



The Hebrew Free Burial Association

Chesed

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Acts of Chesed

The Many Roads to HFBA

The voice on the phone sounded like many others, tentative, surprised that there was an organization

willing to assist total strangers at a difficult time. Indeed, the woman calling had learned of HFBA that very day.

the work of HFBA, Pamela's co-worker informed her that there was an organization dedicated to ensuring that men such as Mark are provided with respectful burials, in full accordance with Jewish law. Pamela attended the funeral comforted by the fact that her friend Mark was laid to rest in consonance with Jewish tradition — exactly as he would have wished.

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As always, we welcome your comments. Please write to us at **224 W. 35th St., Room 300 New York, NY 10001**, call **(212) 239-1662** or send us email at hebrewfreeba@aol.com

Pamela R.,* a non-Jewish woman from Brooklyn, had developed a close friendship with Mark F., an elderly Jewish former neighbor from Queens. As Mark had no relatives, Pamela visited him frequently to inquire of his welfare. When Mark suddenly passed away, Pamela was grief-stricken, and unsure of how to proceed with details of the burial. A religious woman herself, she understood that Mark would have wanted to be buried in full accordance with Jewish tradition. Pamela called a co-worker, the only other Jewish person she knew, hoping to receive guidance in the particulars of arranging a Jewish burial. Familiar with

Another recent call came from an office of the Public Administrator. Cases in which a deceased has no surviving next of kin, or the next of kin does not wish to be involved in burial arrangements, fall to a Public Administrator. Long aware of the work of HFBA, Public Administrators will at times refer Jewish clients to us. This particular case involved a family that

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UJA-FEDERATION OF NEW YORK

Message from our President

Bjorn Bamberger

The Torah teaches us that each human being is created *be-tzelem Elokim* – in some mystical and transcendental way, every man and woman represents a reflection of G-d. For this reason, the Rambam points out that every human being, no matter how lowly his station in life, must be treated with dignity and respect, because he contains a spark of the Divine.

To illustrate the extreme to which Jewish Law goes in codifying this principle, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *z"l*, points to the *halakhab* of *meit mitzvah* — the rules of unattended remains.

Because of his holiness and his responsibilities towards the entire Jewish people, under normal circumstances the High Priest is not permitted to make himself *tomey* — defile himself through contact with a dead body. This rule applies even if the deceased is his mother, father, sibling or spouse.

Yet, in the case of an unknown Jew, all bets are off. Even the High Priest is obligated to be *me-tamey* himself if he encounters the body of an unknown Jew while walking in the byways of Jerusalem or in the fields surrounding the city.

Even on Yom Kippur itself, the High Priest — resplendent in his *bigdei zahav*, the golden garments of his high office: the golden diadem on his forehead inscribed with the words “Holy to G-d,” the breastplate gleaming with twelve gemstones symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel, the golden bells on the hem of his tunic ringing softly as he walks — would be required to interrupt his sacred service and attend to the interment personally, should he encounter a *meit mitzvah*.

This is in spite of the fact that contact with the dead will render the High Priest unfit to

perform his sacred service. In spite of any doubts he may have of the adequacy of the substitute High Priest to serve in his stead. And in spite of the fact that all of Israel depends upon him for atonement, counting on his prayers to yield a peaceful and bountiful year.

One might easily surmise that the needs of the many supersede the needs of a single individual. After all, the whole world stands in suspension, awaiting the successful completion of the Yom Kippur service. And who is this dead person, anyway? Obviously he has no family, no friends. Is he a derelict? A miscreant? A thief?

No matter. Whatever his station in life, the deceased once bore within him the *tzelem Elokim*, and his remains must be treated with the dignity that such divinity demands. Despite the consequences to himself and to all of Israel, the High Priest must disqualify himself from service by burying the *meit mitzvah*. Moreover, he is not even allowed to run into the street and cry out for the *chevrah kadisha* to assist him. He must do it all himself!

It is this reverence for the sanctity of all Jews — no matter how impoverished, no matter how alone, or how distant from the laws of our people — that motivates the Hebrew Free Burial Association in every aspect of its activities. It is our unique charge — our sacred responsibility — to provide burial for all those who simply have no one else.

With G-d's help, and your continuing generous support, we will continue to provide a dignified and proper funeral to every indigent Jew in the New York area.





A Walk Through Our Past: HFBA's Historic Cemeteries

The visitor arrived at Mount Richmond cemetery in search of a relative he never knew. Hailing from South Africa, Dr. Gavin T.* was in America investigating his roots. Gavin, who appeared at the cemetery with his wife and baby daughter, was searching for the grave of his great-grandfather. Arriving in America from Lithuania in the early twentieth century, Gavin's great-grandfather intended to find work and bring his family to join him. Sadly, he instead contracted a fatal illness, and was buried with the help of HFBA. Unable to support her family, his young widow sent her children to live with relatives in South Africa. Making the trip from South Africa, Gavin was the first descendant to visit his ancestor's grave. Consulting records, HFBA's Rabbi Shmuel Plafker was able to locate the burial place of Gavin's great-grandfather. Generations later, the grave of a man who died alone was graced with the presence of his family.

