

Dear Friends and Supporters:

HFBA has been on the front lines of the terrible Covid-19 pandemic. Between March 1st and April 30, we buried 186 indigent and isolated Jews, a population particularly vulnerable to the disease.

As are all first responders, the HFBA staff are truly heroes.

The office staff has been inundated with telephone inquiries. Our *chevra kadisha*, dedicated to providing prompt, respectful *taharas*, has been on call day and night. Because of social distancing requirements, Rabbi Plafker has stood, mostly alone, at scores of burials. Our staff has worked tirelessly, often juggling their own family and child-care demands and other responsibilities.

HFBA's resources have been stretched beyond its limits. Yet our staff continues to comfort the mourners and expedite the funerals and burials. It has been a superhuman effort.

All of us are enormously heartened by the support and the notes we have received, like this one from Barry Feiner:

...My wife Cathy and I decided weeks ago that as our income has not been adversely affected as result of this pandemic, should we receive funds from the stimulus bill, we would donate it all to charity. Last week we donated some of it to two food banks. Then we realized that HFBA must be overwhelmed as a result of this crisis. I hope the enclosed check can help. Please stay safe and thank you for what you do.

I want to thank the Feiners and all HFBA supporters for their generous gifts. We are grateful for every donation during this extraordinary, heartbreaking time.

May you and yours be blessed with safety and good health.

Sincerely,



Amy Koplou

HFBA Executive Director

AP

On April 21, 2020, the AP Newswire published an article on HFBA, written by David Goldman and Matt Sedensky. It is reprinted here with permission.

Cemetery Races to Keep Up as New York Virus Deaths Mount

NEW YORK (AP) — The streets are eerily quiet. Barely a soul walks by. But when Rabbi Shmuel Plafker arrives at the cemetery, it's buzzing: Vans pulling in with bodies aboard, mounds of dirt piling up as graves are dug open, a line of white signs pressed into the ground marking plots that are newly occupied.

Some of the few signs of life in this anguished city are coming from those tending to the dead.

As the world retreats and the pandemic's confirmed death toll in New York City alone charges past 10,000, funeral directors, cemetery workers and others who oversee a body's final chapter are sprinting to keep up.

Plafker, the chaplain at Mount Richmond Cemetery on Staten Island, grips in hands covered by rubber gloves the long list of burials he must preside over this day. In the notes section beside each person's name, the reason for their demise: "COVID." "COVID." "COVID."

"There's a tremendous sadness," he says. "Were it not for this, they would be living, some healthy, some not so healthy. But they would be alive."

Mount Richmond is run by the Hebrew Free Burial Association, which buries Jews who die with little or nothing. A century ago, it buried garment workers killed in the Triangle Shirtwaist fire and those who fell to the Spanish flu. More recently, it was Holocaust survivors who fled Europe.

And now, those dying of the coronavirus.

A stream of people trusted with preparing Mount Richmond's dead for burial continues to arrive at the cemetery, carefully washing the bodies as Jewish law dictates, then placing them in a white shroud. The Torah calls for burial as soon as possible. These days, it's more of a challenge than ever.

Companies that transport the dead to their final resting places are



Cemetery Races to Keep Up ...continued from page 1

backed up, part of a chain reaction of hold-ups that includes overbooked funeral homes and cemeteries that are turning families away.

“The casket companies have no caskets,” says James Donofrio, a funeral director who handles Mount Richmond’s arrangements.

Hebrew Free Burial stocked up on caskets before the coronavirus unleashed its worst, just as they did with protective gear for workers, garments for the dead and other supplies. They think they have enough. Then again, they thought the mortuary cooler they ordered a month ago to fit an extra four bodies would be enough extra space. Now they have a refrigerated trailer big enough to hold 20.

Amy Koplow, who runs Hebrew Free Burial, worries about staff maintaining such furious pace and raising enough money to cover the costs being run up. But they’ve vowed to plod on.

They were used to burying one person on an average day. A “crazy day,” Koplow says, would be five.

The other day, they put 11 people in the ground.

Staffers find themselves exchanging texts about death certificates at 2 a.m. and fielding dozens of calls at a time. It takes its toll on everyone.

Plafker looks at the trees in bloom and the grass sprouting and finds spring’s signs of rebirth so paradoxical given the death that surrounds him. He thinks of the centuries-old words he recites on the High Holy Days, that seem to carry so much more weight now.

