



The Hebrew Free Burial Association

Chesed

Volume 9 • Number 4
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HFBA is Moving!

As of Nov. 1, our address will be:
224 W. 35th St., Room 300,
New York, NY 10001
Our phone number will remain
the same.

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HFBA's Officiating Rabbi*
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As always, we welcome your
comments. Please write to us
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(212) 239-1662 or send us email
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UJA-FEDERATION OF NEW YORK

Acts of Chesed

No Jew Should Be Forgotten

In early summer, HFBA received a call from the Public Administrator's office regarding the case of David M. *, an eighty-six year old man who passed away in an adult home in New York City. Records retained by the home indicated that David was deaf, and hence unable to advocate for himself. There was no legal guardian to be notified of David's death and no family members emerged to claim the body. He had lived and died truly alone.

As with all cases of unclaimed bodies, David's body was sent to the public morgue. The Public Administrator's office was notified of his Jewish last name and called HFBA, knowing that HFBA would claim and bury the body of any forsaken Jew. HFBA hastily contacted the morgue, planning to rescue

the body and arrange for immediate burial, as required by Jewish law. However, officials at the morgue informed HFBA that in fact the body had been sitting at the morgue for over a month, and had already been transferred to a local medical school for use as a research cadaver.

Dismayed that a Jewish body was to be treated in an undignified manner, HFBA immediately contacted the medical school in an attempt to track down the body. After several phone calls, HFBA ascertained that the body had indeed been embalmed, but had not yet been touched by the medical students. With some negotiation, HFBA was able to obtain the return of the body and immediately had the body transported from the medical school so that HFBA's *chevra*

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Message from our President

Bjorn Bamberger

At first, the holiday period we just concluded seems paradoxical. The heightened spirituality of *Elul*...the solemn introspection of the Days of Awe and Judgement... are followed almost immediately by *Succoth* and *Shemini Atzereth / Simchat Torah*, the season of our greatest joy. This apparent paradox is intensified by our long-standing tradition of starting to build our *succoth* immediately after breaking the fast at the conclusion of *Yom Kippur*.

Yet on closer examination it is no paradox at all. Our tradition teaches us that even the most solemn experience of the human condition - death itself - leads to the ultimate joy of everlasting life in the Hereafter - for as the *Mishna* teaches us, "All Jews have a portion in the World to Come."

It is in this spirit that Jewish law mandates equal treatment for all Jews at time of death. No matter how humble their circumstances during life, in death all Jews are truly equal in the eyes of God. The Hebrew Free Burial Association proudly upholds this most important principle with every funeral we undertake.

During the *tabara* - the ritual preparation of the deceased for burial - we recite the words from Ezekiel 36:25, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you," and "You shall be clean from

all your uncleanness," just as is done for the most prominent among us. And our "clients" receive a reverent interment in the consecrated soil of one of the cemeteries we have lovingly maintained for close to one hundred years.

Indeed, if one visits the graves of our departed sages in Europe and Israel, the final resting place of even the greatest of our departed scholars is often marked by a simple stone *matzevah* - one not unlike those found in the cemeteries we maintain. Rich or poor, famous or obscure, every Jew merits final respect in an identical manner.

In the Torah portion of *Chayei Sarah*, we learn that Abraham buried his wife in the Cave of *Machpelah* only after he acquired the cave and the land surrounding it as his permanent possession. Today, as in biblical times, there are costs involved in accompanying one of our fellow Jews to his or her eternal rest. And it is only through your generosity that we are able to undertake our sacred task.

It is my heartfelt prayer that your continuing support of the Hebrew Free Burial Association - your participation in this great *mitzvah* of *chesed shel emeth* - may merit your inscription, and the inscription of all those near and dear to you, in the Heavenly Book of Life!



Thank you to all those who graciously donated *tallesim* in response to our request. In donating your *tallesim* you aided HFBA in upholding the Jewish custom of wrapping men in a *tallis* for burial. Due to the large volume of response to our request, at this time we are no longer in need of donations of *tallesim*.

Meet the Staff

Rabbi Shmuel Plafker Carries Out HFBA's Mission of Caring

The wide range of responsibilities that Rabbi Shmuel Plafker attends to on any particular day demonstrates the degree of service that HFBA offers its clients. As HFBA's officiating rabbi, Rabbi Plafker conducts an average of one funeral a day, six days a week. In addition to performing funerals, Rabbi Plafker assists those who visit HFBA's Mount Richmond Cemetery, some to honor the memory of loved ones, others in search of the graves of relatives they never knew. On the front lines of HFBA's Leave Your Mark Campaign to provide headstones for unmarked graves in our cemetery, Rabbi Plafker researches which graves are in need of monuments. "I wear several *yalmulkes* on this job," Rabbi Plafker comments with a smile. "The common denominator of my responsibilities is making sure that the deceased are treated with respect."

