

Yom Kippur Yizkor, 5774 - The Truest Act of Kindness

G'mar hatimah tovah - may we be sealed for a year of blessing.

The call came in on a Thursday evening. I was watching a baseball game and, not that surprisingly, thoroughly engrossed in it. As I got up to answer it, I still had an eye on the game.

“Is this David Lerner?”

“Yes?”

“Hi, it’s Avi from the *hevra kadisha* – the burial society; we were hoping you could help us with a *tohorah*. Are you available?”

“Oh.... Ummm... [deep breath] OK, I’ll be right over.”

My mind stopped, even as my eyes returned to the pitcher. I was being called by the local *hevra kadisha* – the burial society on the Upper West Side of Manhattan – to perform a *mitzvah* I had never done before.

Part of *my* understanding of rabbinical school was that I should try to be exposed to almost every aspect of our tradition. At the very least, if I was going to advocate for people to perform these traditions, I had better know what I was talking about!

My teachers had taught us why we should insist on traditional Jewish burial practices including *tohorah*, the washing of the dead body before burial, but I had never participated in it.

And you cannot simply be an observer at a *tohorah*, since it is not *k’vod hamet* – it impinges on the honor of the deceased to have people simply watching such a ritual. There are no observers allowed.

And I felt that I needed to perform this *mitzvah*.

A rabbinical school friend who volunteered for the local *hevra kadisha* told me whom to call. After a short conversation, the coordinator told me that I would be called when they needed me and would learn “on the job.”

After a few weeks had passed without a call, I sort-of forgot about it until that Thursday night.

I was flooded with feelings: fear, dread, anxiety. Why had I signed up to do this? What was I thinking? Did I really need to do this?

I could become a fine rabbi without it; in fact, most of my friends had not and were not going to have this experience...

But I had been called. And I am not one to turn someone down, especially someone in need. They needed me to be the fourth person on this *tohorah* team.

I walked the seven blocks to the Plaza Jewish Community Chapel on 91st and Amsterdam. On the way, I thought about how close this funeral home, this place of the deceased, was to where Sharon and I lived on 88th Street. And then I remembered that my own grandmother’s funeral had taken place there. My mind became filled with her memory – may it be for a blessing.

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Avi met me at the door and took me downstairs. He explained a few of the basics about what we were going to do. All I was told about the man we were going to help (men work with men and women with women) was that he was 81 years old and had died of natural causes. Anonymity is also part of the experience of working with a *hevra kadisha*, a burial society. Avi said that we would work mostly in silence together and he would tell me what to do.

After I met the other two men on our *tohorah* team, we went straight to work. The task took on a distinctly surreal quality: on the one hand, I was standing next to a man who had recently died, a corpse; on the other hand, we had a job to do, a *mitzvah* to perform, which needed our full attention and care.

And I also realized that I had never seen a dead human being before in my life...

The man was covered with a sheet and, carefully, we uncovered each part of him, and cleaned him by washing each area. For example, we uncovered his left arm and gently washed it and then covered it again. We proceeded mostly in silence which was interrupted only by short instructions so I would know what these more experienced volunteers already knew. After the body was cleaned, the *tohorah* ritual continued, as we prepared him for burial, pouring water gently over each part of him.

Perhaps the most poignant aspect was that we treated this man, this body, as if he were alive. We were sensitive to issues of modesty and made sure he was covered as we moved him. In a way, it was as if he were alive and we were nurses or attendants in a hospital, washing someone who could not move. We can imagine the love and care given to a living patient, and here, we were doing the same for someone who was deceased.

We recited a few prayers including one that asked that his soul be protected from harm in the world-to-come. The rituals and the texts made it feel as though this man's soul (a man whom I had never met alive), were present in the room. It felt as if his *neshamah*, his soul was hovering right above us.

By the end of the washing rituals, it seemed that his soul had moved on and was at peace.

We dressed the body in *takhrikin*, the white shroud that Jews have been buried in for thousands of years. Reflecting the dressing of the *Kohein Gadol*, the High Priest in the Holy Temple, he was attired in plain white linen garments. This way no Jew is treated differently – rich or poor, learned or ignorant, observant or not observant – we are all the same in death. Then, we placed him gently in the *aron* - in the wood coffin. We placed some earth from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem upon him and surrounded his body with some Hebrew

prayer books which also required burial. It felt as if these would be comforting to him.