“How many shall pass away and how many shall be born,” it says. “Who shall perish by water and who by fire? Who by sword and who by wild beast? Who by famine and who by thirst? Who by earthquake and who by plague?”

Now, it seems, a plague is upon him.

Between travel restrictions and potentially exposed family members kept in isolation, many funerals now have no mourners on site. When they do, they are prohibited from gathering at the graveside, instead listening to rushed services by phone from cars parked 50 feet away.

Michael Tokar comes along this day to bid his father farewell, waiting in his car for directions when Donofrio arrives with news.

“We have a problem,” an apologetic Donofrio says. “The body ain’t here. We’re going to have to do the funeral tomorrow.”

There was a snag in getting the hospital to release the remains. So the son dutifully returns a day later.

Tokar’s father had a cough and fever and a home health aide got him to the hospital. Two days later, he was dead, with the coronavirus listed as the cause.

As Tokar sits in his car, his phone rings. Plafker is on the line. The service is beginning and the rabbi delivers a play-by-play of the ritual.

“I’m going to help the men lower the body,” he tells him.

The crew is dressed in white protective suits, masks and gloves, looking more fit for a moon landing than a funeral. They use orange straps to place David Tokar in his grave.

“We’re going to cover him now,” Plafker says, before asking the son if he wanted to talk about his dad.

“He was born 92 years ago,” he began, reciting a collection of facts that form a portrait.

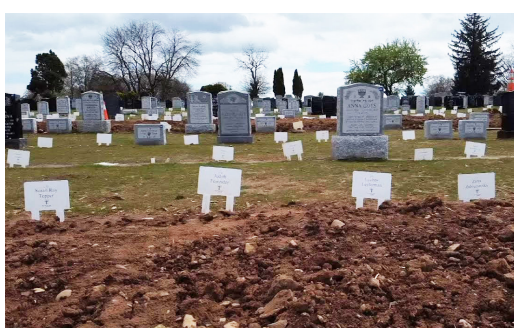
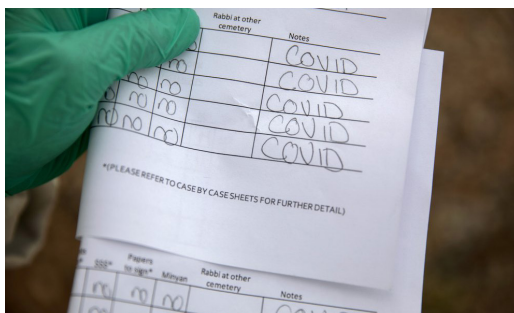
He collected stamps. He loved the racetrack. He adored his grandchildren.

The rabbi reads a Psalm and tells Tokar his father will live on in the hearts of those who loved him and

that he hopes this “terrible plague” will finally pass. In 10 minutes, it is over.

A few rows away, Thomas Cortez readies another grave. Two of his friends have fallen ill and he and his colleagues worry they will too. It is sad work, he admits, but it must continue.

Another funeral is about to begin.



Underwrite a Covid-19 Burial

Every funeral and burial costs HFBA about \$5,400. This year HFBA anticipates twice the number of last year’s interments, to over 700 burials.

You can participate in the *mitzvah* of taking care of one Jewish soul at the end of life. If you underwrite the full cost of a burial, we will send you the name and profile of the deceased and a *yahrzeit* notice next year, creating your personal connection to someone everyone else has forgotten.

The average number of bodies buried by HFBA is about

7 a week, 30 a month, 360 a year.

As the coronavirus began its unrelenting invasion of New York, HFBA had to anticipate, and then deal with, the inevitable increase in burials.

Here is a timeline of HFBA activity during March and April of this year:



March 2: Amy Koplow has first conversation with staff members about dealing with a **possible Covid-19 emergency**

March 3: An HFBA employee, exposed to the coronavirus, has to **quarantine**, leaving fewer staff members to deal with the impending crisis.

March 1-7: 11 burials

March 25: HFBA orders a four-body **mortuary cooler**, adding refrigeration space to the existing 10' refrigerator

March 13: HFBA office staff makes plans to avoid the office and **work remotely**. The surrounding downtown area, normally bustling, looks like a ghost town. Employees alternate the responsibility of going into the office to get the mail, prepare bank deposits and process forms related to the burials.

March 22-28: 14 burials, **double the weekly average**

March 26: HFBA buries the first person whose death certificate identifies the cause of death as Covid-19.

