

**Practices and Policies of the**  
***Chevra Kadisha* of Northern New Mexico**

*By Rick Light*

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## Introduction

This document is intended to be a repository for decisions and practices that guide the way the *Chevra Kadisha* of Northern New Mexico (CKNNM) does its work. It is expected that this document be updated as the times, personnel, technology, and practices change. It is recommended that the policies herein be reviewed at least every other year to be sure they are still appropriate.

There is an underlying assumption that CKNNM is composed of members from several different communities, and hence CKNNM includes all types of Jewish belief. Our policies apply equally to all Jewish denominations and are intended to meet the needs of all of them.

It should be noted that the policies herein are not “rules to be followed,” rather, they are a repository of the current thinking of the *Chevra* as to what to do when faced with certain situations. This repository is just the documentation of decisions made by the Board of Directors of CKNNM in regard to the various topics listed herein. The intent of this document is to be a resource for those who need a reminder of what was decided when new situations are faced.

The shuls participating in CKNNM are the following:

- Chabad of Santa Fe
- Congregation Beit Tikva
- HaMakom
- Kol BeRamah Torah Learning Center
- The Los Alamos Jewish Center
- Temple Beth Shalom

The CKNNM exists as an entity within the auspices of the non-profit (501-C3) Jewish Community Council of Northern New Mexico (JCCNNM). All decisions and policy direction for CKNNM come from the Board of Directors of JCCNNM.

## Scope of the Chevra Kadisha

In every community the *Chevra Kadisha* takes on the role of providing for the dead. In some communities this responsibility starts before death and ends a year after death, encompassing all phases of Jewish death practice. Although individual members of CKNNM may be involved in more activities than the *Chevra* as a whole, we are unable to commit as a *chevra* to a more expanded scope of activities due to limited resources available on a regular basis. Hence, the official scope of responsibility of the CKNNM includes only the following:

- Supporting and providing education to the Jewish community about Jewish death practices, including visiting the sick, death in the home, working with a funeral home, the *Tahara* procedure, *Shmira*, in-ground burial, phases of mourning, *Yizkor*, and other related topics.
- Providing *shomrim* for *Shmira*.
- Providing *Tahara* for all Jewish deceased.
- Supporting the larger Jewish community as needed.

## A Word About Soul

One of the major underlying principles that supports and guides the work of the *Chevra Kadisha* is the Jewish belief that each individual is composed of both physical and non-physical elements – a body and a soul – where the soul is the eternal spiritual aspect of each human being, living on after death. The ideas that (1) the soul is present in the *Tahara* room, and (2) that the *Tahara* ritual helps to “midwife” the soul from this world into the next provide a framework upon which decisions directing the *Chevra Kadisha* can be made. It is in this context that this policy manual has been written. The midwifing of the soul is considered one of the most important ways we can show *kavod ha’met* – honor and respect to the dead.

## Standard Jewish Death Practices

When a Jewish person dies, the hospital, funeral home or rabbi contacts the central contact number for CKNNM (505-490-6148) informing us of the death. Our Director of Services then coordinates between the family and the funeral home to schedule *Shmira* and *Tahara* for the deceased. The CKNNM Director of Services then contacts CKNNM members to schedule specific personnel for both rituals as appropriate.

If CKNNM has enough volunteers they will provide *shomrim* for the entire time between death and burial. If not able to provide coverage for the entire time, the presence of a lit candle may be used to represent the presence of *shomrim* with the deceased. This candle does not need to reside with the deceased.

CKNNM will perform *Tahara* for any Jew who requests it. They provide volunteers to perform this ritual for all Jewish denominations as well as the unaffiliated, and provide training to the CKNNM members as well as to the personnel of both Santa Fe funeral homes. It is expected that the funeral homes provide most of the supplies required for *Tahara*, while CKNNM provides buckets, hand washers, *Tahara* Manuals, boards, and some other supplies stored in our own cabinet at each funeral home. CKNNM expects the funeral home to provide *tachrichim* (burial shrouds for the deceased) and personal protective clothing. (See Appendix A.) The *Tahara* procedure is usually scheduled 3 hours prior to burial, the night before burial, or under unusual circumstances, as soon after death as possible if there will be a prolonged delay before burial. The body of the deceased should be refrigerated until just before the *Tahara* begins.