It was strange, yet so powerful. I walked home that night very slowly, lost in thought, still feeling the intensity of the *tohorah* I had just experienced.

When I got home, Sharon asked me about it; it was hard to describe to her. Although it was straight-forward – I had washed and dressed a dead body in preparation for burial – it felt as if I had done so much more; the four of us had just taken a journey to the point where life and death meet.

I told her that I had never felt anything like it - that someone's soul was hovering above me. And I, I was sending it love and compassion - from one realm to another.

There was also a sense of kinship and closeness. Although I had never met this man in the land of the living, I felt a kinship with him: one Jew helping another Jew. "*Kol Yisrael areivim zeh bazeh* - all of Israel takes care of each other." This was an act not to be left to an employee of a funeral home (which is what happens when a *hevra kadisha* is not involved), but to a group of Jews who treated this man's body with dignity.

I told Sharon how proud I was to be a Jew – that we have such meaningful rituals and groups of people who care enough to perform these acts of love.

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Rituals involving burial and its preparation exist in all religions and all cultures. In fact, unique burial practices were often the first elements a civilization created as it emerged in the ancient world. Ancient peoples buried their dead for many reasons. It may have evolved from a practical concern. A body could decompose, bringing insects and illness.

But, I believe it is deeper than that.

We treat dead bodies with respect, since it has an impact on us - the living. When I have watched video of something like extremists dragging a corpse through city streets from a motorcycle, it felt that this was not only a desecration of the murdered person, but that it was also dehumanizing to the perpetrator and even me, the viewer, as I watched it.

While rituals that prepare the dead are ascribed mystical meaning to the soul of the deceased, to my mind, they have an even greater effect on the living. They make bold moral statements: we honor the dead; the *mitzvah* called *k'vod ha'met*.

Why?

Because if this is how we treat the dead, then how much more respect should we have for the living.

A human being is something so precious and complex - while its shell is an animal body, it contains a level of consciousness that is unique and holy. When one dies, that uniqueness does not simply disappear instantly - certainly not for the living who experience the loss.

I have been with families as their loved one was dying on several occasions, reciting the *Vidui* - the final confession, which I often offer on behalf of the dying. And then they breathed their last breath. The family lovingly said goodbye to the deceased, shut their loved one's eyes and covered the body with a sheet. But, while the consciousness may have departed and their soul, their spark of the divine, may no longer be present in the same manner, when we look at them, we still see them, their totality - body and soul.

These rituals and many others allow us the time and space to help make this transition.

One of the other customs that our community has performed on a number of occasions is *shemirah* - watching or staying with a dead body.

While this custom had a clear function in times before refrigeration - it made certain that no animals, etc., harmed the body – today, that is no longer relevant. Nonetheless, it is an incredibly powerful act to sit in the room next to where a dead body is and read from the book of Psalms, as is traditional. It is a selfless act of love and compassion, something we can lovingly provide to those who have died and their families.

We gather today just a few days after 9-11. A powerful narrative that came out of that terrible tragedy included the *shomerim*, the guards - those who watched with the corpses and bodies and body parts for weeks and months until they could be identified and buried. A human being is so sacred that even just a part of the body after death is treated with respect.

Let me digress for a moment and make something clear: this does not preclude being an organ donor - the tradition states quite clearly that if we can save a life, that takes precedence over honoring a dead body and thus, I am an organ donor and you should be as well.

But, in other instances, we treat the dead body with great love and care - the way we would want to be treated.

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We gather here on Yom Kippur - a day on which death serves as a liturgical motif that pushes us to think deeply about the way we live. Recognizing our own mortality, we realize that we are not living the lives we should and we pledge to do better. We confront the reality that we will not live forever. We do not know what the future holds.

Today's exploration reenacts death as we all become a little bit like a *met*, like a dead body. We remove physical enjoyment - no food, no drink, no washing, no sex, no leather shoes, no pleasurable activities. We wear white and a white *kittel*, as if we were wrapping ourselves in a white shroud, in *takhrikhin*.

Thus, we get in touch with death not simply through words and ideas in the *Mahzor*, but through symbolic actions that help us feel it on a visceral level.

