In the article by Josh Nathan-Kazis about Kavod V'Nichum's annual Chevra Kadisha conference there were a number of points reported that I would call imprecise. For example: I was a presenter at the conference, not an attendee; we accomplish refrigeration of a deceased body, when necessary, with frozen cold-packs, not with ice (if the funeral is within 24 hours of death there is no need for refrigeration and no regulation that requires refrigeration).

But to characterize the conference as a group of radicals seeking to wrest control from the industry is completely inaccurate.

This conference is an annual event to support and educate, to train and allow for the sharing of experiences - indeed to celebrate together a common cause and mitzvah - the chessed (kindness) afforded to members of the community who can no longer help themselves, performed by the children of our father Abraham whose hearts beat with his rhythm of living a life of kind acts and deeds, even, and especially, when those acts are inconvenient and difficult. Those Chevra Kadisha members operate and do the Tahara (ritual wash) irrespective of whether it is within the context of the funeral industry or solely in a community context. As noted in the article, I do not see eye to eye, on a number of issues, with the primarily Conservative and Reform focus (due to the demographics of the members) of the conference and the organization. But I accepted the invitation to speak at the conference because I was drawn to the spirit of chessed and the expression of mitzvah that these Chevra Kadisha members display.

Certainly, my purpose in presenting at the conference was to further my attempt to awaken a broader spirit in the Jewish community. In Pittsburgh we committed to expanding the role of the Chevra Kadisha from being limited to performing the Tahara, back to its original role of assisting the family from the moments before death through the burial and Shiva, without the need of, or interference from, commercial funeral directors. For that we were attacked by the industry and we fought back hard, and won. The reasons for the ability of the industry to usurp the rights and the function of the community are a network of social, economic and religious factors. I came to the conference to proclaim that "the emperor has no clothes" and to try to get other communities to turn back the events of the last 60-70 years in America, and to reclaim the position and the responsibility of the community and its Chevra Kadisha. If that makes me a radical, I wear the term as a badge of honor and I hope to be worthy of the mission. But to miss the point of the conference and to brand the participants as anything other than members of the community coming together to further the performance of an essential mitzvah is simply inaccurate.

There is one more imprecise characterization in the article. My co-presenter's comment about funeral directors being party planners may have been flip and irreverent, but it was not at all rude. He had, a moment earlier, told of a funeral in his family that was handled by a funeral home and he had spoken in glowing terms about the assistance the family received and how much he appreciated the efforts of the funeral home and its directors. In our presentation we went to great lengths to avoid any personal attacks on funeral directors. We made it clear that there are good people and not-so-good people in every industry, including our respective vocations. Audience members had said some very negative and personal things about their feelings of the lack of ethics among funeral directors and we steered the conversation away from that topic. The funeral director mentioned in the article did not challenge them or walk out in response to the seriously negative things they said. The reaction of that funeral director to what Mr. Grail said toward the very end of our presentation was, in my opinion, a staged, theatrical response to attempt to grab the focus of the conversation away from the emperor not having any clothes.

In my profession I deal with party planners all the time. They are very helpful and we have a mutual respect for each other. That is, so long as the party planner does not try to control the religious elements of the event - as does occur at times. At a funeral, so long as there is no - Heaven forbid - cosmetizing, embalming or cremation, a funeral director provides only logistical support. In those communities that, for whatever reason, there is not a strong and developed community structure, the funeral director can potentially provide a very important set of support services to the community. In communities such as our community in Pittsburgh where we come together as a community to help each other in difficult times and in good times, there is no need for those services and we won't apologize for that.

Now that Mr. Grail's comment has been published in your paper, I have to talk to my party planner friends and see if any of them were offended by the reference.

RDW

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