

National Association of Chevra Kadisha (NASCK) Urges Respect for Life, Here and Hereafter

By Pearl Markovitz

The community is invited to join Rabbi Elchonon Zohn, director of the chevra kadisha of the Vaad Harabonim of Queens and founder and president of NASCK, at a breakfast reception on Sunday, July 30, at 9 a.m., at the home of Linda and Avi Laub, 25 Swayze Street in West Orange. Rabbi Zohn will address the community on the topic of "Created in the Image of Hashem: Me. You. Them."

As noted in its mission statement, the National Association of Chevra Kadisha (NASCK), founded in 1996, was created to assist affiliated chevrot kadisha in defining, establishing and achieving the highest degree of *kavod hamet* (respect for the deceased) as defined by Jewish law. NASCK also creates and advances programs and initiatives to promote traditional Jewish end-of-life values.

Rabbi Zohn has been at the forefront of proper Jewish burial practices throughout the United States for over four decades. On a daily basis, he grapples with unusual questions that come to his desk regarding rare situations requiring immediate resolution in keeping with the highest standards of *kavod hamet*. As a young boy of 17, he began what would become a lifetime career by serving as a shomer for a local chevra kadisha. His innate sensitivity and eventual expertise in the halachot of death and burial made him the natural choice to head up this national organization that now serves the entire country.

Among the vital programs initiated by NASCK are the EMES Card, which encourages the signing of halachic living wills and ensures that the met will have an agent in place who will have the power to make all post-mortem decisions in consonance with the directives of the deceased and in accordance with Halacha. The "Nichum V'Neshama" program consists of a packet of resour-

ces for the mourner and the shiva house, including a DVD of comforting divrei Torah, a comprehensive guide to the halachot of mourning, a sign-up chart for Mishnayot and a practical guide to the shiva visit.

The traditional end-of-life awareness movement (TEAM) Shabbos, which is held yearly on Shabbat Parshat Vayechi, is a national movement dedicated to generating positive awareness and educating and guiding the Jewish community on the value of life and making appropriate end-of-life decisions. Last year, over 400 shuls in 206 communities participated in this vital Shabbat initiative. NASCK also offers the recitation of the Kaddish for the deceased and yearly *yahrzeit* reminders.



As the years progressed, Rabbi Zohn was confronted with new challenges to the proper end-of-life procedures presented by the larger community. Currently, one of the most difficult issues is the staggering statistic that 40 percent of Jewish deaths in the U.S. today end in cremation. There are many reasons offered by those who opt for this, including ecological and sociological as well as financial. Understandably, for many families and especially the elderly who subsist on fixed incomes, the costs of burial can seem prohibitive. However, added to this argument for cremation are ecological concerns, including the damaging effects of the metal containers (not used in traditional Jewish burials) and the strong chemicals, such as formaldehyde, used in the burial process, which damage the environment. An equally, if not more,



disturbing resistance to proper burial in a cemetery is the wish by the elders not to burden the next generations with an obligatory location to visit annually. This last objection is most painful as it totally obviates the concept of veneration for our predecessors, *kibbud horim*.

Most importantly, according to NASCK guidelines, "the neshama's return to Heaven is dependent upon the body's return to the ground. That is what the prophet means when he says, 'The dust returns to the earth...and the spirit returns to God who gave it.' (Ecclesiastes, 12:7) Jewish law is therefore concerned with the immediacy of burial and the natural decomposition of the body...Cremation is most certainly forbidden. It is the harshest form of indignity to the body."

To address this, Rabbi Zohn and NASCK have come up with an initiative to provide a financially viable alternative to the high cost of Jewish burial. They have secured a tract of land in southern Florida, between Boca and West Palm Beach, on which will be constructed a large Jewish cemetery offering plots at a fraction of the cost of those in the more established cemeteries. Organized as a non-profit, the cemetery will offer graves as well as grave openings at the all-inclusive and affordable price of \$3,600.

When Linda and Avi Laub first opened their home in 2013 to a NASCK event, the financial needs of the organization were limited to lectures, grief counseling, community outreach and education. Contributions

from shuls around the country were helping defray these costs. However, within the past four years, the needs have morphed and grown exponentially. The cost accrued to the organization from the purchase and development of the Florida property is five million dollars. The project requires a full-time individual to oversee it on site. In addition to serving the indigent and low-budget communities of South Florida, the cemetery is projecting designated sections for Holocaust survivors, Jewish veterans and easy and appropriate access to *kohanim*, in a cemetery that is fully operated *k'halacha*.

According to Rabbi Zohn, who is very excited by and involved in this project, one of the key components in this new venture is the vital outreach to the larger Jewish community that must accompany the physical construction. "We must do *kiruv* within the Jewish community, among our non-affiliated brethren, who have been swayed to believe that cremation is a viable option. We must impress upon them the holiness of their bodies, the container of their souls, which are created in the 'image of Hashem.' Therefore, every met, regardless of who they are, must be treated with the utmost dignity in this world and in preparation for the World to Come. We must all do *kiruv* in appropriate settings, at funerals, shivas, shul functions and wherever we come into contact with our uninformed co-religionists. We must impress upon those of us who have the knowledge that there is no greater chesed that we can provide to an uninformed Jewish individual than the chesed *shel emet* of encouraging a proper Jewish burial that allows the neshama to return to its Heavenly roots in the hereafter."

To learn more about the many vital projects of NASCK, please visit their website at www.nasck.org.