We don't know when it will happen, but we all must accept that we will die. Rabbi David Wolpe tells the story of a man at age 93 who continued to be comforted by the consoling words that his mother had said to him while lying on her deathbed, seventy years earlier: "Don't be afraid. It happens to everyone."

We have to confront our own death and, once we accept our own mortality, we realize how sacred our lives are. What a gift we have been given! And then we ask: what am I doing with this gift? Imagine if I lost this gift tomorrow, what would I do today? Which relationships would I need to heal? Whom would I want to see? As Rabbi Eliezer states in *Pirkei Avot* (2:15): "Repent one day before your death," which means every day.

We realize what is most important in our lives, and, hopefully, appreciate it.

Think of the powerful *piyyut* we recited last night at *Kol Nidrei*: "*Ki hinei kaḥomer* – we are like clay in the hands of the potter, who thickens or thins it at will, so are we in Your hand, Guardian of love." While I do not believe that God controls us, the understanding I take from this prayer is that our bodies are like clay that we do not fully control. The body is the shell, a vital shell, but the exterior which encases a soul that is a spark of the divine.

The rituals around death acknowledge that both the body and soul are sacred and we honor both as we help the deceased and the living cope with death.

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Over the last decade, a number of us have wanted to volunteer and participate in a *tohorah* here in the Boston area. Unfortunately, the Boston Chevra Kadisha, which does great work and which we utilize regularly, while it

helps *all* Jews, it will allow only Orthodox or right-wing Orthodox Jews to participate in this *mitzvah*.

A group of us led by Emunah members: Judith Hember, Hal Miller-Jacobs and myself, have been meeting for a couple of years to create a more inclusive group called the Community *Hevra Kadisha* of Greater Boston. We have been assisted by our member Mark Canter and partnered with Hebrew College and others. We now have 20 rabbis and synagogues who have become founding members of our new organization.

In two weeks, we will hold our first training sessions. For those interested in learning how to perform *tohorah*, please take a brochure and flyer and sign up. For those for whom that might be a bit too intense, you can become engaged in *shemirah* (watching) or helping our organization through financial support or volunteering your time to help us get off the ground.

We hope to begin offering our services to our own community and the wider Jewish community in the coming year.

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How important is this *mitzvah*? It is in the same piece of Talmud I mentioned on Rosh Hashanah and again last night, It teaches that key *mitzvot* include hospitality, visiting the sick and yes, caring for the dead.

The rabbis refer to our burial rites as *hesed shel emet* – the truest act of love, since for every other act of kindness we do for someone else, the other person can repay us, but, for this act, the person can never repay us.

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We are taught as Jews to emulate, insofar as mere humans can, the actions of God: “Even as God is merciful, so should you be merciful.” Our caring for the dead is, according to rabbinic tradition, modeled on the way the *Ribbono*

Shel Olam, the Holy One, God's self, buried Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our Teacher.

God's greatest student is given a unique privilege – the Holy One takes care of his *tohorah* and burial.

The Midrash paints a portrait of a very human Moses who prayed to God: “Lord of the world! Be mindful of the day when You did reveal Yourself to me in the bush of thorns, and be mindful of the day when I ascended into heaven and during forty days partook of neither food nor drink. You, Gracious and Merciful, deliver me not into the hands of Samael [the angel of death].”

“God replied: ‘I have heard your prayer. I Myself shall attend to you and bury you.’”

God takes his soul with a Divine kiss, gently closes his eyes and buries him in a spot that is unknown even to Moses.

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Let me take you back to the ritual of *tohorah* that I opened with. At the end of the *tohorah*, the tradition states that we should ask the deceased for *mehilah*, for forgiveness, for any indignity we may have accidentally done to his body.

Along with the rest of the *hevra kadisha*, I recited: “We ask your forgiveness if we did not act according to your *kavod* – your honor [or you suffered any indignity], even though we acted according to our custom.”

We ask for forgiveness even from the deceased, modeling *teshuvah* for ourselves that can transform ourselves in the realm of the living.

May we all be privileged to volunteer, support, and sustain our new *hevra kadisha*, cherishing the gifts of our lives today and knowing that when our time comes, this loving fellowship will care for us - body and soul.

G'mar hatimah tovah – may we be sealed for a year of blessing and may we perform many *mitzvot*.