Even those familiar with the work of HFBA are often surprised to hear that our organization is over a century old. As we carry out our foundational mission of *chesed shel emet*, we are also able to help people like Gavin reconnect with their past.

HFBA was founded in the 1880's as a free burial society to serve the needs of indigent immigrants on the Lower East Side. Early clients were buried in Queens, until our first cemetery, Silver Lake, was procured in the late nineteenth century. In an era before cars, Silver Lake's location near the tip of Staten



Children's markers purchased and set through our "Leave Your Mark" Campaign—Mt. Richmond Cemetery in Staten Island.

Island made it easy to transport bodies directly from the ferry. Today, visitors to Silver Lake can view the historic graves, well maintained in part by volunteer groups.

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With the wave of immigration at the turn of the century, HFBA soon outgrew Silver Lake, and in 1909 purchased Mount Richmond. Also situated in Staten Island, Mount Richmond is the final resting place for generations of indigent Jews who died of disease, hardship, and old age. Especially heartbreaking are the numerous children's sections, dating to an era before modern medicine, when outbreaks of influenza and other diseases claimed thousands

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Our Staff: HFBA Hosts Retirement Party for Anne Leist

The array of faces present at Anne Leist's retirement party was testimony to the numerous individuals she has touched over her three decades of service to HFBA. Members of the HFBA board and HFBA staff joined individuals from the city Public Administrators' offices, Human Resources Administration, and commercial funeral homes in wishing Anne mazal tov upon this milestone.



From left: Marty Hession, Rabbi Shmuel Plafker, Anne Leist, Joel Morris, Jaime Cappello

Anne began her work at HFBA as one of an office staff of two, and helped HFBA retain its personalized voice as its staff and responsibilities grew. The first person that bereaved families spoke with to arrange a funeral, Anne provided comfort at a difficult time, assuring families that all details of the funeral would

be attended to. Even on her last day in the office, Anne's concern regarding the bereaved was evident; she made numerous phone calls — above and beyond the call of duty — to ensure that a particular family was comfortable with the details of a burial.

Joel Morris from I.J. Morris Funeral Homes, with which HFBA has a relationship, spoke about his years of experience with Anne and offered his good wishes. Other speakers at the party included HFBA officers Andrew Feinman and Jack Gross, HFBA executive director Amy Koplow, office manager Rhonda Stein, and officiating rabbi Rabbi Shmuel Plafker. HFBA president Bjorn Bamberger, presented Anne with a piece of artwork as a way of thanking her for her years of service. Everyone focused upon Anne's dedication to HFBA's mission of providing indigent Jews with a respectful burial, and the particular warmth with which she carried out this mission.

In her speech, Anne thanked HFBA for providing her the opportunity to help people in need. We are inspired by Anne's selfless example of service, and wish her all the best in this new stage of life.

A Hands-On Learning Experience:

A School Participates in Cemetery Beautification



TABC students working hard at Silver Lake Cemetery

The experiences we remember are those that engage our entire selves; mind, heart and body. Such an experience was had by the freshman class of **Torah Academy of Bergen County** when they visited HFBA's Silver Lake Cemetery on April 10, 2002. The students learned about the value of respecting the deceased as they helped rake leaves, clear branches, and remove debris that had fallen around century-old graves. When HFBA thanked the students for their time and energy, the students in turn thanked us for granting them the opportunity to engage hands-on in an important mitzvah. HFBA welcomes schools, synagogues, community centers and other groups interested in ensuring that our historic graves remain in respectful condition. Please call Amy Koplow at 212-239-1662 for more information about opportunities to volunteer.

The Many Roads to HFBA

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delayed in making burial arrangements, leaving the body of a close relative in a morgue for over three months. Noticing that the deceased bore a Jewish name, HFBA was contacted by a Public Administrator's office to proceed with burial arrangements. HFBA covered the cost of the funeral, and buried the body without delay. With HFBA's help, a respectful burial was granted to a Jew who would have otherwise been forsaken.

The very same week, a non-Jewish commercial funeral home contacted HFBA regarding the case of Max F., a deceased Jewish man. Max's non-Jewish wife Charlotte was shocked by the prohibitive expense of arranging a funeral. The funeral home called HFBA on behalf of

Charlotte, and a funeral for Max was quickly arranged. Charlotte was relieved of a financial burden she could not afford, and Max was buried in full accordance with the traditions of his heritage.

