

Hebrew Free Burial Association — When There Is No One Else

The Jewish community is blessed with organizations that nurture Jewish life — caring for our children, supporting families, preserving memory, and strengthening our future.

But when life comes to an end, who is there for the Jew who has no one?

or a distant cousin who has discovered there is no one else to arrange a burial. Other times, HFBA must make the call — reaching out to hospitals, nursing homes, public administrators, or medical examiners to ensure that a Jewish individual is not overlooked.

“If there is no family, we work with public administrators or someone who knew the deceased to authorize the burial.”

HFBA also monitors public databases of unclaimed individuals for Jewish names, ensuring that no one is forgotten. In some cases, a Jewish body has been waiting in a morgue for months before being identified and brought to burial. Recently, HFBA laid to rest an individual who had been waiting for 18 months.

Once everything is set in motion, the *Chevrá Kadisha* takes over.

The Tahara Process

The *Chevrá Kadisha* – the Burial Society – begins its work. These are devoted men and women who understand the profound privilege and responsibility entrusted to them.

Tahara, meaning “purity,” is one of the most sacred rituals in Jewish life. In private, with reverence and care, the deceased is prepared for burial according to *halacha* (Jewish law) and centuries of tradition.

The body is gently cleansed, and is carefully kept covered except for the area being washed, preserving modesty and dignity at every moment. They speak only when

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Each year, approximately 300 individuals are entrusted to HFBA’s care.

Each year, approximately 300 individuals are entrusted to HFBA’s care. They come from every background — observant and unaffiliated, connected and alone — but all share one fundamental truth: they deserve a proper Jewish burial.

The first step is gathering the necessary information to proceed with care and respect. “We reach out to the family, determine where the body is located, review the death certificate, and secure the required permissions,” explains Rhonda Stein, HFBA’s Senior Funeral Coordinator.

In the New York area, that responsibility rests with the Hebrew Free Burial Association, which is committed to preserving the dignity of every Jewish soul, ensuring that no Jew is ever left behind.

The Call Comes In
For HFBA, the responsibility often begins with a simple phone call.

Sometimes the call comes from a relative — an immediate family member overwhelmed with grief,



The *Times of Israel* recently published two poignant stories highlighting HFBA’s work on behalf of those who might otherwise be forgotten. The first recounts the tragic story of a man lost to his family for decades, and the moving journey of his great-grandson to rediscover his grave. The second explores the history of HFBA and the vital work carried out behind the scenes to serve New York’s Jewish community with dignity and care. ■



**Family History, Forgetting,
and the American Dream:**
<https://bit.ly/hfba-history>



**The Haunting History of the Jewish Burial Society
That Cares for NYC’s Lost and Forgotten:**
<https://bit.ly/hfba-compassion>

Wendy Linderman



An organization with as many moving parts as the Hebrew Free Burial Association depends on dedicated volunteers working quietly behind the scenes. The *Chesed* newsletter sat down with HFBA's longest-serving volunteer, Wendy Linderman, to learn more about her commitment and the role she plays in this sacred work.

Thank you so much for all that you do for HFBA! When did you first start volunteering?

I started in 2016 – it's been about nine and a half years.

How did you first hear about HFBA?

Amy spoke at a meeting of the Senior Volunteer Corps at the JCC that I belonged to. The rabbi who ran the program invited organizations that needed volunteers to come and speak. Amy stood up and explained what HFBA does and the kind of help they were looking for. I told her I was interested, she told me to call her — and the rest is history.

What made you decide to dedicate so much of your time to HFBA?

When I finished working, I knew I wanted to do volunteer work; I felt I needed to give back. I was very clear with myself that when I stopped working that I had the responsibility to do something meaningful. So I was looking for an organization that was doing mitzvot, and this was a perfect match.

What do you do when you volunteer?

I go into the office once a week and do whatever needs to be done. I open and sort the mail, process donation checks, stuff



HFBA HELPS

HFBA learned through NamUs (National Missing & Unidentified Persons System) that Sam S. had passed away in April 2024 and had remained unclaimed for 15 months. HFBA had buried his wife in 2022 after her estranged family declined involvement. Efforts to contact Sam's relatives — including children from a previous marriage — similarly revealed no interest in making arrangements.

