



### From Rabbi Carie

The air is crisp, the sky is blue. The crocuses and daffodils are blooming. *HaAviv Higia* (Spring has arrived)! The season of Passover, of freedom, freshness and new possibilities is at hand. And even with very little snow this winter, Spring is particularly welcome this year.

In many ways, it feels like we have been through an exceedingly long, three-year winter — for our world, our nation, our people and for our community. The period of Covid, while not over, has finally moved into a new stage, and we as a community are starting to return to life as it was long ago — with many differences that make sense for today and allow us to envision tomorrow. It is wonderful to behold, to see large groups of people begin to return to the synagogue in person (and others to continue to call us home via Zoom). Please pop in one *Shabbat* to join the fun.

Among the many challenges of the Covid period were those around lifecycles. So many weddings were postponed or held on balconies, in small settings, or over Zoom. Babies did not have the opportunity to meet people beyond their immediate families until they were much older than we would have hoped. Graduations were held outdoors with extended social distancing or on Zoom.

And yet somehow, we found ways to celebrate. Earlier during Covid, we used this newsletter to lift up the amazingly creative ways in which our *Bnai Mitzvah* families adapted during those days of Covid, holding ceremonies in mostly empty sanctuaries, under our tent, in driveways, living rooms, and via Zoom. But in every case, we found a way to bring out the celebratory nature of the day, welcoming a new adult into the Jewish world. It was truly inspiring.

As hard as it was to figure out the nuances of celebrating during Covid, it was that much more difficult to mourn our losses during those days. Our natural tendencies to reach out in support had to be redefined. Funerals often consisted of just immediate family and a rabbi, *shiva* took place on Zoom, in private, and on stoops. Our *Chevra Kaddisha* could not go to do in-person *Shmirah* or *Tahara*, and so we found ways to virtually accompany souls when they died, and to support families in different ways during their times of grief. I am proud of our ability to pivot, to be flexible and to constantly keep the honor of the person who died and their families at the heart of our work throughout the time of Covid.

Just this winter, PSJC suffered a particularly sad series of deaths of beloved members of our community, including Steve Radwell, Brian Newcombe, and Rabbi Jeffrey Marker, may their memories be a blessing. In each case, and in so many other instances this year, our *Chevra Kaddisha* and our community at large, found ways to care for those who died, to honor their memories, and to support their families with deep love and respect. And it is this care which we are focusing on in this issue of our newsletter. It is our hope that this is a way to honor those who have died, along with those engaged in their care and support.

I'm grateful that we are once again able to support people face-to-face in times of loss, and to celebrate together in times of joy. I am grateful that Spring has come, and I am grateful that we have been able to be together as a true community throughout even the darkest moments of the extended winter.



**From Co-Presidents  
Martha Harrison and Rachel Levine**



The greenery of spring brings to mind renewal and the blessing of the cycles of nature and the Jewish year. It's a perfect time to reflect on the constant rejuvenation that happens at PSJC – our spiritual home and center of Jewish learning, community, care, and *mitzvot* – through the hard work of devoted volunteers, engaged members, and committed staff.

There is growth happening all around us, which is all the sweeter this spring, as we look back on three especially challenging pandemic years. Even as we continue to face uncertainty here and abroad, we know that we are always centered and lifted at PSJC, with Rabbi Carie Carter as our incomparable spiritual leader, joined by Aileen Haiman at the helm of the Hebrew School and membership, Cantor Judy Ribnick engaging us through song, and our Rabbinic fellow, Talia Kaplan, who shares her passion for social justice and Jewish learning.

In January we welcomed back the fruitful and fun MLK Day of Service, which resulted in social action projects designed to make our voices heard, hundreds of nutritious meals and snacks being prepared, and many boxes of donated children's books and winter gear, sorted, packed, and delivered to local organizations that serve people in need, including growing numbers of asylum seekers. We had an incredibly spirited and well-attended *Megillah* reading, original *Purimspiel*, and a joyous festival, as well as a high participation *mishloach manot* (Purim food basket) fundraiser, and a terrific 50-50 raffle. *Pesach* magnifies the joy of spring, as we gather at

tables or digitally to celebrate freedom and reinforce our commitment to *tzedek* (righteousness) in our midst and in the larger world.