We at HFBA are often asked how cases are referred to us. The three stories above illustrate that they come through a myriad of channels, some predictable, others quite unexpected. Calls come from nursing homes and hospitals, friends and relatives, doctors and chaplains, neighbors and city workers. We have even received cases from prisons. The array of calls from a variety of sources indicates that HFBA serves a broad and diverse population, united only by a common need. No matter where the calls come from, each of our clients is treated with the respect and compassion every Jew deserves as they are laid to rest.

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HFBA Historic Cemeteries

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of young lives. Mount Richmond is also home to many of the victims of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire. The words "Died at the Fire" are etched upon their headstones. Visitors to Mount Richmond pass through its historic gatehouse, dating to the early twentieth century. Containing more than fifty thousand graves, Mount Richmond is still in use today. Mt. Richmond superintendent, Gregory Schwartzman, expends tremendous efforts to ensure the cemetery is well kept, and his labor is evident in Mount Richmond's neatly trimmed paths and newly paved roads.

A visitor in search of his or her ancestors can contact HFBA and we will search through our records. The names, ages, and location of plot for each burial were recorded by hand in ledgers still in our possession. Several years ago, our records were transferred to microfilm.

In addition, HFBA has retained the handwritten applications filed by family and friends of the deceased.

In the past decade, HFBA has embarked upon a campaign to ensure that those we buried in the early years of our organization do not lie in anonymity. Our *Leave Your Mark* campaign has already placed headstones on over ten thousand graves, four thousand of them belonging to children. Visitors engaged in genealogical research are often touched to find that a headstone of a relative was sponsored by a complete stranger, evidencing the connectedness of all Jews. Ten thousand graves still remain unmarked. We aim to mark all of the graves at Mount Richmond as a testimony to the lives of those who came before us. Our *Leave Your Mark* campaign is one way of connecting our present to our past, as we carry our century-old mission of *chesed shel emet* into a new era.

** All names have been changed to protect the privacy of our clients.*

Standing Room Only at HFBA Breakfast in Riverdale

The annual HFBA Riverdale breakfast took place on Sunday, February 10, 2002, at the Riverdale Jewish Center. Over 250 people attended—literally standing room only! Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale received the Rabbinic Achievement Award, and Miriam Schonfeld Hering of the Riverdale Jewish Center received the Anshei Chesed Award. Rabbi Yitzchok Frankel of Agudath Israel of the Five Towns was the guest speaker. Other distinguished speakers included Rabbi Jonathan Rosenblatt of the RJC, Howard Jonas of IDT Communications, and HFBA President Bjorn Bamberger. We are grateful to event chairs Fred Sugarman and Howard Millendorf and to the entire Riverdale community for enabling this most successful event.



From left: Amy Koplou, Bjorn Bamberger, Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld, Howard Jones, Rabbi Jonathan Rosenblatt, Miriam Schoenfeld Hering, Howard Millendorf.

We are pleased to announce that the following names have been added to our *Leave Your Mark Donor Plaque* in the Weinberg Chapel at Mount Richmond Cemetery:

Mitchel and Lita Aeder
 Mr. John E. Gilcrease
 Mr. Bernd-Gunter Hoeck
 Rabbi David Horwitz
 Mrs. Ruth A. Indyk
 Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Kaplan
 Dr. and Mrs. Irwin Krasna
 Dr. Ben Kreisman
 Ms. Eve M. Locker
 Dr. Morton Malavsky
 Mr. and Mrs. Kevin Melamed
 Mrs. Monique Morris
 Mr. Paul H. Nagelberg
 Mrs. Selma Pickman
 Mr. Melvin Roth
 Mr. and Mrs. Richard M. Schleifstein
 Mr. and Mrs. Larry Taylor
 Mr. and Mrs. Robert Tracer
 Dr. David M. Wasser
 Mr. and Mrs. Herbert I. Weisz

Breakfast Honoring Leonard Kunin of Lido Beach

Please reserve Sunday, November 3, 2002 for our Chayei Sarah Gala Breakfast at the Young Israel of Long Beach, 120 Long Beach Boulevard.

HFBA Cards: The Gift That Is Also A *Mitzvah*

We know how difficult it can be to find the perfect gift for a *simcha* or to locate the proper expression upon a loss. With HFBA's cards, the perfect gift is always on hand.

Whether you are celebrating a *simcha* or commemorating a loss, HFBA's cards let your recipient know that a donation has been made to HFBA in their honor. Each card costs \$10, and you can fill it in with your personalized message. Three different cards are available: In Memory of, Best Wishes for a Speedy Recovery, and In Honor of. To order cards please call HFBA at 212-239-1662.