HFBA worked with the nursing home to clarify why no burial had taken place and proceeded to coordinate his funeral. A *minyan* was assembled for the burial, even on the fast of 17 Tammuz, with volunteers — and even cemetery visitors — stepping forward to ensure he was not laid to rest alone.

Poignantly, Sam was ultimately buried in an unused grave originally reserved in 1944 for another person who was never interred there. After more than a year of being forgotten, he was finally laid to rest with dignity, among generations past, in accordance with Jewish tradition.

Cheryl F. had been in the NYC Morgue since April 2025. Her name appeared in NamUs, and she was believed to be undomiciled, making it especially difficult to confirm information or locate next of kin. For many months, her case remained under review as efforts continued to clarify her status and determine how best to proceed.

Once the case was formally cleared for release, HFBA stepped forward to ensure she was laid to rest with a traditional Jewish burial, providing dignity and care to someone who otherwise had no one to advocate on her behalf.

Her story is a quiet reminder of how easily individuals without family or documentation can be overlooked — and why HFBA's mission remains so essential.

Last fall, we were contacted regarding a Jewish man, Michael G., who had passed away shortly after arriving at a nursing facility. With no known family or documentation at the time of his death, the case was referred for further investigation.

Months later, proof of his Jewish identity was obtained — but tragically, he had already been buried in City Cemetery (Potter's Field) on Hart Island. Once his status was confirmed, we immediately began the process of arranging a disinterment.

Despite the urgency of an approaching snowstorm, our team worked swiftly to ensure he was transferred from City Cemetery to Mount Richmond Cemetery, where he was given a proper Jewish burial. A volunteer *minyan* was present to accord him the dignity and *kavod* (honor) he deserved.

Even when the process is complicated and delayed, we remain committed to ensuring that every Jew is laid to rest in accordance with our tradition.



Celebrating 25 Years of Devoted Service

This past December, friends, community leaders, and supporters gathered to celebrate Amy Koplow's retirement after 25 years of devoted service to Hebrew Free Burial Association. The evening was marked by tribute and inspiration as HBFA recognized not only her extraordinary commitment, but also its critical mission — ensuring a dignified and traditional Jewish burial for the most vulnerable members of our community. Amy's leadership and devotion have left a lasting mark on HFBA, and her impact will continue to be felt for years to come.



Top left to right: Yardena Rothschild, Andrew Parver, Efrem Reis (Assistant Director), Avraham Groll (Executive Director), Wendy Linderman, Lena Samofal, Gabriella Spektor, Yelena Kleban
Bottom left to right: Dana Riess, Amy Koplow, Vicky Turek
Not pictured: Rhonda Stein, Rabbi Shmuel Plafker, James Donofrio, Dan Simone

Volunteer Spotlight, continued from page 2
 envelopes, and help with special projects. I'm there to support whoever needs assistance.

One project that was mine from the beginning was genealogy. People write in asking questions like, "I think you buried my grandfather in a certain year, can you tell me where he's buried?" There were several old spreadsheets and databases from around the late 1800s, or early 1900s, that I was able to use to update the genealogy service.

What's the best part about volunteering for HFBA?
 I know they do mitzvot, unbelievable mitzvot. So the time that I put in I believe that I'm doing a mitzvah. And the staff are wonderful, from

the top to the bottom. It's a great organization and they do wonderful things. And when people are looking for someone and you're able to let them know where they're buried, it helps them and it makes you feel good.

What's the most memorable story you've come across?
 I remember there was a woman who'd been told she had a sister who was in a particular hospital in Queens, and she died there as a child. No one ever told her when her sister died. It turns out we buried her as a young child. I was able to give her the information she didn't have.

People can have no resources or nobody in their life, and they'll still have a dignified Jewish

burial. It's phenomenal. HFBA does a real mitzvah and not a lot of people know about it.