PSJC is flourishing from the ground up: we see burgeoning membership, growing in-person participation, enriching programming for all segments of our community and interest groups, and facility improvements such as continued work on our security features and a budding plan for the yard (stay tuned for exciting developments sprouting soon!).

To help support our continued growth, we are excited that Rabbi Hayley Goldstein will be joining us in the role of Associate Rabbi in July. Rabbi Goldstein brings a wealth of experience in many areas, including community organizing and outreach, and work in multi-generational settings. She will be a great asset working alongside Rabbi Carter and the PSJC professional staff.

And speaking of our strong and dedicated staff, we are excited to report that two of our key professionals, Aileen Heiman, Director of Education and Engagement, and Patrick Francis, Facility Manager, are both celebrating their ten-year anniversaries with PSJC this year! It is hard to believe that Stephanie Cooke, our talented Administrator, has only been with us just over a year. We are very fortunate to have such an amazing and hard-working staff.

We welcomed several new Board and Executive Committee members in January, and we've all been working together to continue to enhance our infrastructure, partnering with our staff, and interfacing with our incredible committees and community members as they develop meaningful and uplifting *avodah* (work, worship, and service), excellent programming, *gemilut chasadim* (acts of lovingkindness), and targeted social action projects.

Our community has much to celebrate, and we are grateful to all of you who support PSJC and call it home.



**From Aileen Heiman  
Director of Education and Engagement**



There is something about the cycle of the Jewish calendar that makes time move more quickly during this season. I often joke with our Hebrew School faculty that as soon as Purim arrives, the year is basically over. Perhaps it is the quick succession from the happiness of *Purim*, to the rush of Passover preparations, to the anticipation of receiving *Torah* at *Shavuot*. We are planning to make the most of these final months of the school year with lessons indoors and outdoors, field trips, Hebrew School *Shabbat*, and the annual *Tzedakah* Fair.

Certainly one highlight memory for our children each year is *Purim* at PSJC, and this year was no exception. From opening the treats in the *mishloach manot* bags, to the spontaneous backup dancers in the balcony during the *spiel*, to pie throwing during the party, PSJC was filled with joy from members of all ages and stages. Programming like this could not be possible without the support of our *Mishloach Manot* donors, so we thank the record-breaking 109 households who participated this year, allowing us to raise almost \$20,000 to support programming during *Purim* and throughout the year.

As we look ahead towards the end of the year and planning for next year, our faculty team is also hard at work reflecting on what worked well this year and what changes we might want to consider for our curriculum and programming. These reflections will take the form of group meetings, one-on-one discussions, and professional development for some of our returning teachers over the summer. We strive to find the balance between meeting curriculum goals and allowing for student-centered exploration. A conversation about *kedushah*

(holiness), leads to a lesson about artistic depiction of angels, and a lost tooth leads to reciting *shechianu* during *tefillah*. It is both the learning moments that we plan for, and the ones that surprise us, that help form lasting Jewish memories for our students.



Later this spring I have the honor of attending the national PJ Library Conference, to do a deep dive into engagement work, gaining tools to share more widely the gifts our community has to offer, and look at the ways in which PSJC can continue to grow within the changing landscape of Brooklyn Jewish life. One of my primary membership engagement goals is to think creatively and broadly about PSJC *Shabbat*. How can we create space to take a break and connect with friends and family?

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Thanks to Adina Lerner and Aileen Heiman for the Hebrew School photos!

**Aileen Heiman –continued**



What do you look for in a *Shabbat* experience and how can you help make that happen? Planning has begun for **Shabbat on the Block**, bringing PSJC *Shabbat* to where you are. We hope to fill the weekend with opportunities to experience *Shabbat*, from services, to meals, to runs in the park, to late night discussions. Most importantly we hope it will be a time to meet PSJC members who are neighbors and to connect with friends new and old. Mark the calendar for June 16th and 17th and if you are interested in hosting a gathering at your home, a local playground, or even at PSJC, please let us know.

