

# The Final Kindness

On the Days of Awe, we face our own mortality in a way more immediate than the rest of the year. Yet even after a human draws his last breath, he is still part of a loving, kind nation that cares for every member. In the same way that mothers bring children into the world and help them integrate into human society, the Jewish *nshei chayil* who take care of the deceased help ease them out of This World and gently transition them into the Next. **Family First** speaks to some of the women who prepare their fellow Jewesses for their final journeys

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Tzivia M. was humming to herself, frosting a double-decker chocolate cake for Shabbos when the call came.

"I know you said you would make yourself available if we really needed you," a female voice said on the other end. "Well, tonight we have two people out with the flu, and we're really short-staffed. Would I be able to pick you up in fifteen minutes?"

Tzivia froze. What had she been *thinking* when she told them she could help? Guess she never imagined anyone would ever really call! "I ... uh ... I ... uh ..." she stammered.

"You never did this before, did you?" the other woman asked kindly.

"Uh, no, not really," Tzivia managed to get out. "I'm not really sure I'll be any good."

"Don't worry," the woman reassured her. "It takes a little getting used to, but you'll be fine."

Tzivia hung up and numbly made her way to her husband's study. "They need an extra person for the *chevra kadisha*," she told him. "Looks like I've been elected."

"You don't have to if you feel you can't handle it," he said, noting how nervous she looked.

"Yeah, but I *offered*," she sighed, trying to stop twisting the canvas cloth of her apron into knots. "And I don't want to be a wimp."

An hour later, Tzivia found herself uneasily descending the stairs of the funeral home to the mortuary, with four other women. One was the local rabbi's wife; one was her daughter's preschool teacher, and the other two she had just met. Her skin crawled; this seemed an incredibly creepy thing to be doing. But the other women seemed as matter-of-fact as if they were walking into a supermarket, albeit rather more subdued.

The dead woman appeared to be in her seventies, thin and fragile after a long illness. Tzivia was reminded of her grandmother, who had passed away a couple of years earlier. As she remembered how strongly she had wished for her own grandmother to be taken care of with dignity, she felt infused with a sudden new sense of resolve. The respectful, concentrated faces of the other women further inspired her to adopt the same attitude.

After that, Tzivia somehow naturally fell into the rhythm of the *taharah*, not repelled in the least. On the contrary, it seemed surprisingly peaceful. No one was speaking, except to read Tehillim and special prayers asking the *meisab* for forgiveness. The body was washed gently and respectfully, uncovered only enough to wash one part at a time. Then it was doused with buckets of water before being carefully dressed in spotless white *tachrichim*, and placed in its sim-



ple pine coffin. In spite of herself, Tzivia was reminded of how she used to dress her baby in a white nightshirt and softly place her in her crib.

She knew the *neshamah* of the deceased woman was supposed to be present in the room. She wasn't sure she could feel it, but the awareness lent a gravity to her actions. But most of the time she was kept busy simply trying hard to follow instructions. Before she knew it, it was over, and there they were washing their hands with a cup before climbing back into the cars to go home.

"Believe it or not, it was kind of inspiring," she was able to report to her husband later, when he woke up, hearing her enter the room at two in the morning. "It really felt like a mitzvah."

### The Jewish Way of Death

As a joker once quipped, "Nobody gets out of this life alive." But death is not generally a subject most of us care to dwell on for long.

When we reach the Yamim Noraim, the veils of denial are forcibly torn away, as we feel ourselves sitting in judgment, wondering "who will live and who will die, who by fire and who by water ..." We pray that Hashem should keep us and our loved ones alive, so that we should continue to remain together and be able to fulfill His mitzvos.

The idea of death frightens us, for it remains the Great Unknown; the idea of decay — especially one's own — is naturally repugnant to the living. We fear the suffering and indignities that often precede the act of dying, and the moment of Divine Judgment that follows. Even though we know on an intellectual level what our end must be, most of us prefer to flit through life convinced that death is something that happens only to other people.