The funerals that Rabbi Plafker conducts fall into one of two categories: those with attendees and those with no attendees aside from himself and a gravedigger. One third of the funerals the Rabbi conducts have no attendees. "In a sense, I need to represent New York Jewry," he remarks. These are the saddest funerals, and they signify what HFBA is about; providing burial for those who leave this world bereft of financial resources and social support. "In cases where there are no attendees, we provide the same dignified funeral as if there were fifty people there," states Rabbi Plafker. The appropriate prayers are said, and the body is buried in full accord with Jewish tradition.

When the funerals do have attendees, the Rabbi seizes the opportunity to speak of the departed.



*Rabbi Shmuel Plafker with a visitor to
Mt. Richmond Cemetery*

"I encourage family and friends to share memories," says the Rabbi. "It is important for me to realize who I am burying, and for people to open their hearts at this difficult moment." At such funerals Rabbi Plafker takes the time to speak with family members about Jewish customs of burial and mourning. The Rabbi often finds himself playing the role of counselor, at times addressing the theological issues raised by deep loss, and at times simply providing a shoulder to lean on. "I see people in their most vulnerable moment, when they come to bury a loved one," says Rabbi Plafker. "My concern is dealing with the family. If I can make a difference in someone's life at that moment, then I have done my job."

In his twelve years of conducting funerals for HFBA, Rabbi Plafker has been witness to encounters that will remain with him for a lifetime. He has seen parents place toys upon the grave of their young child. He has seen physically disabled people trek to the gravesite of a friend to attend a funeral. And he has seen the ways in which Jews reach out to help each other in times of sorrow.

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One recent case stands out in the Rabbi's mind. In June, Beth G.* died alone in an apartment building in Queens, leaving no relatives. Feeling that it was important to honor Beth's memory with recitation of the *kaddish*, a neighbor from the building took it upon himself to organize a *minyán* for the funeral. In cooperation with Rabbi Plafker, he contacted a synagogue that quickly organized volunteers to go to the cemetery. Upon arriving at the cemetery, the volunteers were informed that the hearse was delayed and that there would be a two hour wait before the funeral would take place. Despite the fact that it was the middle of the day, every single volunteer returned to the funeral two hours later so that *kaddish* could be recited at the grave. One man asked for the woman's name, and took upon himself the tremendous responsibility of reciting *kaddish* for an entire year for someone he never met. It is the opportunity to witness the bonds between people that grants Rabbi Plafker the strength to minister to sorrow.

When he is not performing funerals, Rabbi Plafker can be found aiding those who come to visit Mount Richmond Cemetery. Recently there has been a surge of interest in genealogical

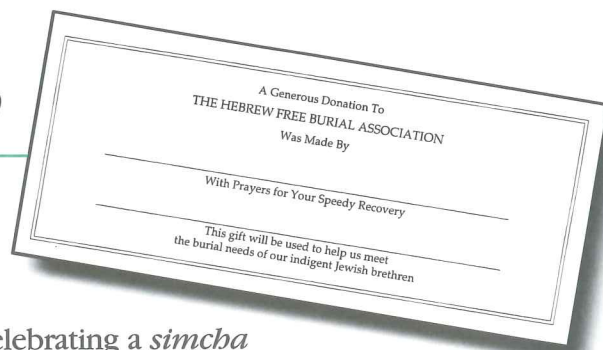
research, with Jews investigating their roots. As guardian of HFBA's detailed records, Rabbi Plafker is the first person an individual in search of the burial place of a long-lost relative will turn to. The Rabbi notes that it is not uncommon for adults to show up at the cemetery looking for the grave of a sibling who passed away before they were born, of whom they only recently became aware.

While his job is demanding, Rabbi Plafker is proud to help HFBA carry out its mission. "We are an organization that was founded over one hundred years ago to help Jews in need, and the need still exists," he says. Many of the people who come to bury loved ones tell Rabbi Plafker that they never expected to need the services of HFBA, but they fell into bad luck, or medical expenses for the deceased depleted their savings. All are impressed with the dignity and care that goes into every funeral that HFBA performs. "We don't make distinctions - we serve the entire Jewish community," says Rabbi Plafker. "It is our mission to ensure that all deceased Jews are granted a respectful burial."

