

The Myth Of The Mitzvah No One Can Thank You For

Our tradition considers it a mitzvah to bury the dead. The Chevra Kavod Hamet helps people with that. Our tradition also considers it a mitzvah to comfort the mourner, and the Chevra Kavod Hamet does that, too. But the Chevra cannot do any of that without your help. The often-repeated phrase is that you should join in the work of the Chevra because it is the mitzvah that no one can thank you for. I'm here to tell you that that is just not so. I'm here to tell you that you should help with the work of the Chevra exactly because it is a few hours that you will be thanked for and feel thanked for more than any few hours in your lifetime.

For those of you who have never experienced looking into the eyes of a mourner and wondering what you can say or do, you are very lucky. For those of you who have been in the position of losing a loved one, a parent for example, I'm not telling you anything you don't know. At that time of loss, between death and burial, you are in a never-never land. To try to describe to you this never-never land from personal experience, you know at some level that you have lost your parent, but you have not yet confronted the reality of death that comes through burial. But, you know at some level that the reality of burial is coming very soon. For my wife, she knew her father had died. She was torn between wanting to be with him so that she could still entertain the fantasy that he did not die and not wanting to see him because she knew her thoughts would then be proven to be just a fantasy. But, how could she just abandon her father at this time? Wasn't abandoning him at this time cruel? She was tortured by these conflicting emotions.

This is exactly where the Chevra comes in. My wife was incredibly comforted by the fact that her friends stepped forward exactly during this time when she was in never-never land and relieved her of her abandonment guilt. Her friends stepped forward and comforted her in a way and at a time that is unique in human existence. Her friends stepped forward and performed, for her, the mitzvah of shmira -- guarding her father from the time of death until the time of burial. She was relieved of her guilt of abandonment. Her father was with friends at this awful time. So, if you think that performing the mitzvah of shmira as a part of the Chevra is a thankless mitzvah, you have not been in the never-never land between

death and burial for a loved one. You are very lucky. I hope it is a long time before you experience that. If you have been there, you know. You know what incredible comfort it is to a mourner. You know that a small inconvenience to you can mean the world to someone else. And if you know what incredible meaning spending these few hours performing the mitzvah of shmira can have for someone close to you, can you even imagine the effect this mitzvah has on members of our congregation who are in that never-never land position and people they do not personally know come forward to be shomrim? Because of my position as the Chevra administrator and because of Leslie Gotlieb's position and Joyce Brelje's position of arranging times for shomrim, people tell us, so that we do know. Now, we are trying to let you know so that you will take those few hours a year and perform the mitzvah of shmira for someone you know or someone you don't know because now you know what it means.

In the balance of life, and life is certainly full and we are all busy, rarely are we given the opportunity to affect the life of another human being quite so deeply and at a time of their complete emotional vulnerability. Performing the mitzvah of shmira is one of those opportunities. If you have not done so, yet, I ask you not to delay any longer --put your name on the Chevra calling list and volunteer the next time you are called. You will not be alone, at least the first time and maybe never if that is your choice. You can be paired with someone who has performed this mitzvah before so that you will be comfortable. But, do not put off this opportunity any longer, this opportunity to touch another human being quite so deeply.