CKNNM’s standard *Tahara* policy is the following: men perform *Tahara* for deceased men, and women perform *Tahara* for deceased women. Under unusual circumstances, a mixed team may perform *Tahara*, as long as the modesty and dignity of the deceased is preserved. This may mean guidance from someone outside of the *Tahara* room, or possibly a reader standing at the back of the *Tahara* room with their back to the *Tahara* table, or other such arrangements.

CKNNM uses a *Tahara* manual to guide *chevra* members in performing this ritual. The same manual should be used by both men and women, even though there might be slight variations in how they do their work. The choice of which manual to use could change over time, so CKNNM does not specify in these policies that a specific manual must be used. It is felt important, however, that whatever manual is being used for *Tahara* also be used as the basis for training, and that it be available to all *chevra* members to study at home.

CKNNM policy emphasizes respect for the deceased. Hence, we do not allow observers of *Tahara*. If someone wishes to observe, they must participate as a part of the team. That's often how new members in the *chevra* learn the basics – through “on the job training”.

## **A Comment About the Leader of the *Tahara***

The performance of the *Tahara* is a holy act. Maintaining an atmosphere of respect, dignity, and reverence is paramount during the entire time the *Chevra Kadisha* members are in the *Tahara* room. With this in mind, and considering the many possibilities for variation in custom and details in the performance of these procedures, as well as the variation in experience and knowledge of the members performing the *Tahara*, it is our local convention (*minhag*) to appoint a leader for each *Tahara*. The primary responsibility of the leader is to make all decisions, thereby avoiding possibilities for conflict, confusion, or disrespect during the ritual. If there are disagreements as to if or how something should be performed, such discussions should be held before the group enters the *Tahara* room, never in the presence of the deceased. The leader should decide ahead of time how the *Tahara* is to be performed, who is to do what, and if there are special circumstances requiring specific changes to normal procedures, etc. This must be communicated ahead of time to the team performing the *Tahara* so everyone understands how the ritual will be performed, and minimize questions and unnecessary talking during the procedure. In general, a briefing of the *Tahara* team prior to *Tahara*, and a debriefing afterward are recommended.

It is the leader who is responsible for determining how to implement any special requests from the family of the deceased. Such requests might include, for example, special clothes for the deceased (see section below), inclusion of items into the casket, or a specific level of Orthodox observance in the *Tahara* team. These must be discussed at the pre-briefing so everyone understands what the request is, how it will be implemented, and by whom.

Furthermore, the leader is the one who will make decisions during the procedure if unexpected situations arise. The leader coordinates all activities, working closely with the reader. The reader delineates what is to be done, while the leader ensures it is done properly. If there are new members who have not done this before, it is the leader who guides and shows them how it is to be done.

## **Clothing the Deceased**

The normal practice of CKNNM is to dress the deceased in traditional Jewish *tachrichim* – burial shrouds that are simple cotton or linen clothes designed to represent the clothes of the *Kohen HaGadol* (the High Priest in the days of the Temple). On occasion there have been

requests to dress a deceased person in specific clothes of importance to that person, such as a robe bestowed upon them for an honorary degree, or possibly a jacket that was “always worn” by a deceased teenager. Our policy is to dress the deceased in *tachrichim*, then if the family is particularly insistent about such clothing, we will cut the clothing up the back and drape it over the deceased once they are in the casket (after removing any metal on the garment). If CKNNM team members do not wish to handle such clothes, they may ask the funeral home to perform this part of the procedure.

