

Cemetery races to keep up as New York virus deaths mount

April 21 2020, by David Goldman and Matt Sedensky



Gravediggers carry the casket of someone presumed to have died from coronavirus as they are buried without any family present at Mount Richmond Cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York, Tuesday, April 7, 2020. In a marathon of grief at this small Jewish cemetery mounds of dirt are piling up as graves are opened, vans are constantly arriving with bodies aboard and a line of white signs is being pressed into the ground marking plots soon to be occupied. Families are being kept away from their loved one's gravesite at the cemetery, which caters to those with little or nothing. (AP Photo/David Goldman)

The streets are eerily quiet. Barely a soul walks by. But when Rabbi Shmuel Plafker arrives at the cemetery, it's buzzing: Vans pulling in with bodies aboard, mounds of dirt piling up as graves are dug open, a line of white signs pressed into the ground marking plots that are newly occupied.

Some of the few signs of life in this anguished city are coming from those tending to the dead.

As the world retreats and the pandemic's confirmed [death toll](#) in New York City alone charges past 10,000, funeral directors, cemetery workers and others who oversee a body's final chapter are sprinting to keep up.

Plafker, the chaplain at Mount Richmond Cemetery on Staten Island, grips in hands covered by rubber gloves the long list of burials he must preside over this day. In the notes section beside each person's name, the reason for their demise: "COVID." "COVID." "COVID."

"There's a tremendous sadness," he says. "Were it not for this, they would be living, some healthy, some not so healthy. But they would be alive."

Mount Richmond is run by the Hebrew Free Burial Association, which buries Jews who die with little or nothing. A century ago, it buried garment workers killed in the Triangle Shirtwaist fire and those who fell to the Spanish flu. More recently, it was Holocaust survivors who fled Europe.

And now, those dying of the coronavirus.



Rabbi Shmuel Plafker escorts Michael Tokar to the plot for the burial of his father, David Tokar, at Mount Richmond Cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York, Wednesday, April 8, 2020. Between travel restrictions and potentially exposed family members kept in isolation, many funerals now have no mourners on site. When they do, they are prohibited from gathering at the graveside, instead listening to rushed services by phone from cars parked 50 feet away. (AP Photo/David Goldman)

A stream of people trusted with preparing Mount Richmond's dead for burial continues to arrive at the cemetery, carefully washing the bodies as Jewish law dictates, then placing them in a white shroud. The Torah calls for burial as soon as possible. These days, it's more of a challenge than ever.

Companies that transport the dead to their final resting places are backed up, part of a chain reaction of hold-ups that includes overbooked funeral homes and cemeteries that are turning families away.

"The casket companies have no caskets," says James Donofrio, a funeral director who handles Mount Richmond's arrangements.

Hebrew Free Burial stocked up on caskets before the coronavirus unleashed its worst, just as they did with [protective gear](#) for workers, garments for the dead and other supplies. They think they have enough. Then again, they thought the mortuary cooler they ordered a month ago to fit an extra four bodies would be enough extra space. Now they have a refrigerated trailer big enough to hold 20.



Gravedigger Thomas Cortez accompanies a casket as it's brought to the plot for burial at Hebrew Free Burial Association's Mount Richmond Cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York, Wednesday April 8, 2020. The group serves Jews who mostly die with little or nothing. A century ago, it buried garment workers killed in the Triangle Shirtwaist fire and those who fell to the Spanish flu. More recently, it was Holocaust survivors who fled Europe. And now, those dying of the coronavirus. (AP Photo/David Goldman)

Amy Koplow, who runs Hebrew Free Burial, worries about staff maintaining such furious pace and raising enough money to cover the costs being run up. But they've vowed to plod on.

They were used to burying one person on an average day. A "crazy day," Koplow says, would be five.

The other day, they put 11 people in the ground.

Staffers find themselves exchanging texts about death certificates at 2 a.m. and fielding dozens of calls at a time. It takes its toll on everyone.

Plafker looks at the trees in bloom and the grass sprouting and finds spring's signs of rebirth so paradoxical given the death that surrounds him. He thinks of the centuries-old words he recites on the High Holy Days, that seem to carry so much more weight now.

"How many shall pass away and how many shall be born," it says. "Who shall perish by water and who by fire? Who by sword and who by wild beast? Who by famine and who by thirst? Who by earthquake and who by plague?"