Inspired by Wendy's example? HFBA offers many meaningful opportunities to get involved — in the office, at the cemetery, and within the community. To learn more or to volunteer, please visit: <https://bit.ly/hfba-volunteer> ■

TO VOLUNTEER



Еврейская Благотворительная Похоронная Ассоциация – «Когда Больше Некому» Ни один еврей не останется в одиночестве

В еврейских общинах есть много организаций, сохраняющих традиции и заботящихся о наших детях и о будущем.

Но кто будет рядом с евреем в конце жизни, если у него никого нет? В Нью-Йорке это – Еврейская Благотворительная Похоронная Ассоциация (HFBA). Мы сохраняем достоинство каждого еврея, обеспечивая каждому традиционные похороны.

Всё начинается с телефонного звонка

Наша работа начинается с обычного звонка. Звонят члены семьи, охваченные горем утраты, или дальние родственники, когда больше некому организовать похороны. Часто сотрудники HFBA сами звонят в больницы, дома престарелых или в офис судмедэксперта – убедиться, что ни один еврей не был пропущен.

Ежегодно HFBA хоронит около трёхсот евреев – религиозных и несоблюдающих, семейных и одиноких. Но все они заслуживают надлежащего еврейского погребения.

Первый шаг – сбор информации – проводится с большим тактом. «Мы связываемся с членами семьи, определяем где находится тело усопшего и получаем необходимые разрешения от родственников или властей», объясняет Ронда Стайн, старший координатор похорон. «Если у усопшего нет семьи, то обращаемся к тем, кто знал покойного, или к городскому администратору».

HFBA также ищет еврейские имена в базах данных о неостребованных лицах. Иногда тело усопшего может пробыть в морге многие месяцы, прежде чем его идентифицируют и похоронят.

Обряд тахара (очищение)

Когда все формальности улажены, хевра кадиша («похоронное братство») начинает свою священную работу. Это не чуждые общине специалисты, а добровольцы, посвятившие себя важной миссии.

Тахара («чистота» на иврите) – свято чтимый еврейский ритуал. Умершего готовят к погребению в отдельном помещении, следуя всем требованиям галахи (еврейского закона).

Тело осторожно обмывают водой, не нарушая достоинство усопшего, прерывая молчание только когда нужно

произнести ритуальную молитву.

Часть ритуала – попросить прощения у усопшего, если ему нечаянно было оказано какое-либо неуважение.

По окончании тахара усопшего облачают в простой белый саван (на иврите тахрихим), обычно из хлопка или льна, что отражает равенство всех и смирение перед Вс-вышним. Затем тело кладут в простой деревянный гроб, чтобы оно естественным путём вернулось в землю.

Присутствие на похоронах

Похороны, или левая («сопровождение» на иврите) – заключительный акт проводов умершего. Мы приветствуем душу, пришедшую в мир, и мы делаем, чтобы она не покидала этот мир в одиночестве.

Раввин Шмуэль Плафкер руководит похоронами и сам проводит службу. Он помогает семьям справиться с горем и объясняет дальнейшие действия. Каждая его церемония отражает достоинство еврейских традиций.

«Я отправляю похоронную службу и даю людям советы», – говорит он. «И я нахожу людей, которые произнесут каддиш (прославление Б-га) ежедневно и годовщину смерти». Часто HFBA привлекает группу из десяти добровольцев (миньян) для прочтения каддиша. Поэтому если кто-то уходит из этого мира без друзей и близких, их место занимает община.

Рав Плафкер начинает службу левая с объяснения: «Жизнь – это посещение. Мы все гости здесь, и, когда кто-то уходит из жизни, мы провожаем его домой. Тело должно вернуться в землю, а душа возносится к Б-гу».

Ещё он напоминает собравшимся о хесед шель эмет, подлинном милосердии по отношению к умершим. Если живущий может отплатить добром за добро, то усопший – уже нет.

Сохранение памяти

На кладбище Маунт-Ричмонд, действующем с 1908 года, мы обязуемся не только достойно похоронить каждого еврея, но и сохранить память о каждом.

По еврейской традиции, мацейва («надгробие») – это не просто памятная метка. Мацейва показывает, что еврейская душа ходила по этой земле, и что имя человека будет

увековечено. В разных общинах различается время установки надгробия – после шивы (через семь дней), через 30 дней или после первого года, но обязанность сохранить память неизменна.

