

A CONTEMPLATION

Isaac Pollak, KJ's "Volunteer of the Year" shares his thoughts on this important mitzvah.

"Show me the manner in which a nation cares for its dead and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender mercies of its people," observed William Gladstone, the British statesman. People who have learned how to care tenderly for the bodies of the dead are almost surely people who also know how to show mercy to the bodies of the living.

I believe what we do embodies that philosophy, perhaps even epitomizes it.

Take a walk back with me 1700 years ago and listen to how all this started.

In approximately 310-320 CE, Rav Hamnuna arrives one morning in the town of Duramatha (Harta or Argiz, currently a suburb of Baghdad) and hears the sound of a funerary horn, announcing that someone has died. When he sees that the citizens of the town continue their vocations and avocations he angrily denounces them.

"Don't you know," he tells the townspeople, "that the duty of arranging for the disposal of the dead devolved upon and involved the entire community and all activities need to cease?"

The townspeople respond, "*Chavruta ika bashuka*." There is a *chevra*, a group or fraternity charged with this duty. Upon hearing this Rav Hamnuna permitted the townspeople to go back to their activities. However what exactly this *chavruta* was charged with doing is not specified.

The next mention of a similar *chevra* is approximately 300 years later where we are told (*Masachet Semachot*) that some *chavrot* go to the "gathering of bones," *likud atzumath*. In what is referred to as Greco-Roman times, bodies were put in a cave or on a hollowed out rock shelf. Twelve months later, when the body had decomposed, the bones were gathered and put into an ossuary or *osophogi*; a limestone container (called a *Gluskama* in the Talmud) and a day of mourning was held, as that which motivated sin, the flesh, is now gone, and the soul can now rise to another level. The *Yahrzeit* we observe today is traced to this day of *likud atzumot*, or bone gathering, as well as the tradition to erect a tombstone a year after death.

It wasn't until the year 1626, when Rav Aron Berachia of Modena compiled

the *Maavar Yavuk*, that we finally have for the first time the exact details of what one does at a *tahara* and what prayers accompany the process: A *tahara* is the process of washing and cleaning the body, going through the Mikvah process and dressing it in shrouds. There are no *tahara halachot*, but rather, a set of tenets that have evolved over the centuries.



I would like to share some personal observations in no particular order about being involved with *Chevra Kadisha* work for over three decades.

DEATH AS AN EQUALIZER

Chapter 2 in *Malachim Alef* (Kings I) starts with the following sentence:

וַיִּקְרְבוּ יְמֵי-דָוִד לָמוֹת

"Now the days of David grew near that he should die." Just a few sentences earlier in the previous chapter he was

וְהַמֶּלֶךְ דָּוִד זָקֵן

"And King David was old," but as he nears his final days, he is referred to only as David and the title "King" no longer applies. When we approach death we can no longer hide behind titles and status; we are all equal in the eyes of our Creator.

When we uncover the body at the beginning of a *tahara*, everybody has the same status. The learned or the unlettered,

the wealthy or the poor; all are treated in the same dignified manner. All Jews stand equal in the sight of their Creator and no one is to be put to shame on his or her last appearance on earth.

William Gladstone is only echoing what we have been doing for the previous 1800 years.



"It's only death and it's happened to everyone that has ever lived," quipped Benjamin Franklin, adding his famous phrase, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes." And in the 21st century, if Benjamin Franklin were alive today he would have added, "Don't forget to cancel your credit cards before you die."

A story to illustrate: A woman died in January 2009. Citibank billed her in February (and March) for their annual service charges on her credit card, and added late fees and interest onto the monthly charge! The balance was \$0 when she died, but that turned into \$60, so a family member placed a call to Citibank.

Here is the exchange:

Family Member: "I am calling to tell you she died back in January."

Citibank: "The account was never closed so the late fees and charges still apply."

Family Member: "Maybe you should turn it over to Collections."

Citibank: "Since the account is two months past due, it already has been."

Family Member: "So, what will they do when they find out she is dead?"

Citibank: "Either report her account to the Frauds Division or report her to the Credit Bureau, maybe both!"

THREE COMMUNITY MIKVAHS

The Jacques & Hannah Schwalbe Mikvah

419 East 77th Street
(between 1st & York Avenues)
Telephone: 212-359-2020

The Rennert Mikvah at 5th Avenue Synagogue

5 East 62nd Street
(just off Fifth Avenue)
Telephone: 212-753-6058

The West Side Mikvah

234 West 74th Street
(East of Broadway)
Telephone: 212-579-2011

OF THE CHEVRA KADISHA

Family Member: "Do you think God will be mad at her?"

Citibank: "Excuse me?"

Family Member: "Did you get what I was just telling you, the part about her being dead?"

Citibank: "Sir, you'll have to speak to my supervisor!"

