

The Body Guards

Guardians of the dead perform thankless task — literally

by Richard Greenberg, Associate Editor

It's well past midnight, and the building is deathly quiet — except for the murmuring of a lone sentinel softly reciting passages from a holy text.

Others are present, but they are not among the living — this being a funeral home. The sentinel is on hand to serve the deceased, as required by Jewish tradition that all but enshrines selflessness. It prohibits a corpse from being left alone from the time of death until burial, and that can sometimes take days.

Those who undertake the solemn task of standing vigil over the dead are known as shomrim (Hebrew for guardians), and their deed is considered especially laudable because it can never be reciprocated by the recipient.

"It's what we do as Jews," explained veteran shomer Lynne Sandler, 70, a member of Conservative Agudas Achim Congregation in Alexandria. "When someone dies, you feel such an emptiness that you want to do something. It's quietly giving honor to the person who passed away, and it's very comforting."

Ideally, survivors can also find solace in the efforts of shomrim, comforted that the community has provided an extra layer of emotional support by ensuring that a loved one is not left alone.

"It's the right way for the community to reach out and provide for the family when [the family] needs all the help it can get," said David Zinner, executive director of the Jewish Funeral Practices Committee of Greater Washington.

Long a mainstay among Orthodox Jews, shemira has become more commonplace in the non-Orthodox world, where acceptance of traditional ritual practice has grown in the past decade or so.

Still, it is hardly universally known. "Some people ask for it, but a lot of families don't even know what it is," said Keith Phippin, manager of the Hines-Rinaldi funeral home in Silver Spring, which performs Jewish funerals under contract with JFPCGW.

Sometimes, though, fully nonobservant survivors opt for shemira after they've been informed that such a custom exists. "They say, 'How lovely,'" reported Joyce Torchinsky of Torchinsky Hebrew Funeral Home, Inc., in the

District. (Her business, she emphasized, does not make a penny on the deal.)

Although guarding the dead serves an important communal purpose, it is primarily a solitary pursuit — so unobtrusive it might easily go unnoticed by a casual visitor to a funeral home. A shomer typically spends most of his or her time sitting quietly while reciting psalms.

“It’s the hidden mitzvah,” said Zinner.

Its practitioners are a diverse lot, and their motivation for becoming guardians runs the gamut. Debbie Ehrenstein, 75, a shomeret (feminine for shomer) since the mid-1990s, became interested in Jewish customs related to death and dying while co-chairing the life-cycle committee at Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda.

“Community is so important to Jews, and supporting mourners is such a strong expression of community,” the Bethesda resident explained. “We should enfold them somehow. I feel like I’m comforting the survivors.”

Rockville resident Marty Butin, 50, was drawn to shemira following the death of his first wife nearly three years ago. The experience became more traumatic when he learned that such a Jewish tradition existed — even as his wife’s body lay in the coroner’s office in Baltimore.

“I assumed there was no shomer there, and I felt it was something my wife should have had,” he said. “I felt bad for her and for anyone else’s loved one who winds up in a situation like that. I wanted to do something to help.”

For the past year and a half, Butin, the owner of a post-disaster restoration company, has performed shemira as a volunteer through his shul, Conservative B’nai Israel Congregation in Rockville.

When he is alone with the deceased, Butin said, “it feels almost like we’re holding hands or like I’m helping guide that person as they wait to be taken. It gives me chills.”

The Jewish law mandating shemira is drawn from the Talmud, and was later codified in the Shulchan Aruch, the authoritative code of law produced in the 16th century, according to a spokesperson for the National Association of Chevra Kadisha, a New York-based organization.

Shemira was intended to “give respect to the remains [of the body] and consolation to the soul by not leaving the body unattended like something useless and no longer worthy,” the NACK Web site states.

Another reason for guarding the body, according to the Web Site, was to prevent it from becoming prey for rodents and insects (a more remote likelihood today, since funeral homes keep bodies refrigerated).

Shemira is similar to another mitzvah that is highly esteemed because it, too, can never be repaid — the ritual preparation of the deceased (a procedure known as a tahara) by a Jewish burial society, or chevrah kadisha.

Locally, several congregations maintain their own all-volunteer, in-house chevra kadisha, with some also offering shomer services.

However, the bulk of shemira in the Washington area is provided (on request of survivors) by an independent, nonvolunteer organization that has been in existence for decades. It charges \$10-\$12 per hour per deceased. The fee is paid by the next of kin, most of whom are not affiliated with a congregation that offers such services.

The organization performs shemira more than 150 times a year, employing about a dozen paid staffers; currently, about 60 percent of them are Orthodox, but the denominational mix fluctuates over time.

Operations are coordinated by 76-year-old Silver Spring resident Howard Katz, a member of Orthodox Young Israel Shomrai Emunah in Silver Spring's Kemp Mill. He began doing shemira for a fee about 20 years ago when his family-owned business went under.

Paid shomrim are necessary, according to several observers, because it can sometimes be difficult to round up a sufficient supply of volunteers.

"We're very grateful to have Howard's group; they're very dedicated to what they do," said Terry Shuch Meiselman, 55, who performs shemira through the all-volunteer chevra kadish at Conservative Ohr Kodesh in Chevy Chase.

One of Meiselman's goals as a shomeret, she said, is to "set a certain tone" that reflects dignity and respect for the deceased.

That tone was lacking several years ago when she arrived at a local hospital to perform shemira for a friend's mother, who had just died. The deceased was surrounded by friends and family members who were chatting — not disrespectfully — but somewhat inappropriately, according to Meiselman.

"I walked in, greeted the people, sat down and started reciting psalms," she recalled. "As soon as I started, they said, 'Oh, yeah,' and left. Those who stayed became quiet and told me they were glad I had done that."

Another aim, Meiselman said, is to instill peace of mind in the survivors by helping establish a “chain of custody” certifying that the body in the casket has been properly identified.

“That’s not an idle or speculative matter,” added Meiselman, an attorney, who knows about misidentification firsthand. She was at a local funeral home in 2001 awaiting the arrival of the body of her father-in-law. But the hospital almost delivered the wrong corpse. “We found out about it,” she said, “only because we had a shomer at the hospital, my sister-in-law.”

Unlike tahara, shemira requires little specialized training, and it does not involve handling dead bodies. In fact, the shomer and the deceased often occupy separate rooms in the funeral home. Katz said he demands that the rooms be adjacent and that he have full access to the body at all times to maintain the chain of custody.

Although Jewish law insists on prompt burial — usually within 24 hours of death — shomrim sometimes find themselves marooned at a funeral home for much longer than that if their watch coincides with Shabbat or a Jewish holiday, when burials are not permitted by Jewish law. Worse yet, falling asleep while on watch is strongly discouraged by Jewish tradition. “You do the best you can,” said Katz. “Coffee is important.”

District resident Beth Naftalin, 72, said she is indebted to whomever stood watch over the bodies of her son, Ethan, who died six years ago at age 39, and her husband, Micah, who died last year at age 76.

“It felt like the community was supporting me and guarding them,” she said, breaking into sobs. “It felt very communal, like being enveloped by people who really cared and shared our loss.”