* The name of our client has been changed to protect her privacy.

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.



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

Mrs. Sandra F. Berman
Mrs. Ruthe B. Cowl
Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Cywiak
Ms. Hana L. Fuchs
Mr. Bernd-Gunter Hoeck
Mr. and Mrs. Irving Schlusell
Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Schwartz

The Annual Long Beach *Chayei Sarah* breakfast will take place on November 11, 2001 at the Young Israel of Long Beach. Herman Neuman is the guest of honor. We look forward to your participation in this important event!

Visit the Historic Mount Richmond Cemetery November 12, 2001

Mount Richmond Cemetery, in Staten Island, was procured by HFBA in the early twentieth century as the needs of the community outgrew HFBA's first cemetery. The cemetery served New York's indigent Jews through periods of tragedy and disease. In 1911, Mount Richmond became the final resting place for many of the victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire. Walking through the cemetery, one can see the words "Died at the Fire" etched on their headstones. In 1918, as an outbreak of influenza swept through the city, HFBA buried hundreds of children at Mount Richmond.

The cemetery holds the graves of immigrants who never realized the American dream, and of Holocaust survivors who died penniless. Mount Richmond is still in use today, as HFBA buries more than three hundred Jews a year upon its hallowed ground.

On Monday November 12, HFBA will conduct a tour of the historic Mount Richmond Cemetery. Participants will be able to view the headstones and will have the opportunity to converse with Rabbi Shmuel Plafker, HFBA's officiating Rabbi. There is no cost for the trip, and there will be no solicitations. A light snack will be served. The bus will leave HFBA's office at 224 W. 35th St., Room 300 at 9:00 AM and will return at approximately 12:00 PM. Please call Amy Koplow at (212) 239-1662 to make a reservation.

No Jew Should Be Forgotten

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kadisha could perform a *tabara* (purification) in accordance with Jewish tradition. His body detained for almost 3 months in the morgue and the medical school, HFBA was finally able to provide respectful Jewish burial for David.

David's story is representative of many of the cases that HFBA receives - Jews who die utterly helpless, without family or friends to aid in funeral arrangements or to mourn for the departed. In these cases, HFBA steps in when there are no family or friends to do so, ensuring that deceased Jews are afforded the respect they deserve and not left to public mercy. But David's story is representative in another way - as it indicates the extent to which HFBA often must go to ensure that Jewish bodies are not forsaken. In David's case HFBA served as both detective and friend, making phone calls to track down the body, negotiating for its release, and then arranging for its transport, all in addition to providing for the funeral. David's story is representative in that it shows HFBA's depth of commitment to safeguarding the dignity of all deceased Jews.

** The name of our client has been changed to protect his privacy.*

Maximize the Impact of your Gift to HFBA through your Company's Matching Gift Program

You can double or even triple the dollar value of your gift to HFBA if you work for a company with a Matching Gift Program.

- ❖ It's easy - first contact your employer's human resources office and inquire as to whether your company matches employee donations.
- ❖ Review your company's guidelines to see if HFBA is eligible to receive a matching gift. If so, obtain a copy of your company's matching gift form and mail it along with your donation to HFBA.
- ❖ HFBA will process the form and send it back to your employer. Your company will send its matching donation directly to HFBA.
- ❖ Together, you and your employer will help ensure that every Jew can have a respectful Jewish burial.

We would like to thank those companies who have generously donated Matching Gifts to HFBA:

American Express
American International Group Inc.
Continental Assurance Company
Chase Manhattan Bank
Citibank N.A. and Citicorp
Citigroup Foundation
Compaq Computer Corporation
Deutsche Bank North America
Gartner Group
Home Depot
Minerals Technologies Inc.
Mobil
Mutual of America Life Insurance
Newsweek
Pfizer Inc.
Prudential
Seagram Companies
Thomson Financial
UBS

HFBA Now Has Tzedakah Boxes

For over one hundred years HFBA has been involved in the *mitzvah* of burying the dead. Every donation helps our organization continue its important work. You can now participate in this *mitzvah* by placing an HFBA *tzedakah* box in your home, school, or local kosher restaurant. The *tzedakah* boxes provide a unique opportunity to perform a *mitzvah* with your children and to teach them about the ways we can help those less fortunate than ourselves. It is especially appropriate to place an HFBA *tzedakah* box in a house of mourning, in memory of the deceased. To have a *tzedakah* box sent to you please call HFBA at (212) 239-1662.



Students at The Solomon Schechter School of Westchester participate in the mitzvah of tzedakah.