Michael Tokar observes from his car as his father, David Tokar, is buried at Mount Richmond Cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York, Wednesday, April 8, 2020. Tokar's father had a cough and fever and a home health aide got him to the hospital. Two days later, he was dead, with the coronavirus listed as the cause. (AP Photo/David Goldman)

Now, it seems, a plague is upon him.

Between travel restrictions and potentially exposed family members kept in isolation, many funerals now have no mourners on site. When they do, they are prohibited from gathering at the graveside, instead listening to rushed services by phone from cars parked 50 feet away.

Michael Tokar comes along this day to bid his father farewell, waiting in

his car for directions when Donofrio arrives with news.

"We have a problem," an apologetic Donofrio says. "The body ain't here. We're going to have to do the funeral tomorrow."

There was a snag in getting the hospital to release the remains. So the son dutifully returns a day later.

Tokar's father had a cough and fever and a home health aide got him to the hospital. Two days later, he was dead, with the [coronavirus](#) listed as the cause.



The casket of someone presumed to have died from coronavirus waits to be buried without any family present at Hebrew Free Burial Association's Mount Richmond Cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York, Tuesday, April

7, 2020. The group buries Jews who die with little or nothing. A century ago, it buried garment workers killed in the Triangle Shirtwaist fire and those who fell to the Spanish flu. More recently, it was Holocaust survivors who fled Europe. And now, those dying of the coronavirus. (AP Photo/David Goldman)

As Tokar sits in his car, his phone rings. Plafker is on the line. The service is beginning and the rabbi delivers a play-by-play of the ritual.

"I'm going to help the men lower the body," he tells him.

The crew is dressed in white protective suits, masks and gloves, looking more fit for a moon landing than a funeral. They use orange straps to place David Tokar in his grave.

"We're going to cover him now," Plafker says, before asking the son if he wanted to talk about his dad.

"He was born 92 years ago," he began, reciting a collection of facts that form a portrait.

He collected stamps. He loved the racetrack. He adored his grandchildren.

The rabbi reads a Psalm and tells Tokar his father will live on in the hearts of those who loved him and that he hopes this "terrible plague" will finally pass. In 10 minutes, it is over.



Rabbi Shmuel Plafker, rear, finishes a prayer during the burial service for David Tokar as gravediggers prepare a plot for the next burial at Mount Richmond Cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York, Wednesday April 8, 2020. When Plafker arrives at the cemetery, it's buzzing: Vans pulling in with bodies aboard, mounds of dirt piling up as graves are dug open, a line of white signs pressed into the ground marking plots that are newly occupied. Some of the few signs of life in this anguished city are coming from those tending to the dead. (AP Photo/David Goldman)



Jason Boxer wipes away tears while observing from the car the burial of his father, Allen Boxer, at Mount Richmond Cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York, Sunday, April 12, 2020. "He was kind and gentle and had the biggest heart of anyone you'd know," said Boxer of his father, a U.S. Army veteran. "It's hard, very hard," he added of not being able to stand at the grave during the service. (AP Photo/David Goldman)



Gravedigger Thomas Cortez directs his coworker where to stop the pickup truck carrying a casket as it's brought to a plot for burial at Hebrew Free Burial Association's Mount Richmond Cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York, Wednesday April 8, 2020. Two of Cortez' friends have fallen ill and he and his colleagues worry they will too. It is sad work, he admits, but it must continue. Another funeral is about to begin. (AP Photo/David Goldman)