Whether you are new to PSJC, just checking us out, or have been around a long time and want to learn more, reach out to me at [aileen@psjc.org](mailto:aileen@psjc.org) or our Membership Chair, Naomi Sunshine, at [membership@psjc.org](mailto:membership@psjc.org) to meet for a cup of coffee, or find us at an upcoming event.

**From Stephanie Cooke  
PSJC Administrator**



Spring is in full swing, and we couldn't be more excited to share what's happening at PSJC this season! We have an exciting lineup of spring and summer programming that I am eager to share with you. Our calendar is packed with enriching events, including *Pesach*

services, *Shabbat* on the Block, Pride *Shabbat*, and much more. As we enjoy these upcoming celebrations, we'll also soon be turning our attention to preparations for the High Holy Days.

Our recent *Purim* celebration was a resounding success, and I want to thank every one of you for your enthusiastic participation and dedication. The joy and laughter we shared during this special event are testaments to the strong bonds and connections within our community.

We are thrilled to announce the conclusion of our IT system upgrades at the synagogue. Thanks to your generous support, we can modernize our systems and continue to fulfill our mission for the years to come. This upgrade will significantly enhance our ability to serve our community and stay connected.

As we move forward, we will continue to offer diverse and engaging programming, fostering spiritual growth and lifelong learning for all our members. We are committed to strengthening our connections with each other, and I am excited about the opportunities that lie ahead.

I am truly humbled to be a part of a synagogue that is so passionate about its community and the world beyond. I look forward to working together as we continue to enrich our community, creating a space where everyone feels welcome and valued.

**From Talia Kaplan—Rabbinic Fellow**



It's hard to believe that when I last wrote to you, I was just starting out at PSJC. Over the past 8 months, you have all welcomed me with open arms, for which I am so grateful. Being at PSJC allows JTS students to serve a special community while also learning from the clergy, staff, lay leadership, and congregants. Think of it like a medical residency, except you probably shouldn't entrust me with a scalpel — they don't teach THAT in Rabbinical School!

Teaching and learning stands out as one of the central themes of my time at PSJC. One of my favorite things about the community is how people are eager to learn from new voices and also happy to share their own wisdom and expertise. Whether at *Lev Tahor shabbatot*, through volunteering at the *Purim Party*, or facilitating a session at PAI, PSJC members know how to give and receive the gift of *Torah*.

It is in this spirit that I embarked on a learning experiment called “*Talmud* through a Different Lens.” What would it look like to bring together PSJC members ranging from those who have learned *Talmud* before to those who do not really know what the *Talmud* is? By approaching rabbinic texts through various distinct non-rabbinic frameworks, I hoped to make *Talmud* accessible to those for whom it was foreign and fresh for those for whom it was familiar. In our first session, we explored how Stephen Sondheim’s approach to writing musical theater lyrics could help us pay attention to the way God is in the details of rabbinic texts. We then used an academic approach at the intersection of disability studies and queer studies called “crip theory” to help us contend with power, sexism, and ableism in rabbinic texts. How do we engage with our sacred stories when they can be painful? While there is no one answer, scholar Julia Watts Belser’s writings helped us recenter the experiences and agency of those with marginalized identities in our conversation. In our final session we will employ Dr. David Kraemer’s methodology of reading the *Talmud* as a work of literature.

Thank you to everyone who has participated in this experiment. Hearing your voices and opinions animate a page of *Talmud* has made this all the more worthwhile. If we haven’t yet learned together, I would love to do so. As I look forward to my second and final year as your Rabbinic Fellow, I hope you will partner with me in continuing to think about the ways in which we’d like to learn together as a community.