HFBA устанавливает мацейва и для тех, у кого не было семьи, или если у близких нет средств на надгробие. Поэтому на Маунт Ричмонд каждая могила имеет имя, каждая жизнь отмечена, остаётся память о каждой еврейской душе.

«На каждой могиле есть надгробие», объясняет Дана Риесс, директор по логистике. «Благодаря кампании «Оставь свой след» мы заботимся, чтобы даже у не имевших семьи или близких был надгробный знак».

Раз в год, в «День памятников», сотни надгробий прибывают на кладбище. Ряды свежесвыгравированных монолитов бережно выгружают из грузовиков и размещают на земле, чтобы работники кладбища могли их установить на нужные могилы. Это растягивается на несколько недель. С каждым надгробием неотмеченные могилы обретают имя; в это особое время на кладбище те, кто был похоронен в одиночестве, сохраняются в нашей памяти.

После этого наша работа не заканчивается. Целая бригада поддерживает и чинит стареющие памятники, некоторым из которых более ста лет. Этот труд не даёт времени и стихиям стереть память об усопших.

В рамках ещё одной нашей программы члены общины включают в молитву об усопших (Йизкор) имена одиноких евреев. По праздникам эти имена звучат в молитвах и в наших сердцах, остаются частью еврейской общины.

А пожертвования участников ещё одного проекта «Оставь свой след» напрямую идут на покупку и установку надгробий для тех, чья могила могла остаться безымянной. Если Вы хотите помочь в этом сохранении памяти, пожалуйста посетите сайт www.hebrewfreeburial.org/donate/ и выберите рубрику «Leave Your Mark».

И в жизни и в смерти ни один еврей не должен оставаться в одиночестве. Поэтому и существует HFBA – чтобы не стёрлась память ни об одном еврее. ■

continued from cover

necessary and to recite the prayers that accompany the ritual, asking forgiveness if any unintended disrespect is shown and honoring the soul as it prepares to return to its Creator.

After the *tahara* is completed, the deceased is dressed in simple white shrouds, traditionally made of cotton or linen, symbolizing equality and humility before G-d. The body is then placed in a plain wooden coffin, preparing to return naturally to the earth, just as Jewish tradition prescribes.

Attending the Funeral

The funeral, or *levaya* – literally meaning “escort” – is Judaism’s final act of accompaniment. Rabbi Shmuel Plafker, HFBA’s Chaplain, officiates these funerals. His role extends far beyond delivering brief remarks at a graveside. He guides families through unfamiliar terrain, offers comfort and clarity, and ensures that every service reflects the dignity of Jewish tradition.

“I officiate the funerals, and occasionally give people advice,” he says. “I find people to say *kaddish* (the prayer sanctifying G-d’s name) either daily or on the *yahrtzeit* (commemoration of a person’s passing), and also coordinate a volunteer *minyán* when needed.” When a family requests it, HFBA mobilizes a dedicated group of volunteers to ensure that a *minyán* is present so that *kaddish* can be recited. Rabbi Plafker begins each *levaya* by explaining its meaning. “Life is a visit.

We’re all visitors, and when someone passes away, we’re escorting them home. The body comes from the Earth, and it must go back to the Earth. The soul ascends to G-d.”

He reminds those present of the concept of *Chesed Shel Emet* — true loving-kindness. “What we do for the deceased is the purest form of kindness, because it can never be repaid. A living person can reciprocate an act of compassion. The dead cannot.”

Life is a visit. We’re all visitors, and when someone passes away, we’re escorting them home.

Preserving Memory

At Mount Richmond Cemetery, which has been open since 1908, HFBA is committed not only to burying each individual with dignity, but to preserving their legacy, memory, and sense of identity.

In Jewish tradition, a *matzeivah* — a headstone — is far more than a marker. It affirms that a life was lived, that a Jewish soul walked this world, and that their name will endure. While customs vary as to when a headstone is erected — after *shiva*, after thirty days, or at the end of the first year — the obligation to remember remains constant.