March 29-April 4: 25 burials, including 14 victims of the virus



March 30: HFBA funeral staff starts working overtime into the evening, supplementing the one after-hours caseworker. There is a large increase in inquiries and intakes, too much for one person to handle.



March 31: 5 victims of Covid-19 buried



March 30: HFBA receives notice of \$250,000 Covid-19 Emergency Covid-19 Response grant from UJA-Federation of New York

April 1: Record number of telephone inquiries for burial. 7 victims of Covid-19 buried

Saturday nights, April 4 and April 11: Seven HFBA staff members work late into the night, **past midnight**, arranging for burials for the next day.

April 3: HFBA orders **40' refrigerated trailer** for additional storage to accommodate growing number of bodies. Anticipated delivery: April 7

April 5: 10 burials, a one-day record



April 5-11: Record number of burials in one week: 27 burials, quadruple the weekly average, including 17 Covid-19 victims

April 10: Refrigerated trailer is outfitted with shelves and lights and hooked up to diesel generator which is rented for over \$100/ day



April 17: Another record broken- 11 burials in one day



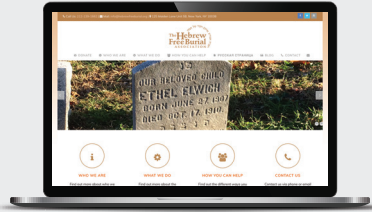
April 12-18: Yet another record broken: 37 burials, including 26 victims of the virus

April 26: 11 burials, 8 victims of Covid-19 HFBA's Director of Operations asks for donations of **talleisim** for burials from his local community and through Facebook

April 26- May 1: HFBA's request for **talleisim** turns into a viral campaign and HFBA receives over **1500 talleisim** from the New York metropolitan area as well as from places as far away as Florida, Nebraska and Oregon.



PLEASE HELP OUT TODAY BY SENDING A DONATION IN THE ENCLOSED ENVELOPE



Your help is needed now more than ever.
Donate online at
www.hebrewfreeburial.org/donate
 Giving on our secure website
 is both easy and efficient!

HFBA MISSION STATEMENT

THE HEBREW FREE BURIAL ASSOCIATION devotes its resources to performing *chesed shel emet* (the ultimate act of loving kindness). It is the only agency in the New York metropolitan area dedicated to assuring that every Jew, regardless of financial means or religious affiliation, receives a dignified, traditional Jewish funeral and burial.

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Give a Gift That Lasts Forever and Costs Nothing Today

Many of our supporters are currently dealing with financial stress, and are unable now to contribute as much as they would have wanted.

By including a gift to HFBA in your will, you can create a lasting impact on our community, ensuring burials for the indigent for years to come, at no immediate personal cost.

To write your will for free, protect the things you love and build your legacy at Hebrew Free Burial Association, visit:
www.hebrewfreeburial.org/freewill

We would be happy to help you.

Many, Many Thanks to Our HFBA Heroes

FUNERAL COORDINATORS:

Rhonda Stein
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 Joann D'Agnese Baxter
 Wendy Linderman (*volunteer*)

CEMETERY STAFF:

Rabbi Shmuel Plafker and funeral director James Donofrio and the cemetery team. They conducted and enabled an astonishing 186 burials in 61 days.

DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS

Andrew Parver

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE STAFF:

Yardena Rothschild
 Vicky Turek

CEMETERY OFFICE STAFF

Lena Samofal

HFBA Has Buried Victims of Covid-19 as Young as 37. Among Those We've Lost in the Pandemic....

- **Dora and Izzy F.** were siblings who lived together in a small Brooklyn apartment. Tragically, they both succumbed to Covid-19 on the same day in different New York City hospitals. A friend called HFBA about Izzy, age 65 and a doctor called about Dora, age 73. After getting the go-ahead from the Public Administrator, brother and sister were laid to rest at Mount Richmond Cemetery.
- Aaron I. called HFBA about his 53-year-old brother who had died of Covid-19. He was so distraught and difficult to understand that an HFBA staff member reached out to his mother, Sadie. Sadie, herself disabled and subsisting on SSI and Medicaid, said that **Isaac** had lived in a group home, was non-verbal and low-functioning. She cried in sadness and gratitude as she explained that she did not have the means to bury her son and learned that HFBA would do it for her.

Donate Appreciated Stocks

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