### Speaking of Israel Update

Speaking of Israel, a program that started in winter 2021, features a series of talks and presentations to connect PSJC with Israel. The events focus on various topics, with a range of speakers from all walks of life in Israel and the U.S. This year our programs encompassed a wide variety of topics, including history, food, PSJC culture, and more.

In November we commemorated *Kristallnacht* with a screening of “You Look So German,” followed by discussion with the director Nirit Ben-Yosef, live from Berlin. In December we had a lovely presentation and discussion by Adeena Sussman, author of the well-known cookbook “*Sababa*.” During March and April we are screening a series of short films that deal with different aspects of Israeli society, each followed by a discussion moderated by our *Shaliach* Elad Bar Ilan.

We had a great reunion in February with our past *Shinshinim*, in which we learned about their military service after leaving Brooklyn, the influence that the year in Brooklyn had on their future choices, and the value of the program for both the *Shinshinim* and ourselves. If you missed the reunion, check out the video section (in the “Who Are We?” dropdown) of the PSJC website which has a recording of the session.

Upcoming programs: At the end of *Yom Hashoah*, on April 18 at 7PM we will screen on Zoom “Question of Life and Death”, a powerful documentary by Moshe Alafi, followed by Q&A with the director, live from Israel. The film follows a group of notable Israeli on a five-day trip to Poland.

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We will conclude this year's programming on June 11 with a conversation with Dr. Yizhar Hess, Deputy Chairman of the World Zionist Organization and former Executive Director of the *Masorti* Movement in Israel, part of the worldwide Conservative/*Masorti* Movement dedicated to a traditional, egalitarian and pluralistic vision for Israel and Judaism. Yizhar represented the *Masorti* Movement in negotiations with the Israeli government regarding egalitarian prayer at the *Kotel*, and he is one of the leading voices in Israel promoting Jewish pluralism.

We look forward to more exciting programs in the year ahead and beyond!



From the *Shinshinim* Zoom

### Positive Aging Initiative (PAI) Update

PAI members have enjoyed the benefits of in-person activities (sorely missed during the acute stages of the pandemic) as well as the popular remote sessions of Shared Wisdom. We seem to have found a winning combination.

Earlier in Winter 2022-23, our members both participated in and assisted with PSJC's Art Show. We held a PAI Dinner in the *Sukkah* in PSJC's yard, and participated in the PSJC Open House, during which time we were able to offer information about our programs and some fun activities as well. (Thanks, Roberta Moskowitz, for the delightful game you brought, and thanks to our skilled knitters for showing members some basics.)

We held a Hearing Evaluation event, delivered by two professionals, which helped members become more sensitive to the issue of hearing loss, and offered on-site hearing evaluations to participants.

We participated in the MLK Day of Service, at which time the knitting folks created knitted and crocheted rectangles which were later joined to create a colorful blanket to donate to CHIPS. Donations didn't stop there, though. Our popular program of food donations to CHIPS, organized by Roberta Moskowitz, has provided peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and hard boiled eggs to the many people who rely on that organization for an extra meal. The hybrid nature of our program, in which some members meet together to prepare the food while others donate food they have made in their own homes, has been a key to its success as well as a sign of the way PAI has adapted events for its members.

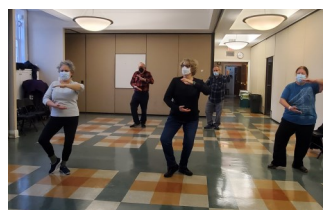
Thanks to an idea of Marjorie Rothenberg's, we initiated a new event, a Sing-Along. It was led by PSJC member Nir Sadovnik, and proved popular enough to lay a foundation for future sessions.

Walk and Talk sessions have been another great way members have gotten together. One such event was a walk through the Fort Greene and neighboring areas. Another was the annual Winter Walk, held in January this year because December was just too "wintery" for an outdoor excursion.



Encounter on a PAI Walk

We left Brooklyn for a tour of the Morgan Library in Manhattan, and, closer to home, initiated a series of Tai Chi sessions which are about to start a fifth "cycle" of classes. These are held right at PSJC.



