

Day in the Life

Andrew Parver is the director of operations for the Hebrew Free Burial Association.

What I do

We're a 127-year-old organization that arranges nearly 400 funerals and burials a year and owns and manages four cemeteries in New York. We spend a lot of time educating about the importance of a traditional Jewish funeral. It's a complex operation that requires significant coordination between our office and funeral staff, and my job is to make sure everything runs smoothly. I also fundraise and manage our volunteer program.

Our clientele

comes from all over the Tristate area, and they run the gamut in age and background. While many are elderly, there are also people who outlived their family, who once were successful and then suffered financial setbacks, who had mental disabilities, or who were on the fringes of the community and not affiliated with any synagogue or community group.

If I could give one message

We need to remove the stigma associated with talking about death. Isolated individuals should be encouraged to preplan their final needs, because when someone who lived alone dies, his information dies with him. That includes his Social Security number, which is needed to file a death certificate, which is a prerequisite to arranging a funeral. And someone needs to authorize the burial. It's usually the next of kin — a spouse, child, or even niece or nephew — but when there is none, or if next of kin is unknown, the burial can be delayed. In some counties, they have to wait until the public administrator accesses the deceased's apartment and searches for records of his family — what a tragic delay! If no one is found, the public administrator gives us permission to provide a burial, but this intrusion and delay isn't necessary. Unfortunately, we've had to bury people without knowing their Hebrew name. Planning

University attended
Yeshiva University

When I was a kid, I wanted to be
a lawyer

In Brief:

I know it'll be a rough day when

It's 10:00 and my yogurt is still uneaten. Time is of the essence in everything we do, and sometimes, there's no time to eat.

Three famous people I'd want to be stuck in an elevator with

Rabbi Yakov Horowitz, Malcolm Gladwell, Michael Bloomberg



ahead means vital information will be recorded and available when necessary.

Playing detective

We do our own research to find family members, and sometimes we'll turn up a long-lost relative to authorize the burial. I remember one night I received a call at home from a local rabbi — someone who supposedly had no family had died. Our chief investigator found a sister living only 25 miles away, but she hadn't spoken to her brother in over 20 years and didn't even know where he lived. After much back and forth, she authorized HFBA to perform the funeral and burial. It's situations like this where I know I'm making a difference.

Why it's so important for everyone to have a "death plan"

So often when someone dies, the family is scrambling to figure out where the funeral will be, if there is a grave, what would the deceased have wanted. All too often, they make emotional decisions that can set them out significant sums of money. Even those with family and with adequate financial resources should have this arranged — it can be decades ahead of time — so when the time comes, all that's needed is one call to the funeral home, and the family can focus on grieving and not on detailed arrangements. Having a plan in place can also preempt conflict between family members.

What that entails

A death plan can be as simple as a written document saying the deceased wants a Jewish funeral or as complete as a pre-need agreement at a funeral home where the funeral is completely arranged and paid for, and everything in between. At the very least, in my opinion, a death plan should include a signed and notarized document

indicating that the person wants a traditional Jewish funeral and burial. Preferably, a *chevra kaddisha* or rabbi should be listed on the document as well, so that if any questions arise, the person already indicated who to ask. The National Association of Chevra Kadisha has a form on their website that's very helpful.

The easiest part about training for this job

I started at HFBA when I was in college. It was a random summer internship. I saw the tremendous work being done, and I wanted to be a part of it, so after I graduated from college and began working for HFBA full-time, I received my master's degree in public administration. I'm now a few months away from becoming a licensed funeral director. But the best training has been the day-to-day work; because I started with the menial, yet important tasks — data entry, digitizing old records, processing the mail and bringing it to the post office — I fully appreciate the importance of every part of the organization, even as I've moved up the ladder.

The season I never sleep is

Tishrei. There's a lot more fundraising, as people are moved to give both because it's Tishrei, and because visiting loved ones inspires us to think about others who need help. It's a time many people visit the cemetery, and the volume of visitors always increases calls to our office — it's a trigger. People ask about their plans, or they have questions about their loved one's gravesite.

The biggest challenge we're facing right now

is the rise of cremation in the Jewish world; what used to be taboo is no longer. I was once speaking to a *frum* woman about

Equipment I always have

My cemetery shoes — I keep them in my car, I use them so I don't ruin my regular shoes — and ArtScroll's *The Funeral and Cemetery Handbook*.

If I need a break during work

I'll go for a walk. The pedometer app is very motivating.

what I do, mentioning the cremation problem in passing — and her face turned white. She had no idea it was against halachah, she simply hadn't been taught about it in school and her rabbi never mentioned it in a *derashah*. She said, "That's my plan — I'm a single mother, and I don't want to be a burden." I followed up with her rabbi, and baruch Hashem, that's no longer her plan. We encourage all rabbis to speak about the need to plan a Jewish funeral and burial at least once a year, in order to ensure that when someone dies, he'll be provided with a dignified burial as quickly as possible.

The best part of the job

There's no greater feeling than knowing I've helped provide a funeral and burial *k'halachah* to someone who would've otherwise been cremated. Standing at the gravesite after a funeral, while in many ways sad, is also tremendously fulfilling. On the flipside, working in the death industry — and it's a \$20 billion industry in the US — does take a toll. Coming home to my family every night reminds me of all the *brachos* that I have. It's a fine line of getting used to this line of work while not being desensitized either. I constantly remind myself of the incredible work we're doing, how we're bringing hundreds of people a year to a proper *kevuah*, because knowing that I'm part of something greater than me helps keep a healthy perspective. Once we had our *rav*, Rabbi Moshe Stavsky, over for a meal, and afterward he sent my wife, who is an oncology nurse, and me the following note: "You both have intensely serious professions which perpetually give you maturity and solemnity well beyond your years. Baruch Hashem your children always make sure you have reason to smile."

Interesting sh'eilos

Our *posek* is Rabbi Elchonon Zohn — he's the director of the Chevra Kaddisha of the Vaad Harabonim of Queens and the president and founder of the National Association of Chevra Kaddisha. We just had a *sh'eilah* involving cemetery care — we're in the process of rehabilitating our cemetery on Staten Island, which was overgrown with poison ivy. The most effective method of removing ivy is by bringing goats in — they devour it. We asked about the appropriateness of doing this and were told it's *mutar*.

On a personal note

It's not my primary responsibility at HFBA, but I do attend between 20 and 30 funerals a year, so I'm very attentive to small details when I'm at funerals of people I knew. I notice details like how the grave was dug, the process for lining cars at the procession, and so on. Also, I've become the go-to guy on funeral matters for friends or acquaintances. When someone they know died, I'll often get a call. It's a great responsibility.

The most painful levayah I attended

The summer before I began working for HFBA, a dear friend of mine died suddenly on Erev Tishah B'Av. The Tishah B'Av *levayah* is one I'll never forget. I still visit my friend's *kever* at least once a year.

The most inspiring hesped I ever heard

Our cemetery chaplain, Rabbi Shmuel Plafker, always inspires me with his *hespedim*. He is able to eulogize someone he never met with the same love and emotion as if it were someone near and dear to him. Every person we bury, even if they're buried with no family or friends present, was *somebody*. We are all one family.