## Family Member Participation in *Tahara*

Our experience has led to a policy of no participation in *Tahara* ritual procedures by family members or relatives close to the deceased. This policy is based on 2 primary concerns:

1. The possibility of emotional trauma to the family member, and possible subsequent disruption of the ritual, and
2. Respect for *chevra* team members who might feel scrutinized by the presence of family members while they do their work.

If a child of a deceased parent or a parent of a deceased child insists on participating, we offer them the opportunity to tie the last knot – they tie the *shin, daled, yud* knot representing the name of God into the belt around the waist that finishes the clothing of the deceased. For all other relatives of the deceased, they are invited to participate in sitting *Shmira* with the deceased, but are not offered participation in the *Tahara*.

## Cremation

Jewish tradition does not support cremation. In today’s world, however, many Jewish families do choose cremation for their loved ones. If the family insists on cremation, it is the policy of the CKNNM that we will indeed still perform *Tahara* and *Shmira* for the deceased, with the caveat that CKNNM team members will be informed of this circumstance and may choose not to participate. If there are enough team members to perform the *Tahara*, then CKNNM shall do so. If there are not enough personnel to perform the ritual, then the family shall be told that CKNNM is unable to perform the requested *Tahara*. CKNNM will sit *Shmira* until the *Tahara* starts, or until the body is taken for cremation, but only if there are enough personnel to do so.

## *Tahara* for Transgender Jews

CKNNM will perform *Tahara* for Jews who change their sex or live as a different sex from that of their birth. The careful decision as to which team from CKNNM (men’s or women’s) should perform the *Tahara* procedure must take into account the lived identity of the deceased. This decision should be made with input from family members and close friends of the deceased, and will vary from case to case. The goal is to promote and maintain the

dignity and modesty of the deceased to the greatest extent possible. CKNNM members may choose not to participate in such a *Tahara*.

## **What to Do for a Non-Jewish Spouse of a Jew**

CKNNM will not perform *Tahara* for non-Jews. However, the CKNNM policy is to support the needs of the community by honoring deceased non-Jewish spouses of Jews who have been involved in the Jewish community, have raised their children as Jews, and who are considered "*K'rov Yisrael*" – those close to the Jews. It is our policy that CKNNM not perform preparation rituals for *K'rov Yisrael* as a *chevra*, however, it is deemed appropriate for the CKNNM mailing list to be used to notify members of such a death, so members can choose to participate as individuals in the preparation for burial of non-Jewish spouses of Jews. A manual to guide such a preparation is being published at this time.

## For Additional Information

To find more details on all aspects of Jewish death practices, *Tahara*, and *Chevra Kadisha*, see the following references:

- The *Kavod v'Nichum* website: <http://jewish-funerals.org>
- Lynn Greenhough's very thorough Master's Degree thesis on North American Jewish Burial Societies: <http://jewish-funerals.org/greenhough-1>
- Lamm, Maurice. *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*. New York, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 2000.

For better understanding about soul:

- Raphael, Simcha Paull. *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*. New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004.
- Spitz, Elie Kaplan. *Does the Soul Survive?*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011.

There are many *Tahara* manuals that give an understanding of *Chevra Kadisha* work, in addition to the manuals written by Rick Light, which are the preferred manuals for CKNNM use. Other good ones for reference are also listed below.

- Epstein, Mosha. *Tahara Manual of Practices*. Bridgeport, CT: Chevra Kadisha Zichron Shabtai Leib of Greater Bridgeport, 1995.
- Kelman, Stuart, and Fendel, Dan. *Chesed Shel Emet, The Truest Act of Kindness*. Berkeley, 3rd Edition, CA: EKS Publishing, 2013.
- Light, Richard A. *Final Kindness: Honoring K'rovei Yisrael, Burial Preparation of Non-Jews Who Are Part of the Jewish Community*. Santa Fe, NM: Chevra Kadisha of Northern New Mexico, 2013.
- Light, Richard A. *To Midwife A Soul, Guidelines for Performing Tahara*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, Santa Fe, NM: Chevra Kadisha of Northern New Mexico, 2013.
- Sandler-Phillips, Regina. *PSJC Hevra Kadisha Tahara Manual*. Brooklyn, NY: Park Slope Jewish Center, 2009.