Tai Chi at PSJC



The Book Club, which had excellent participation throughout the pandemic, continued to maintain high interest as members returned to in-person meetings. Recent discussions have focused on Colson Whitehead's "Harlem Shuffle," Sherry Turkle's "The Empathy Diaries," Paula Fox's "Desperate Characters," Imbolo Mbue's "We Were So Beautiful," and Graham Greene's "The Human Factor."

We have been pleased at the continuing response to our remote "Shared Wisdom" experiences. We have featured programs by Sarah Chinn on "American Indian Schools and Native American Protests," Ellen Briefel on "The Physics behind the Webb Telescope," Daniel Soyer's 3-part series on "Eastern European Immigration to America," David Rosen's "Jewish Child Soldiers in the Holocaust," Rachel Danzing's "Conservation of Works of Art on Paper," and Fran Hawthorne's "How to Get Your Novel Published." Currently, Angela Weisl is presenting a series on a history of our language, "A Voyage to English."

There are many events, both remote and in-person planned for the coming months. We welcome all PSJC members 50 years of age and above to join with us as we work to enrich our experiences at PSJC.

### **A Note from our *Shaliach* Elad Bar Ilan**

As many of you know, in November we launched a one-of-a-kind mission, oriented to Brooklyn's senior leadership, to Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the United Arab Emirates. After we returned, I sent the following message to the participants, which I would like to share with you all, as I believe it's still very relevant to you, and to Israel.

I'm not sure how to start, as it seems there is no start and no ending.

Just before the take-off on the United flight back to NY from Israel and Dubai, as part of the "Abraham's Tent" Mission, I read an article that described — again — the emotional

disengagement of American Jewish communities from Israel, as part of an ongoing process, and as a reaction to the results of Israel's latest election.

During our seven-day-long Mission, we met incredible individuals in Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the United Arab Emirates, who are committed to making the Middle East a better place for Muslims, Jews and all of the global spectrum of beliefs our world has to offer.

In my opinion, all the inspiring leaders we met, had one thing in common. No matter if they lived in Ramallah, Jerusalem, Haifa, Um El Fachem or Dubai, they see people before borders, humans before governments, and peoplehood before policies.

I strongly believe that the connection of global Judaism to Israel is much more than politicians, governments and policies. It's a connection between people who share the same 3800-years-old memories, carrying inside the very relevant commitment of "*Tikkun Olam*".

Landing on the ground in Newark was both metaphoric and physical — upon landing I received the horrifying news about a terror attack in Jerusalem, where two remote-controlled bombs, hidden in corners of bus stops in Jerusalem, caused the death of Aryeh Schopeck, a 16-year-old from Jerusalem, and injured 26 people, leaving one in critical condition — 50-year-old Tadesa Toshoma, an Ethiopian Israeli who came to Jerusalem to celebrate the *Sigd* Holiday. In Jenin, the body of an 18-year-old Druze-Israeli that was killed in a car accident was kidnapped by a terrorist organization, as they hoped to use the body to negotiate for Palestinian prisoners.

As I was walking in the aisle before the passport control, the words of Doc' Brown, from the movie I watched on the plane, "Back To the Future" were still echoing in my head: "The future is what you will make of it, so make it a good one."

## A Note from Avodah

With the coming of Spring and *Pesach*, it's hard not to feel optimistic, even in the crazy world we're living in. As the magnolias burst into blossom, and daffodils replace crocuses in front yards, and the Bradford pears make canopies of white blossom, it's easy to hear the echo from the *Hagaddah*, "this is the season of our liberation." While many of us will be thinking of the past—missing Rabbi Jeff Marker leading us through the Sea of Reeds, for example — we might also think towards the future. After all, all these flowers will soon become leaves, the cherry blossoms will be replaced by dogwoods and crepe myrtle, and so on. As we think through the cycles of the year, perhaps we might consider what brings us to PSJC. What is it that draws you to our wonderful community? Why do you come to services, whether every *Shabbat*, or to morning *minyan*, or to the High Holy Days? And in this season of renewal, how might we renew our commitments to the congregation? We hope to see you all in the sanctuary at some point during the year. A *Zissen Pesach* to all, and go admire the beautiful trees. Spring is fleeting.

