



WHO WE ARE

The Hebrew Free Burial Association began in the 1880's as a free burial society serving the residents of Manhattan's Lower East Side and was incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1889. As the need grew in adjacent Jewish communities, HFBA also grew to serve the broader metropolitan area of New York City. HFBA is currently the largest free burial society outside of Israel.

Although as a community, Jews have successfully created many organizations dedicated to helping the unfortunate among us deal with crises of living, HFBA is unique in that it cares for impoverished, marginalized Jews after death. Typically, an indigent person in New York City is buried in an anonymous mass grave in Potter's Field after lying in a morgue, potentially for many months. HFBA, through its contacts with city and social service agencies, is notified about Jewish decedents and makes arrangements so that every Jew receives a prompt, dignified Jewish funeral and burial.

Our clients have primarily come from among the impoverished, from the margins of society or from immigrant communities. Early in our history, they were victims of disease epidemics, occupationally hazardous conditions, poor medical care, lack of proper sanitary conditions and high infant and mother mortality rates. In its annual report from 1900, HFBA's directors wrote, "What little they may have had quickly vanished for doctor's services and medicines, and even their belongings were pawned by them to obtain the wherewithal to save their loved one from the grim monster-death."

In the early years of the organization's existence, many burials were of small children. In 1911, HFBA provided burials for 22 young victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. Bodies were shipped from Manila during the Spanish American War and at least one soldier's body arrived from New Guinea in the South Pacific during World War II. Large immigrant groups, such as Holocaust survivors and refugees from the former Soviet Union have also been prominently represented, including Victor Ourin and Aaron Kuperstock, well known Russian poets. Those who have needed HFBA's help over time have ranged from the parents of Eddie Cantor and Clara Bow, celebrities in their times, Mel Brooks' grandparents, and inmates from Riker's Island and Sing Sing prisons.

Over the last decade, many of our clients have been from the Russian Jewish community and were elderly or ill when they arrived in the United States. Experience has shown us that although their Jewish identity may have been hidden or denied in the former Soviet Union, they, or their families, expressed the desire for a proper Jewish burial. Our newsletter, *Chesed*, has an entire section written in Russian to make sure that this community feels embraced in life as well as in death.

Since its inception, HFBA has been supported by individuals and whatever funds the Jewish community had to offer. In 1910, the organization's twelfth annual report lists 1,500 donors. Most individual donations were for very small amounts, ranging from 10 to 87 cents, reflecting the poverty of the Jewish community. Nonetheless it was clear from records of fundraising efforts in synagogues that the Jewish community embraced HFBA's cause.

HFBA still relies on the Jewish community's commitment to *chesed shel emet* to fulfill its obligation to our less fortunate brothers and sisters, not just to provide them with dignified burials but to maintain their resting places in our two cemeteries with dignity. Today, donations account for half of HFBA's operating budget, thereby allowing us to continue our important work.