

The Last Responder

People are often surprised—shocked even—when I tell them what I do. I transform one of the unholy objects—a corpse—into one of the holiest by preparing the body, a vessel for its soul, to face God. I look death square on as I touch, clean and dress the deceased. This hallowed work is done with no expectation of thanks or reward.

I lead the Chevra Kadisha (Holy Fellowship) in my synagogue—the group of women who prepare the deceased female for burial according to Jewish custom. Our job is to midwife her soul from this world to the next. Serving in the Chevra Kadisha is an act of *chesed shel emet*—true loving kindness.

One of the most time-sensitive Jewish rituals, occurring within hours after death, is the Tahara, the purification and preparation of the body for interment.

Because traditional Jews do not embalm, deceased are typically buried 24-48 hours after death. When I get the call, either from my rabbi or one of our local funeral homes, that a female congregant has died, I organize a minimum of four women to fulfill this sacred act. The calls I make are “Can-you-drop-everything?” requests, often made with just a few hours’ notice, with little time to arrange child care or rearrange appointments. Our Chevra Kadisha members have cancelled classes and given up theater tickets to perform this ritual. They are a team of angels—spiritual beings possessing extraordinary compassion, reverence, and commitment. People often ask me, “Doesn’t it make you sad? Don’t you cry?”

The truth is, I don’t cry. I am awed. “I feel privileged to care for this woman in her final hours on this earth.”

I have been fortunate. I have not been called to care for a young child or a murder victim or someone whose body has been abused, as women in other congregations have. I imagine I would cry in those circumstances.

When a midwife brings a baby into the world, she helps the child emerge from a safe, dark coziness into a brightly-lit unknown environment, entering clean and pure. When a woman dies, she experiences a similar transition—from a familiar world to an unknown world—from one realm of existence to another. We ready her to enter the next world with the same reverence and gentleness that was shown to her when she first entered this life.

As I cross into the Tahara room, I enter into an intimate relationship with a woman who is transitioning from this world to the next. I am in liminal space; I feel its holiness.

Before entering the room, we assign roles and tasks. Once inside, we work primarily in silence, speaking only to recite the prayers and blessings or to confer about an unusual circumstance. We never pass anything across the woman’s body, as we believe that her soul lingers just above her, nor do we stand at her head, since we believe God’s presence hovers there. We touch her as a mother would caress an infant who was also unable to care for herself.

Death looks nothing like the cosmeticized version we see on television or in the movies. But this rite of passage brings beauty to a previously beautiful woman.

First we recite a prayer asking God to give us the courage and strength to cleanse her, dress her in the customary shrouds, and prepare her for burial. After we wash our hands and don gloves and aprons, we recite a prayer asking forgiveness for anything inappropriate we might accidentally do. The implication: her spirit is present and aware. We ask God, on behalf of the deceased, for compassion and mercy for her. We pray that her soul will come to rest with the righteous in Gan Eden (Paradise).

Next we approach the metal table on which she lies in a zippered bag. We remove her and undress and examine her. Some bodies—often those coming from nursing homes—are meticulously clean. Others, who may have died at home, need more cleansing. In situations where rigor mortis has set in, we have to be even more delicate to avoid breaking bones.

Before we can begin the Tahara, we lovingly clean and clip her nails, wash and comb her hair, and then bathe her from head to toe with warm water and soft cloths. When I do this, I experience the same tenderness that I feel when brushing the hair of my granddaughters. We recite Shir Hashirim from the Song of Songs, reminding us that she was a beautiful human being, created in God's image.

Then we start the actual purification by pouring warm water over her, in a continuous flow from head to foot, all the time repeating "She is pure" and reciting blessings from Ezekial and Jeremiah. This replicates the sanctity of the mikveh, the Jewish ritual bath.

We gently dry her using fresh towels and dress her in the time-honored Jewish burial garments—white, hand-sewn, linen garments designed to emulate the clothes of the High Priests. They have no pockets, buttons, snaps, or other fasteners. According to Leviticus (16:4), the High Priests attained closeness to God in the linen tunic. We dress her similarly so she will also attain closeness to God. These burial garments are the same for all traditional Jews, reflecting our belief in our fundamental equality in the eyes of God.

We dress her in a particular order, ensuring her dignity. We cover her head and face first, acknowledging that we are the last people who will see her face. We put on the collarless undershirt and tie it at the neck, followed by the pants which are sewn shut at the feet, and then the collared top shirt, also tied at the neck. Then we tie the sash around her waist making three loops in the shape of the Hebrew letter shin, representing one of the names of God—Shaddai—translated as "Almighty."

We gently lift her and place her into the aron (casket), reciting the Priestly Blessing (Numbers 6:24-26) that is used at the most sacred times in our lives:

May the Lord bless you and keep you

May the Lord shine upon you and be gracious unto you

May the Lord show you kindness and grant you peace.

Traditional Jews are buried in plain pine boxes held together with wooden pegs rather than metal screws or nails—wood that naturally decomposes so the body can return to the earth. Selecting the simplest casket reflects Judaism’s tenet in the equality of all in death.

Before closing the lid on the coffin, we put clay pottery shards on her eyelids and lips, symbolizing penitence for any possible sins her eyes or mouth may have committed. If she wore a tallit (prayer shawl) during her life, we cut one of its four fringes and place it in the sash around her waist, showing she is no longer responsible for wearing the tallit. After draping the prayer shawl around her shoulders, we wrap her body in a burial sheet, as we would swaddle a baby in a blanket. We sprinkle sand from Israel on her eyes and in the casket so the first thing she will “see” in the world to come will be the soil of our holy land.

Once the casket is closed, it is not reopened. Chevra Kadisha members again recite the Mechilah, this time praying for forgiveness for any accidental act that did not show respect or that might have offended her, or caused her humiliation. We assure her that we have treated her with the utmost kavanah—intention and focus of purpose.

Before leaving, I lean over the coffin and, in a whisper, bid her farewell using her Hebrew name. “Good bye, Roisa bat Nuchem. You are ready to go on now. May God protect you.”

When we exit the building, we wash our hands from a pitcher that is left outside. We take time to express any concerns, emotions, or other responses to the experience we have just shared. These can be particularly poignant when we have known the deceased. I ensure that everyone is ready to reintegrate to daily life and, if not, provide any needed support. We take a moment of silence for private meditation and reflection. I have been blessed with a fellowship of resilient and strong spiritual beings.

Each time I exit the Tahara room, I am overwhelmed with the sanctity of each human being and the fragility of life. Performing this act of kindness for the dead reminds me to show the same compassion to the living. When I midwife a soul, giving respect and dignity to a divine being, I feel God’s spark kindled in my spirit and His warmth enfold me.

I am a last responder.

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Sarah has won numerous writing awards and her articles have appeared in Talking Writing, Bookwoman, and the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance Journal. Her just-completed memoir, A Daughter’s Final Gift, follows her 11-month journey reciting Kaddish twice-daily in synagogues across America to honor her father’s soul. Sarah’s post-retirement “encore career” as a writer and author coalesces with time feeding the hungry, supporting the homeless, writing a weekly newsletter about racial injustice and combatting racism, volunteering in the Israeli Army, and leading her synagogue’s Chevra Kadisha.