As noted in the Rabbi's column, we are dedicating the next section of the Newsletter to the work of the ***Chevrah Kadisha*** and the creative ways in which they coped with the pandemic. We also include a note from the Cemetery Committee, and edited versions of two previously published personal reflections on the work of the *Chevrah*.

## From the *Chevra Kadisha*: Transitions

If there is one word that is at the heart of the Jewish response to the continuum of dying, death and bereavement in general, and the *Chevrah Kadisha* in particular, it is "transitions." Judaism provides a structure for transitioning through each stage of this continuum, for the

person who is dying, for their body and soul after death, and for the mourners and the community that surrounds them. A person who is near death may face that transition by reciting the *vidui* (final confession). Once death has occurred, the *Chevrah Kadisha* steps in to prepare the body for burial and to comfort the soul as it transitions away from the body that has held it. At the funeral, loved ones transition to becoming mourners.

Next come the transitions associated with mourning: the seven days of *shivah*, "rejoining the land of the living" at the end of *shivah*, the *shloshim* (first 30 days), the year of saying *kaddish* and then the annual *yahrzeit*. Each stage has its own customs, meant to facilitate moving from one phase to the next.

The *Chevrah Kadisha* also has moments of transition in its work. Care is taken to create an atmosphere of holiness and respect as *shmirah* (guarding the body) and *taharah* (the ritual washing and dressing of the body) begin. After the work of *taharah*, it is common for team members to find a quiet place to "debrief," to transition from the holiness of their work back to the mundane world outside.

But what happens when the *Chevrah Kadisha* itself faces profound and fundamental transitions? That is exactly what occurred when the Covid-19 pandemic hit. What most people thought would be a limited disruption turned into an extended period when it was impossible to carry out prescribed rites and rituals in customary ways. Although some *Chevrah Kadisha* groups continued to operate as usual throughout the pandemic, most – including PSJC's – did not.

Losing the structure of the traditional response to death proved painful on many levels. Not being able to provide *shmirah* and *taharah* impacted both mourners, who knew their loved ones could not receive customary care, and *Chevrah Kadisha* members, who were torn by not being able to do what they had committed to doing. The bereaved also were deprived of





participating in a traditional funeral and being comforted by the presence of others during *shivah*. In addition, a potent means of community-building was lost, as the strong bonds often formed between *shmirah* and *taharah* volunteers were no longer possible. Judaism is resilient though, and out of tragedy and disruption, creativity and new approaches to transitions emerged. Some communities developed alternative rituals to take the place of *taharah*. Although PSC did not do virtual *taharah*, we embraced virtual *shmirah*, livestreamed funerals, and conducted Zoom and stoop *shivahs*.

The reactions to these new approaches were varied. For some volunteers, being able to reclaim some aspect of their holy work felt empowering in the face of so much that could not be controlled, and *Chevrah* volunteers who no longer lived in the area were happy they could now serve virtually. For some newer volunteers, virtual *shmirah* also proved to be an easier introduction to the practice. For others, the distance between themselves and the deceased created a disconnect. While virtual condolences are no substitute for a real hug, the Zoom option did allow *shivah* participation by physically distant family and friends that would otherwise not have been possible.

With the advent of vaccines and boosters, the *Chevrah Kadisha* began to transition again, but wrestled with difficult questions. Is it safe for us to go back into the funeral home? What precautions should be taken? Should we modify our procedures and practices in any way? How are individual *Chevrah Kadisha* members feeling about returning to in-person practice? Do volunteers for *shmirah* still want to work with a partner, or do they prefer to be alone? As is often the case, things proceeded in stages.

We are now back to performing *shmirah* and *taharha* in the funeral home. As things started to transition back, we found that, when the family was amenable, a hybrid model for

*shmirah* worked best, doing part of it in-person with those volunteers who were comfortable doing so, and part of it virtually with those volunteers who were not. Very likely, some funerals will continue to be livestreamed and families may opt to include a Zoom option for at least part of *shivah*.