Supervisor gets on the phone:

Family Member: "I'm calling to tell you she died back in January with a \$0.00 balance."

Citibank: "The account was never closed so late fees and charges still apply."

Family Member: "You mean you want to collect from her estate?"

Citibank: (stammer) "Are you her lawyer?"

Family Member: "No, I'm her great-nephew." (Lawyer info was given)

Citibank: "Could you fax us a Death Certificate?"

Family Member: "Sure." (Fax number was given)

After they get the fax:

Citibank: "Our system isn't set up for death; I don't know what more I can do to help."

Family Member: "Well, if you figure it out, great! If not, you could just keep billing her; she won't care."

Citibank: "Well, the late fees and charges will still apply..."

(What is wrong with these people?)

Family Member: "Would you like her new billing address?"

Citibank: "That might help."

Family Member: "Odessa Memorial Cemetery, Highway 129, Plot Number 69."

Citibank: "Sir, that's a cemetery!"

Family Member: "And what do you do with dead people on your planet?"

(Absolutely priceless!)

And we wondered why Citibank was going broke and needed the Feds to bail them out!

AWARENESS OF SELF

Every one of us who has done *taharas* has a story that has touched him or her in a unique way, and this is one of mine that I would like to share with you.

Approximately 15 years ago, I was in

Hong Kong when, after Shacharit one morning, the Rabbi asked if anyone had any Chevra Kadisha experience and would be available to help in a complicated Tahara later that afternoon. I volunteered. A young Israeli engineering student in his early 30s had died of a blood disease and the local rules mandated that the blood had to be drained from the body. It was then to be refilled with embalming fluid and sealed. Only then could we clothe the body in shrouds before it could be shipped back to Israel in a sealed coffin for burial. All this had to take place in a special government hospital under Chinese medical supervision with an attending doctor from the Israeli embassy. It took about four hours and when it was over I just walked for a long time and couldn't concentrate on work that evening.

This young, very handsome man is often in my mind, especially on the seventh day of Adar, when I recite Tehilim in his memory and others for whom I have



performed a Tahara in the previous 12 months. In situations such as this, life is suddenly thrust into the forefront. Life is more savory. It's as if we were saved from imminent danger. I struggle to find the right words to express this.

You see yourself in a new and intense way. You rediscover yourself with a certain clarity. In a way, you are able to see who you are for the first time, outside familiar surroundings, alone, distinct, whole. You feel the texture of life as you would feel the texture of material that you would rub between your fingers. Your self-awareness of life is raised to a higher level.

When this happens, your day is different, your frenzied schedule of multi-tasking takes on a different hue, your kids and your wife get extra hugs and kisses, and, when you look around you and say "Thank God." You say it with a quiet

intensity that was not there previously.

I would sometimes come home exhausted and drenched from a late night Tahara, tiptoe into my kids' room and just lay down next to one of them and listen to their gentle breathing for a while and let the rhythm of life settle about me.

We become very vulnerable, especially if the *tahara* was on a young child, or a teenager, or on the person who sat next to you yesterday in shul; but this vulnerability enables us to be empowered. It may tear us apart, but it may reassemble us in ways that astonish. So I ask myself, "Who is doing a *chesed* and who has a *chesed* done to him?" More on this subject in a moment.

YOUR CHEVRA KADISHA MEMBERS

Approximately 33 years ago there was a call to set up a *Chevra Kadisha* at KJ. A year later I joined. Rabbi Israel Rosenberg was our teacher and guide. The very first time I attended -never having seen, much less handled a dead body- Dr. Mortimer Blumenthal AH, in his own gentle way, literally took me by the hand, told me to stay close to him. He hovered over me constantly monitoring me to be sure I was OK. Martin Rochlin AH, was always there in those early days with vim and

passion, full of heart and voice. No task was too difficult for him, and sometimes what we do is quite difficult. Mordie Mann AH, who almost never missed a *tahara* and, even in his 80s, insisted on coming and helping in whatever way he could. There were those among others who have helped us for longer or shorter time periods including Dr. Larry Steinberg, Harvey Geisler, Eugene Roshwalb, Dr. Danny Potaznik, Michael Jesselson, Alan Brown, and our very own Rabbi Haskel Lookstein.

We tend to keep in the background and remain quiet about our activities. But I am accepting this honor for our members and you should know who they are. I often think that what defines us is what we are willing to give of ourselves and, ladies and gentlemen, these folks have given and given.

Here is what happens: A call from the

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synagogue alerts us that a *tahara* is needed and a Yahoo group e-mail is sent to our members. Responses come within minutes with their availability and a mutually convenient time is scheduled among us and the funeral home, ideally as close as possible to the time the of the funeral. It sounds simple, but we all have commitments and working spouses and children and schedules, and death doesn't come on schedule. I often tell people: *Don't die during Pesach or the week sandwiched between Christmas and New Year's*. I have had both my sons (Zamir and Ovadya) participate in a *tahara* when they were as young as 15, when they were needed; especially during Pesach.