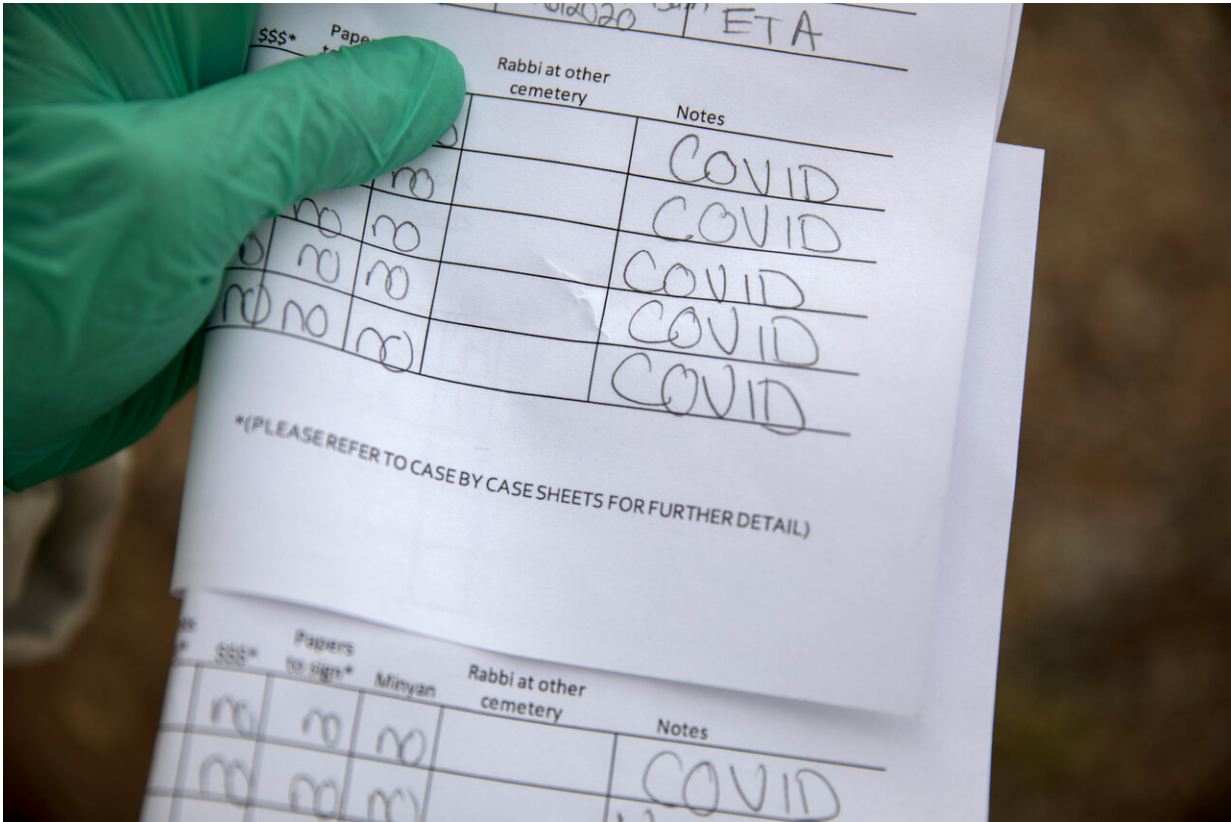
Temporary placards mark the plots of those recently buried, mostly from coronavirus, at Hebrew Free Burial Association's Mount Richmond Cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York, Tuesday, April 7, 2020. The association was used to burying one person on an average day. A "crazy day," executive director Amy Koplou says, would be five. The other day, they put 11 people in the ground. (AP Photo/David Goldman)



Rabbi Shmuel Plafker, left, watches as a casket is brought for burial at Mount Richmond Cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York, Wednesday April 8, 2020. Plafker looks at the trees in bloom and the grass sprouting and finds spring's signs of rebirth so paradoxical given the death that surrounds him. He thinks of the centuries-old words he recites on the High Holy Days, that seem to carry so much more weight now. "Who shall perish by water and who by fire? Who by sword and who by wild beast? Who by famine and who by thirst? Who by earthquake and who by plague?" Now, it seems, a plague is upon him. (AP Photo/David Goldman)



Caskets are lined up for burial as Rabbi Shmuel Plafker, left, and funeral director James Donofrio keep pace with a surge of burials, mostly of those who died from coronavirus, at Hebrew Free Burial Association's cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York, Sunday, April 12, 2020. "We literally changed the grieving process for all these thousands of people that died from coronavirus," said Donofrio of family who can't attend burials or must do so from their cars. "Their thoughts are going to be that their loved one couldn't even get a proper burial and it's going to be difficult for them to get over. (AP Photo/David Goldman)



Rabbi Shmuel Plafker looks at the list of burials for the day, all listing the cause of death as COVID-19, as he keeps pace with a surge of deaths reaching Hebrew Free Burial Association's cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York, Tuesday, April 7, 2020. "There's a tremendous sadness," he says. "Were it not for this, they would be living, some healthy, some not so healthy. But they would be alive." (AP Photo/David Goldman)