So, what have we learned from all these transitions? We have been reminded of the strength and beauty of the Jewish response to dying, death and bereavement even in the worst of circumstances. And we have learned that as we strive to be an ever more caring community, we can use our creativity to preserve the meaning and intention of our tradition and triumph in the face of adversity.

-Ilene Rubenstein

### **From the Cemetery Committee**

PSJC holds rights to gravesites at Beth David Cemetery (in Elmont, Long Island, near Belmont Racetrack) and New Mount Carmel Cemetery (in Glendale, Queens, near the Jackie Robinson Interborough Parkway). Graves in these cemeteries, like others in and around New York City, are scarce and valuable — but members of PSJC in good standing may purchase them from PSJC at favorable prices (as of January 2023, \$1,350 per standard grave in Beth David Cemetery; \$1,800 in Mt. Carmel).

The Cemetery Committee is authorized to complete the paperwork on behalf of PSJC relating to these cemeteries. You can get details about purchasing graves, registering deeds with the cemeteries, restrictions regarding burials, etc. by contacting the PSJC office, the Rabbi or the Committee (email: [cemetery@psjc.org](mailto:cemetery@psjc.org)). Of course, the Committee works closely with other PSJC working groups regarding end-of-life issues: the *Chevra Kadisha*; the Simple Funeral Plan (funeral and burial); and the *G'mach* (supporting members with illness, during *shiva*, and helping in difficult times).



The following piece was written in 2007 by our dear member, Steven Radwell (*Shir Mordechai ben Moshe Aharon v'Chaya*) z"l, who died earlier this year. May his memory continue to be for many blessings.

### “The Call”

The call came at the worst possible moment. I had just gotten back from vacation, the place was a mess, I had a brutal workweek ahead. And the PSJC *Chevra Kadisha* was calling and asking for a *shomer* (watcher) – at 2 a.m.! The worst possible shift! I barely knew the family whose member had passed. Why were they always calling me when there are probably dozens of *shomers* out there who know the bereaved better than I do? How can I do this, I thought. There's no way I can do this.

Before I had even deleted the message they were calling back. I screened it. They had filled half the shift with one person, a rookie, but they still needed another, and preferred someone with experience, like me. They really needed someone. They didn't want a first-timer to do their first shift alone. Time was tight, the *Chevra Kadisha* coordinator was saying. Please call back ASAP to let us know one way or the other. And thanks for your past and future service. Service. (I flashed on the PSJC member who showed up unexpectedly at my mom's shiva house outside the city, after my father had passed five years earlier.)

I cleaned the dishes in the sink. I got my stuff together for work. I started reading a book but couldn't concentrate. I got up and looked at my Blackberry – there were no big meetings on my calendar for tomorrow. All right, all right. I'll call in sushi; I'll go to bed early. When I called back, they gave me the rookie's name and we made arrangements to share a car. “Is it weird?” the rookie asked when I got in, after we'd shaken hands. “We'll get through it,” I said.

At the funeral home, we met the outgoing crew – the two watchers who'd done midnight to two AM. They showed us the name; the casket; the *Hevra Kadisha* reading materials; prayer books; psalms. They noted the corridor that led to the restroom. We said goodbye and then we sat, my partner and I. We read the explanatory flyers from the *Hevra Kadisha*. I had read them before but always find it worthwhile re-reading them. We read psalms. We chatted a little. Mostly we read. The rookie turned out to be an excellent partner: respectful; inquisitive; serious; involved.

The hours flew. Near the end my partner looked up and asked if we could sing – then led us through a plaintive chant of Psalm 23, in Hebrew. A few minutes later my cell phone rang. The *shomers* on the next shift were outside. I went up and let them in. We showed them everything, just as we had been shown, and suddenly it was time to go. “Amazing,” my partner – a rookie no longer – said in the car. I nodded. We both felt the mystery, the power, of what we had done.