Within minutes we put it together, and everyone is willing to make a sacrifice and give of themselves. One person drives one and one-half hours from a weekend in the Hamptons, participates in the *tahara*, and drives back; another opens his Blackberry during intermission at the theater with clients, leaves his clients with his wife and grabs a taxi to meet us at the funeral home; and yet another, while en route to a milestone graduation, has the taxi change routes so he could participate in the *tahara* of a young man who died in his sleep leaving three young children.

Please meet these very special members of the Men's *Chevra Kadisha*. Benjamin Brown, 33 years; Dr. Robert Podell, over 20 years; Kenneth Rochlin, 20 years; Samuel Attias, 16 years; Jay Lunzer, 15 years; Larry Adolf, 12 years; Isaac Hoffman, 9 years; Jonathan Hornbliss, 9 years; Morris Massel, 3 years; Larry Present, 3 years; Benjamin Rubin, 2 years; Rabbi Josh Lookstein, 2 years; Aaron Gordon, 2 years.

Of course, let us not forget the Women's *Chevra Kadisha*, so capably run by Sue Robins and Tova Bulow for 28 years, with dedicated members who also perform *taharas* in a most selfless fashion.

וכל מי שעוסקים בצוכי צבור באמונה
הקדוש ברוך הוא ישלם שכרם

"And all those who faithfully occupy themselves with the needs of the community. May the Holy One, blessed be He, give them their reward. May He remove from them all illness, grant them complete healing, and forgive all their sins. May He send blessing and success to all the work of their hands, Amen."

A VERY PERSONAL OBSERVATION

And when the time came for Israel to die he summoned his son Joseph and said:

שׁים-נא ידך תחת ירכי ועשית עמדי
חסד ואמת

"Do me this favor, place your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your steadfast loyalty and kindness - a true kindness, please do not bury me in Egypt."

Jewish tradition defines true kindness as a good deed for which there is no reciprocal favor -- such as tending to the needs of the dead. (I have often pondered the inherent contradiction of *chesed* and *emet*. At times the epitome of *chesed* is not to be truthful; perhaps a discussion for another time.) The dead cannot thank you, and there is no earthly reward. (And as a *Chevra Kadisha* colleague quipped, "Neither can they complain of poor



service.") Adherence to this sacred practice is one reason why the volunteer burial society in a community is known as *Chevra Kadisha*, the Sacred Society.

WHO IS DOING THE CHESED TO WHOM?

While the traditional meaning is that the person doing the *tahara* is doing the *chesed*, after many years and having performed many *taharas*, I would like to think that this *chesed* goes both ways. Let me explain: In Tehilim 89 we read:

חסדי יהוה עולם אשירה,
כי אמרתי, עולם חסד יבנה,

"Of Hashem's kindness I will sing forever for I said, 'Forever will [Your] kindness be built.'"

Maimonides suggests that this tells us that the world is built on *chesed*. None of us could have done anything to earn the gifts of life and consciousness. God owes us nothing, yet chose to bring us into this world and thus give us something. We are a religion of gratitude; our day starts with *Modeh Ani*, grateful am "I" before You. We don't say *Ani Modeh*, "I" am grateful, perhaps suggesting that there is no self, there is no "I" without gratitude, and that one does not become human until "I" gratitude is conveyed.

Having received an inestimable gift of *chesed*, we are called upon to bestow *chesed* ourselves and this is the way we walk in God's ways. By creating human beings in His image, God has chosen to need us. We are called upon to help narrow the enormous gap between the Real, where human dignity is often trampled upon in countless ways, and the Ideal, where the presence of God is manifest.

I often see our work as helping to bridge this gap. In the process we are the recipients of *chesed*. We appreciate life in a different manner. Anyone who has done a *tahara* never sees life the same way. We get so much more than what we give. We appreciate so much more what we have.

Our work is somber (there is no conversation during a *tahara*), even sad, and often very difficult, but it is neither discouraging nor depressing. "A good death and a good funeral," writes Thomas Lynch, a poet and undertaker, "is one that gets the dead where they need to go and the living where they need to be."

May God give the members of our Men's and Women's *Chevra Kadisha*, and all holy societies, the strength to persist in their efforts and may we have as few opportunities as possible to demonstrate the inspiring ability to combine the attributes of *chesed* and *emeth*. Thank you for listening to me about a grave subject we tend to avoid. I can only echo the words of the great Rabbi Akiba, who concluded a funeral with the words, *Lech La'batachim La Shalom*. Go to your homes in peace.