleled the other fading traditions of the immigrants and the wisdom which underlie the traditions.

The 1960s, however, brought forth another shift. As a socio-political response to religious alienation within the male-oriented, bureaucratic system of synagogue life, a counterculture coalesced. In rejecting the structure, a radical form of Judaism began to emerge, influenced by the writings of social/political activists. The result was a fusing of ancient teachings. *The Jewish Catalog*, a do-it-yourself manual for Jewish practice, was a continual source of inspiration for the growth of the individual ownership, so to speak, of the Jewish individual’s relationship to their cultural and religious heritage. This mixed with the growing belief in the afterlife as brought forward by the Renewal Movement. It added a unique American contribution to Jewish culture. Furthermore, consciousness practices of humanistic and transpersonal psychology emphasized the pursuit of expanded consciousness over and above rationality and rote ritual. This has resulted in a contemporary model of the afterlife. Additionally, with society’s growing openness to discussing and facing death came visionary reports of people who had been declared clinically dead and then brought back to life. This has forced medical doctors to reopen the whole question about life after death.

The new wave of *chevra kadisha* groups, particularly in the immediate post-1960 era, infiltrated the Jewish world in the U.S. in various ways. This new wave consisted of a marginalized group whose emergence came in the form of social activism/community

organizing. Some of the major points in the evolution of the chevra kadisha movement involved the commissioning of umbrella organizations such as the Orthodox Union, the exposure of the psychological process involved in death and dying, otherwise disparate shuls working together, and death education. The entirety of this movement encompassed major analyses of the funeral industry which resulted in negative publicity of the for-profit funeral homes. Some of the specific actions were as follows: In the Orthodox world, Rabbi Sidney Applebaum was commissioned by the Orthodox Union to “find ways to combat the flagrant violations of Jewish law in the funeral practices and to counter the gross exploitation of bereaved families.” A national chevra kadisha was established to direct and control all Orthodox funerals, funeral homes, and educational campaigns. Applebaum concretized this organizing effort into a six-point “Jewish Funeral Guide.” In the conservative world, R’Samuel Dresner invoked the words and work of Rabban Gamliel in calling for a change. He developed an eight-point plan in accordance with the tradition of chevra kadisha work. Initially, his plan generated intense opposition from local funeral directors and found little support from the Conservative movement, but shortly thereafter the Conservative movement joined in the efforts. The secular realm of the funeral industry was thrown into turmoil by the publication of Jessica Mitford’s book *The American Way of Death*. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’ writings and teachings popularized the psychological stages that one goes through when facing terminal illness, thus emphasizing the importance of pre-death care. Eventually there arose an organization jointly sponsored by the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform movements. All of these efforts achieved important success but also notable failure. While it raised important issues and made widely known these issues, it fell short of establishing a lasting and permanent change. “In the long run, reclaiming the ancient Jewish tradition of the afterlife and making it relevant to our times will totally revolutionize the way Jewish communities care for the elderly, sick, dying and bereaved” (Raphael 35). From the moment of death the body is subject to a distinct dichotomy within Jewish tradition. As I write this paper, the midwifery model has been transferred into the death process; a doula for the soul as it enters the realm of death. Judaism has no single, systematized belief regarding the afterlife. The religious tradition has a wide and varied collection of sometimes disparate, sometimes complementary teachings, opinions, and points of view. The forms these have assumed and the modes through which they have been expressed permeate throughout Jewish history, albeit varying greatly from period to period. Distinct conceptions also exist side-by-side. The beliefs are interwoven and there is no generally accepted theological system. This cannot be ignored in the context of the development and changes within chevrot kadisha. The reality is that within the ebbs and flows of relative peace and oppression within Jewish history, the chevrot kadisha have remained strong in their convictions. “Standing on the cusp of the twenty-first century, we are living through an era of changing perspectives on dying and death. The time is ripe for a reclaiming of ancient Jewish afterlife that makes Jewish postmortem teachings accessible to individuals dealing with death, dying, and bereavement today” (Raphael 16).