Climbing the stairs at home, exhausted, it hit me – a great calm, a depth of gratitude, awe – unmatched by anything I could conceive of. The rightness of it. We had helped someone in their deepest need. Such a small thing but such a large thing. How could I not have done this, I thought. How could anyone not do this....

The following piece by Elizabeth Schnur is excerpted from a prior Newsletter.

### “Getting Personal”

I have been a member of PSJC's *Chevrah Kadisha* (literally: Sacred Community) for many years. There is a large group of individuals from all parts of the PSJC community who are members of the *Shmirah* Team, sitting vigil for two hours at a time, usually with a partner, often reading and/or singing *tehilim* (psalms).



A smaller group of members forms the men's and women's *Taharah* teams. Participants in the *Chevrah Kadisha* are anonymous, so that the mourners will not feel uncomfortable or in any way beholden to anyone.

When I first joined the *Taharah* team, it was, in part, because of my fear of death and dying. I felt that I needed to confront these fears and be more aware of death as a part of life. I participated in my first *taharah* with huge trepidation, expecting it to be scary and – well – creepy and unpredictable.

My experience was very different from these expectations. We were given training in the ritual practice, and there was an established protocol for everything, from moving the body of the deceased (the *metah*), cleaning, washing, and dressing the *metah*, placing the *metah* in the coffin, and then returning the *metah* to the company of members performing *shmirah*.

Instead of being negative, there was a feeling of uncommon grace throughout, a sense of connection and community, working closely with a few other women in what was a respectful and fundamentally loving process. There is a minimum of talking during *taharah*, out of respect for the *metah*, and psalms are often sung or hummed during the process. My predominant feeling after that first *taharah*, and in all subsequent ones, was of caring and peace.

This all became very personal when my mother was dying. Throughout her final months, Rabbi Carie and many members of the community were extremely supportive, with visits, phone calls and emails. Freddie Brooks helped me to complete PSJC's "Simple Funeral Plan" – something I had been putting off for years. The plan, available to all members, essentially involves providing basic information (Hebrew/English names, cemetery location, etc.). Filling the plan out in advance meant that, when the inevitable finally happened, you only have to make a single phone call and no decisions, at a

time when you are most vulnerable, and least able to think.

But more than anything, when Mom died, it helped me to know that she would be treated respectfully and lovingly by the wonderful *Taharah* team, and kept company through the night by the stalwart members of the *Shmirah* group. It made it more possible for my sister and me to physically let our mother go.

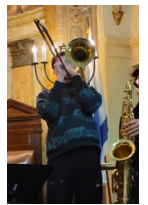
PSJC members also visited throughout the *shiva* week, listening to stories and viewing photos, and we always had a *minyan* for prayers. Many PSJCers also schlepped to Manhattan for the funeral, beautifully led by Rabbi Carie. The community brought more food than my family and I could possibly eat, and it made us feel incredibly cared for (we Jews express so much through food). After the *shiva* ended, I began to attend the Wednesday morning *minyan*, and though I found it challenging to drag myself out of bed that early in the morning, there was a comfort in saying *kaddish* with other community members.

I find it hard, even now, to accept that my mother – an amazing, loving, vital, funny, creative and brilliant force of nature – is no longer on this earth. But being embraced by PSJC's caring community was critical to helping me to get through the painful time of her loss. Ironically, through supporting people dealing with the pain and challenges of death, the *Chevrah Kadisha* ends up being an incredibly life affirming force.



**If you would like to join the *Chevrah Kadisha*, to participate in *Shmirah* and/or *Taharah*, or if you would like more information about the *Chevrah* or about the simple funeral plan, please contact us at:**

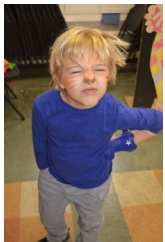
**[hevra.kadisha@psjc.org](mailto:hevra.kadisha@psjc.org)**



**Purim Dance!**



**Purim Party!**



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