Gravedigger Thomas Cortez, left, and Rabbi Shmuel Plafker look into the mortuary cooler after someone presumed to have died from coronanvirus arrived from a hospital as they keep pace with a surge in burials at Mount Richmond Cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York, Tuesday, April 7, 2020. Companies that transport the dead to their final resting places are backed up, part of a chain reaction of hold-ups that includes overbooked funeral homes and cemeteries that are turning families away. (AP Photo/David Goldman)



Gravedigger Thomas Cortez watches as a refrigerated trailer is delivered to keep pace with a surge of bodies arriving for burials, mostly those who died from coronavirus, at Hebrew Free Burial Association's cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York, Tuesday, April 7, 2020. The organization stocked up on caskets before the coronavirus unleashed its worst, just as they did with protective gear for workers, garments for the dead and other supplies. They think they have enough. Then again, they thought the mortuary cooler they ordered a month ago to fit an extra four bodies would be enough extra space. Now they have a refrigerated trailer big enough to hold 20. (AP Photo/David Goldman)



Gravedigger Thomas Cortez, left, helps load a casket of someone who is presumed to have died from coronavirus as they keep pace with a surge in burials at Mount Richmond Cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York, Tuesday, April 7, 2020. "It's sad, it's sad, and I feel sorry because they want to see. They can't. They have to be in the car and can't go and cry where it has to be," said Cortez of family members who must remain in their cars for burials and can't approach the grave. (AP Photo/David Goldman)



Rabbi Shmuel Plafker, left, and funeral director James Donofrio work in the office of Hebrew Free Burial Association's cemetery as they deal with a surge in burials, mostly of those who died from coronavirus, in the Staten Island borough of New York, Tuesday, April 7, 2020. Staffers find themselves exchanging texts about death certificates at 2 a.m. and fielding dozens of calls at a time. It takes its toll on everyone. (AP Photo/David Goldman)



Rabbi Shmuel Plafker removes his protective suit after conducting seven burials Monday, April 6, 2020, as the chaplain for the Hebrew Free Burial Association at their cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York. "It's ironic," said Plafker as he reflects after burying another potential coronavirus victim. "Spring is here. Everything is in bloom and people are dying." (AP Photo/David Goldman)



Rabbi Shmuel Plafker closes the gates after another day of keeping pace with a surge in burials, most of them deaths from coronavirus, at the Hebrew Free Burial Association's cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York, Wednesday April 8, 2020. As the world retreats and the pandemic's confirmed death toll in New York City alone charges past 10,000, funeral directors, cemetery workers and others who oversee a body's final chapter are sprinting to keep up. (AP Photo/David Goldman)



Michael Tokar holds the ring of his father, David Tokar, after it was returned to him before his burial at Mount Richmond Cemetery in the Staten Island borough of New York, Wednesday April 8, 2020. "My father wore this ring all his life and I want to keep it for me. It's the best memory. It's like part of my father." (AP Photo/David Goldman)



Michael Tokar poses for a photo as he must mourn the death of his father without the company of his children and extended family at his home in the Staten Island borough of New York, Tuesday, April 7, 2020. "It's hard. It's just, it's strange. My father passed away and nobody can say goodbye," said Tokar. Tokar's father, David Tokar, had a cough and fever and a home health aide got him to the hospital. Two days later, he was dead, with the coronavirus listed as the cause. (AP Photo/David Goldman)



Michael Tokar holds a picture of his father, David Tokar, as he cleans out his apartment after he died from complications caused by coronavirus, in the Brooklyn borough of New York, Sunday, April 12, 2020. "He was born 92 years ago," said Tokar, reciting a collection of facts that form a portrait. "He collected stamps. He loved the racetrack. He adored his grandchildren." (AP Photo/David Goldman)



Michael Tokar packs up the apartment of his father, David Tokar, after he died from complications from coronavirus, in the Brooklyn borough of New York, Sunday, April 12, 2020. "I miss him. I like to call him sometimes. Ask him what you need, what you want, sometimes just to keep him busy," said Tokar of his 92-year-old father who collected stamps and liked to go to the casino. "I know he was old man and I was prepared that one day he'd pass away. But I wasn't ready for this. I'm not ready now." (AP Photo/David Goldman)

A few rows away, Thomas Cortez readies another grave. Two of his friends have fallen ill and he and his colleagues worry they will too. It is sad work, he admits, but it must continue.

Another funeral is about to begin.

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Citation: Cemetery races to keep up as New York virus deaths mount (2020, April 21) retrieved 24 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-04-cemetery-york-virus-deaths-mount.html>

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