**Appendix:** Information to be given to funeral homes, coroners, hospitals, and other non-Jewish public servants who may deal with Jewish corpses.

## An Introduction and Guide to The Handling of Jewish Dead

This guide is intended for those professionals whose work includes the handling of corpses, to provide an understanding of Jewish customs and expectations when a Jewish person dies.

### Overview of Jewish Burial Customs

The human body is considered a holy vessel to the Jew, hence it must be treated with utmost respect and dignity, both during life and after death. When a Jew dies, the body is prepared for burial through a specific procedure known as the *Tahara* that must be performed by other Jews. The team of people who do this are called the *Chevra Kadisha* ("sacred fellowship" or "burial society"). This process includes washing the body physically, a spiritual purification through the pouring of water over the body, the dressing of the body in specific burial shrouds, and the placing of the body into the casket. The *Tahara* procedure is usually performed a few hours before burial. **No embalming is performed.** Autopsies are allowed only when absolutely necessary. Organ donation is encouraged if it will help save other lives. It is expected that if the body is cut open for these procedures, the opening be surgically stitched closed afterwards so no fluids can pass into or out of the body.

It is our custom to bury our dead into the ground. **Cremation is not a Jewish custom.** Some Jews choose cremation because they do not know this or because it is so common among non-Jews to cremate. If a Jewish family is planning cremation we suggest that you ask them to consult with a Rabbi before finalizing this choice.

### Who to Contact When a Jew Dies

When it is determined that the deceased is Jewish, please contact the *Chevra Kadisha* of Northern New Mexico (primary contact is **Zoe Van Raan, 505-490-6148**, or 505-577-5825), or one of the following:

- **Chabad Jewish Center of Santa Fe:**  
[www.chabadsantafe.com](http://www.chabadsantafe.com)  
Rabbi Berel Levertov 505-920-4324
- **Kol BeRamah, Torah Learning Center of Santa Fe:** [www.kolberamah.org](http://www.kolberamah.org)  
Rabbi Mordechai Scher 505-955-1748
- **Congregation Beit Tikva:**  
[www.beittikvasantafe.org](http://www.beittikvasantafe.org)  
Rabbi Martin Levy 505-670-4671
- **Los Alamos Jewish Center:**  
[www.lajc.org](http://www.lajc.org)  
David Izraelevitz 505-661-8878
- **Ha Makom:** [www.hamakomtheplace.org](http://www.hamakomtheplace.org)  
Rabbi Malka Drucker 505-988-1860
- **Temple Beth Shalom:** [www.sftbs.org](http://www.sftbs.org)  
Rabbi Marvin Schwab 505-982-1376

## Requirements Asked of the Funeral Home for Body Preparation

The *Tahara* is a ritual preparation of the body for burial. It includes a physical washing of the body along with spiritual rituals. We will provide much of what is needed for this process, however we need your help in the areas listed below.

