

Rabbi Regina Sandler-Phillips

► For broadening the mitzvah of watching the dead.

Shrouded In Holiness

.....
Steve Lipman
STAFF WRITER

*More and more non-Orthodox
are reclaiming chevra kadisha work,
thanks to a Brooklyn rabbi.*

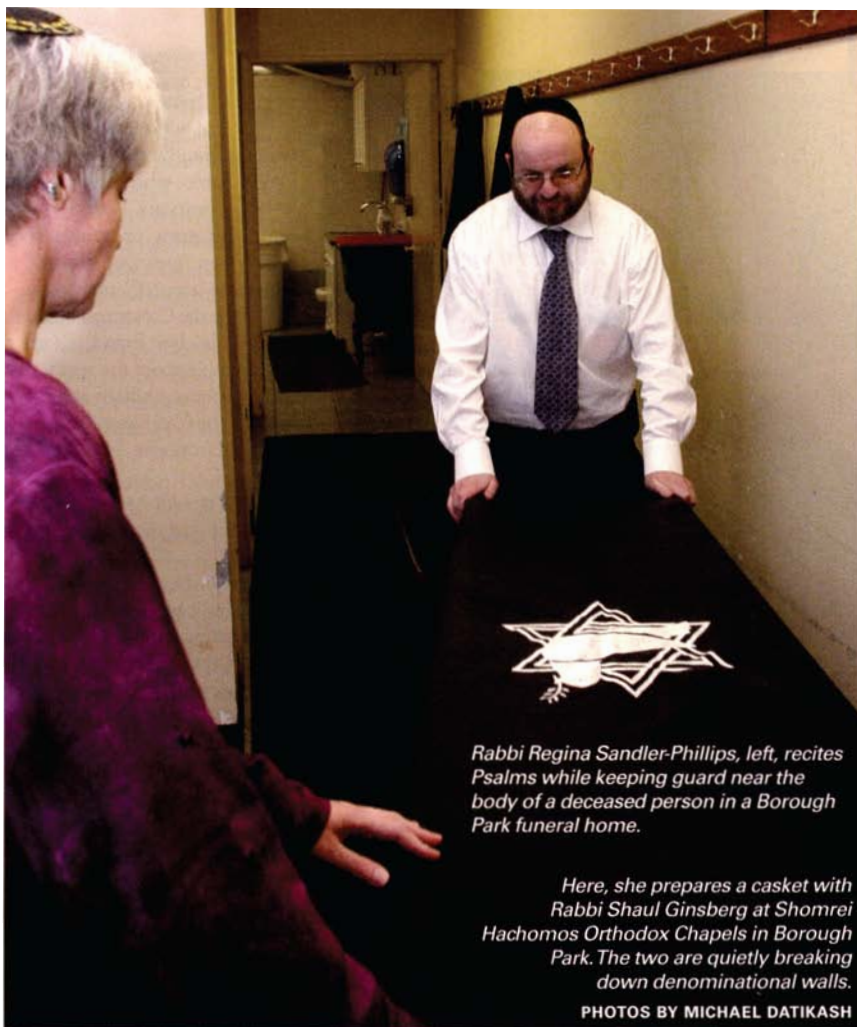
One of these days, probably in the dark of winter's early evening, Rabbi Regina Sandler-Phillips, a "fast approaching 50" native of Manhattan, with a large knit kipa atop her closely cut gray hair, will walk up the front stairs of a Jewish funeral home on the edge of Borough Park. In a small "family room" outfitted with a sofa and coat rack, she will draw a few familiar faces around her, fellow members of the Park Slope Jewish Center, women who serve as volunteer members of the Brooklyn synagogue's chevra kadisha burial society, which cares for the synagogue members and their relatives who have died, and arranges for the needs of the deceased's family.

That night, the chevra kadisha will perform its holy duties, reciting Psalms near the body and preparing it for its final journey in the traditional manner, by washing it and clothing it in shrouds.

That night, Rabbi Sandler-Phillips — a former social worker who first mobilized Park Slope's members for chevra kadisha work in 1995, organized official training in 2004 and continues to serve as the groups' spiritual guide — will speak with the other volunteers for a few minutes. She will give them words of inspiration, reviewing some of the shmira and tahara procedures for watching and washing the body. Then she will say a few words about the person whom many of them once knew in life, leading them down a narrow set of stairs to the place most mourners never see, where bodies are kept in a refrigerated room and washed on a large metal table.

That night, Rabbi Sandler-Phillips, trained in piano as an undergraduate at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, will start a niggun.

Before the group descends the stairs, she will hum a familiar Jewish melody, a cross between a lullaby and a chant, a tune without words, which sets the mood for the next hour of somber, but life-affirming, work.



Rabbi Regina Sandler-Phillips, left, recites Psalms while keeping guard near the body of a deceased person in a Borough Park funeral home.