For those without family, or without the financial means to erect a monument, HFBA ensures that a *matzeivah* is placed nonetheless. Every grave at Mount Richmond Cemetery bears a name. Every life is acknowledged. Every soul is remembered.

“Every grave has a tombstone,” says Dana Riess, HFBA’s Director of Logistics. “Through the Leave Your Mark campaign, we make sure that even those without family will have a monument. That’s something we’re very careful about.”

Once each year, hundreds of monuments arrive at the cemetery on what HFBA



calls

“Monument

Day.” Row upon row of newly engraved stones are carefully unloaded from a flatbed truck. They are gently positioned so the grounds crew can set them in their proper places, a process that unfolds over several weeks. With every stone that is raised, a once-unmarked grave is given identity and permanence. It is a quiet, sacred time at Mount Richmond Cemetery — visible testimony that those who were buried alone will not remain alone in memory.

And the work does not stop there. With a full-time grounds staff, HFBA maintains, resets, and repairs aging monuments, some more than a century old, ensuring that time and weather do not erase memory.

HFBA is also developing an initiative to connect synagogues and members of the broader Jewish community with the names of indigent Jews who were buried without mourners. On Yom Kippur, during *Yizkor*, those names can be spoken in prayer. Even if a person left this world alone, they need not remain alone in memory.

Through the Leave Your Mark campaign, supporters partner with us in this sacred responsibility. Contributions go directly toward the purchase, engraving, and installation of headstones for those who would otherwise remain unmarked.



To help ensure that no Jew is ever forgotten, please visit: www.hebrewfreeburial.org/ donate and select “Leave Your Mark.”

Because in life and in death, no Jew should ever be alone. That is why HFBA exists — to ensure that no Jew is ever left behind. ■



Workers unload headstones to be placed on each grave

There are many Passover seder traditions, and they vary between every table. Many people have philosophical discussions of the Passover Haggadah, others give out prizes for excellent questions, and many children enjoy the mischief of hiding the Afikoman. But one thing guaranteed to be in every seder is the passage of *Ha Lachma'anya*, the bread of affliction.

In that passage we read, "Let all who are hungry come and eat. Let all who are in need, come and share the Pesach meal." The message is clear. We leave nobody behind. Anyone who is hungry is welcome to join our table and eat.

The Hebrew Free Burial Association's mission is to extend that courtesy. The deceased deserve just as much dignity and honor as the living, and just like we invite the living to join our seder tables, HFBA ensures that no one, living or dead, is left behind.

The Hebrew Free Burial Association wishes everyone a wonderful Pesach.



Annual Riverdale Breakfast

We look forward to gathering again on Sunday, April 26, at the Annual Riverdale Breakfast, where we



will continue to celebrate Amy's retirement after a quarter century of dedication to the broader Jewish community. To register, please visit:

HebrewFreeBurial.org/Riverdale ■



Dear Rabbi Plafker,

The enclosed donation to the Hebrew Free Burial Association is in your honor, for all the time, care, and concern you took to make today's cemetery visit the most memorable one I have had in years.

Because of you, I was finally able to visit my grandfather Shammai Baruch Lifschultz's grave and pay my respects.

Thank you for caring and helping me fulfill a mitzvah.

Sincerely, A. Weiss



MOUNT RICHMOND CEMETERY HOURS OF OPERATION

PASSOVER 2026

Wednesday April 1 — 9 AM – 1 PM
 Thursday April 2 — CLOSED
 Friday April 3, CLOSED
 Tuesday April 7 — 9 AM – 1 PM
 Wednesday April 8 — CLOSED
 Thursday April 9 — CLOSED
 YIZKOR IS RECITED THURSDAY APRIL 9

SHAVUOT 2026

Thursday May 21 — 9 AM – 1 PM
 Friday May 22 — CLOSED
 YIZKOR IS RECITED SATURDAY MAY 23

GENERAL HOURS

Sunday - Thursday — 9 AM – 3:45 PM
 Friday — 9 AM – 1 PM
 CLOSED ON SHABBAT AND JEWISH HOLIDAYS

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