- Please provide us with a preparation room that is clean, orderly, and ready for our use.
- The body should be lying on his/her back with eyes closed on a table that tilts with the table tilted just slightly toward the feet. The body should be covered with a clean sheet. All catheters in the body should be removed before our arrival.
- The table on which the body is resting should be locked into position, both the tilt and the wheels.
- The coffin should be in the room on a rolling stand. The casket should be simple wood, not metal or other material. It should have holes drilled into the bottom, and be free of fancy linings or other embellishments. The lid should be with the coffin, and checked to be sure it fits properly.
- There should be an additional table available in the room for spreading out shrouds and supplies, etc.
- Please provide a Jewish burial shroud set for the appropriate gender of the dead. (*See recommended burial shrouds below.*)
- One packet of earth from Israel is used for each *Tahara*, and often, another at the burial.
- Please provide waterproof surgical clothing and face shields for the *Tahara* team to wear (usually four to six people are needed). A supply of heavy-duty rubber or latex gloves (sizes XL, M, and S) should be on hand. (*See the required personal protective equipment below.*)
- There should be at least 6 clean, dry sheets available (white, rectangular, twin-size).
- There should be plenty of clean cloth towels available along with a roll of cotton batting or paper towels.
- A water source should be close at hand – a sink big enough to fill buckets in, wash hands, etc.
- The room should have a working drain in the floor or near the end of the table on which the body is resting. We will be pouring water over the deceased. This water needs to drain appropriately, and the urinal-drain gets overloaded easily, so we don't use it. The water will be poured over the body and table and onto the floor. We can better contain the poured water to funnel it into the drain perhaps if you provide extra towels or a "dam" of some sort that will keep the water from spreading across the room.
- An appropriate container for bio-hazardous material should be available in the room, along with a large trashcan for normal trash.
- There should be another container or laundry bin for used sheets and cloth towels.
- Arrangements should be made to turn off all buzzers, phones, alarms, etc., that are in the room where the *Tahara* takes place.
- Once the *Tahara* is completed, the coffin with the body inside will need to rest in a different room from where the washing occurred. It should be a place safe for a candle to be lit, and have space for a person to sit near the coffin. Please make

arrangements for family members or others to sit with the body until burial. This could easily be through the night or over a weekend.

- At the gravesite, please ensure that there is a mound of dirt near the grave, and several shovels available. Part of the burial service includes family members shoveling some dirt into the grave onto the casket.
- Jewish funerals usually do not include flowers – we ask that people give to a charity in the name of the deceased instead.
- A qualified staff member should always be in the facility when a *Tahara* is being performed should any problems arise. On occasion we will need your help to use the hydraulic lift to move a body from the table into the casket.

### **Access to the Funeral Home Prior to and after *Tahara***

Because the Jewish tradition includes the concept of soul, the body of the deceased is not left alone from the time of death until burial. If it is not possible for a “*shomer*” to sit with the deceased, then it is requested that a lit candle be present near the head of the body. To show respect to the deceased, we never “view the body” – at no time will the casket be open, nor the body available for viewing. We ask that you allow members of our community 24-hour access to your facility to sit “*shomer*” with the body. Please provide a place for these visitors to sit while they read psalms, somewhere warm, out of the weather, with a light for reading.

### **Questions To Be Asked Of The Family**

- What is the full Hebrew name of the deceased?
- What is the full English name of the deceased?
- What should be done with the wedding band (if any), buried with the dead or given to the family? What about any other jewelry found on the body?
- Does the family want to participate in *shmirah*? (Sitting with the casket, reading psalms.)
- Does the deceased have a prayer shawl (*tallit*)? Do the family members want him (or possibly her) buried in it?
- Any special requests?
- Please notify the family that it is customary for them to make a donation to the *Chevra Kadisha* of Northern New Mexico – any amount is acceptable, the norm is \$300.

## Recommended Burial Shrouds

The following is the contact information for Jewish burial shrouds, and the specific items to order:

Rose Solomon Company  
63 Flushing Ave, Unit 330  
Brooklyn, NY 11205-1005  
Phone: 718-855-1788  
FAX: 718-855-6815

Choose the linen shrouds for men and women (no children), order men's size large, women's size medium.

## Required Personal Protective Clothing

The following is a list of disposable personal protective equipment needed by the *Tahara* team members. Please have various sizes on hand.

- Full sleeve coveralls (one-piece full-body suit, elastic sleeves, zipper, attached boots): S, M, XL sizes
- Full sleeve aprons
- Hair covering surgical bonnets
- Face splash shields (such as Medline #NONFS300H full foam top elastic shield)
- Rubber gloves: S, M, XL sizes