Here, she prepares a casket with Rabbi Shaul Ginsberg at Shomrei Hachomos Orthodox Chapels in Borough Park. The two are quietly breaking down denominational walls.

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL DATIKASH

"It's a Sephardic tradition," she says. A tradition that, as far as she knows, is foreign to an Ashkenazi chevra kadisha.

The music, says Marc Rentzer, one of the first chevra kadisha volunteers recruited by the rabbi, "brings us together in the right frame of mind to enter the room," where they will recite some prescribed blessings but otherwise work in silence. "We're all reacting to the same rhythm. Regina is so good at that."

Rabbi Sandler-Phillips, who has served as a teacher, counselor and pulpit rabbi since being ordained almost 10 years ago, is the spiritual leader of Kehillat Tikvah, a newly formed, nondenominational congregation in Jackson Heights, Queens. She is a pioneer: a non-Orthodox activist in a field largely dominated by the Orthodox. Chevra kadisha activities, a normative part of Jewish life and death for thousands of years, has grown unfamiliar in most non-Orthodox circles, where many eschew a shomer or Psalms or ritual washing or shrouds. A few Conservative synagogues in Manhattan — Or Zarua, Ansche Chesed and Bnai Jeshurun — sponsor chevra kadisha groups, as do a few out-of-town, non-Orthodox congregations.

The Park Slope Jewish Center, where Rabbi Sandler-Phillips is a member — "one of the Jews in the pews," as she puts it — is Conservative. "A traditional, egalitarian community," she says.

The rabbi, ordained in 1999 at the non-denominational Academy for Jewish Religion in Riverdale, campaigned to start a chevra kadisha after she experienced the death of several loved ones, including her father. She had earlier made

Continued on page 48

Reprinted by permission of *The Jewish Week*, © 2008

Shrouded In Holiness *cont. from page 21*

chevra kadisha the theme of her thesis at AJR.

Park Slope's chevra kadisha is the only one in Brooklyn under non-Orthodox auspices.

"We have found that the Hevra Kadisha provides comfort for those who grieve, enriches the lives of those who serve, and strengthens our community as a whole," she writes on the synagogue's Web site (psjc.org). "Just as we don't rely upon outside professionals to visit the sick and comfort the bereaved in our PSJC community, we believe that those who die in our community should be cared for by members of our community, and not by strangers, at the sacred and vulnerable time of death."

Rabbi Sandler-Phillips has also become a pioneer in interdenominational cooperation. Shomrei Hachomos Orthodox Chapels, where the Park Slope chevra kadisha and its "Simple Jewish Funeral Plan" are based, is under haredi aegis in a haredi neighborhood.

Rabbi Shaul Ginsberg, the funeral home's secretary and day-to-day administrator, who volunteers as a leader of the chevra kadisha's men's teams, says his first meeting with Rabbi Sandler-Phillips and with Rabbi Carie Carter, the synagogue's spiritual leader and a supporter of the chevra kadisha, presented no barriers.

"I was very impressed," says Rabbi Ginsberg, a native of South Africa. He says the Park Slope chevra kadisha follows the Jewish laws and established Jewish customs of Orthodox Jewish burial "one hundred percent. I think it's a wonderful thing."

"I was very impressed," Rabbi Ginsberg says, by Rabbi Sandler-Phillips's "passion that wants to do burial according to traditional Orthodox practice."

As a member of the chevra kadisha, Rabbi Sandler-Phillips does



shmira, often taking the late-night hours inconvenient for other volunteers. She joins the women's tahara teams. She leads orientation and educational sessions around the city about the beauty of chevra kadisha work. She organizes the annual chevra kadisha dinner at her synagogue. And she encourages people she

meets to consider joining a chevra kadisha.

"I'm the nudge," she says. "I encourage others to do this sacred work."

The rabbi's commitment is intense, but her personality is not. She smiles easily. She doesn't preach or cajole. She is a magnet for small children. "I'm considered a happy, party person," she says. "People know me as a dancer. People know me as a singer. People know me as a storyteller."

"She's very gifted," says volunteer Rentzer, who works as an executive search consultant. "The way she guides things is very gifted, very compelling." Rabbi Sandler-Phillips, he says, takes the morbidity out of death, out of dealing with bodies. "People who might find it gross at first glance come away feeling less so."

The rabbi is now at work on "Sacred Undertaking," a book about her experiences "with the living and the dead."

In that coming night at the funeral home, after joining the Park Slope volunteers performing a tahara, she will lead them back upstairs to the meeting room. After a few minutes of final thoughts and debriefing, she will start another niggun, a melody of peace. Then Rabbi Sandler-Phillips and her friends, who have just spent holy minutes in the presence of the dead, will step outside, into the dark, back into the world of the living. ✪