Modern society is particularly averse to confronting death directly. Most people today pass away in hospitals, shunted away from public view, and then the body is whisked away to a funeral home. This marks a major change from preindustrial times, when family members most often died at home and were buried by their loved ones. (Journalist Jessica Mitford documented the change from simple family burials in the 1800s to extravagantly expensive funeral home affairs in her 1963 bestseller *The American Way of Death*.) The Jewish community, however, has always followed its own laws about the proper procedures to take care of the deceased. In our circles, the pillars of postmortem care are the people who comprise the *chevra kadisha*, or burial society.

Serving on a *chevra kadisha* is not for everyone, in the same way that those who faint at the sight of blood would be better

off not going to medical school. There are many who try it once and never return. Others find the experience surprisingly uplifting; they are impressed by the dignity and gentleness with which the *meis* is treated, as the body is rendered clean, whole, and properly dressed for burial. In a lovely essay entitled "Taharah," writer Varda Branfman describes the first time she entered a mortuary, and how she found herself haunted by memories of horror movies: "I could almost hear the chilling musical accompaniment as I descended into the basement." But as she began working with the *taharah* team, she found herself woven into an ambiance of peace, release, and purification.

You may not even be aware which members of your community serve on the *chevra kadisha*; it is a quiet job, and most *taharas* take place early in the morning or late at night. Most *chevra kadisha* participants work purely as volunteers. So what might lead a regular Jewish woman to throw in her lot with a *chevra kadisha*? **Mishpacha** spoke with a few of them to find out how they become involved in this most selfless of *chasadim*.

### When the Going Is Tough, the Tough Get Going

I met Mrs. Celia Rapp quite a few years ago, through another of her many *chesed* projects. She always seemed so poised and elegantly dressed that it came as a surprise to me to learn she was active in the local *chevra kadisha*. When I reconnected with her more recently, for the purposes of this article, I discovered she was one of the *chevra's* founding members. "I grew up in Washington Heights, where the shul was a very strong part of the community," Mrs. Rapp says. "Over there, when somebody passes away, all it takes is one phone call to the *chevra kadisha*, and things are taken care of."

So it came as a shock, once she was married and living in Queens, that nobody was available for her when her father was *niftar*, many years ago. "There was no *chevra kadisha* in Queens," she remembers. "I called the rabbi — it turns out he was on vacation. A friend who was a *frum* doctor came over, as well as other friends, and we all tried to arrange the funeral together on our own." The trauma left her determined to keep others from repeating her experience.

"My husband and I began organizing a *chevra kadisha* in our shul, Young Israel of Kew Garden Hills," she says. "We joined forces with the Vaad Harabonim of Queens, and ever since, my husband and I have been involved in this mitzvah."

I ask if it was difficult for her when she did her first *taharah*. "It was very, very scary," she admits. "There's this mystique about dead people, and it takes a lot of getting used to!"

"The funeral homes are generally meticulously kept up on the upstairs floors, but going into the mortuary in the basement is a completely different experience. The bodies also arrive in different states of intactness, depending on the circumstances of the death. Sometimes people die in accidents, or during surgery, and they arrive not even properly sewn up because the surgeons just gave up and left. I have learned a tremendous amount about human anatomy doing this work!"

Situations in which a body is not completely whole often lead the *chevra kadisha* team to pick up a phone and call in a *sheilah*. In fact, in the course of carrying out a *taharah*, many a question arises: What if a stain on the skin refuses to come off? What if the skin tears during cleansing? "Our *chevra kadisha* is associated with the Vaad Harabonim of Queens," says Mrs. Rapp, "and we direct our *sheilos* to Rabbi Elchonon Zohn. Rabbi Zohn also gives classes

once a month to review the halachos."

In addition to the technical challenges of *taharah*, there are the emotional challenges, particularly if the *meisah* is a child or young person. "We *chevra* members are all parents," Mrs. Rapp says, "and we acutely feel the family's pain. Sometimes, I think it's our tears that are doing the actual washing of the body."

Nevertheless, she says that the distress that is sometimes reflected in the face of the *meisah* — not to mention in the faces of the *taharah* team — seems to dissipate as the *taharah* proceeds. "Sometimes, the person's face really looks more relaxed, more at peace when we finish," she says. "As for the workers, the 'up' part for us is when we finish, and we really sense that we have accomplished a *chesed shel emes*."

### Difficult Beginnings in Chicago

Like Celia Rapp, June Goldberg first found herself involved with a *chevra kadisha* quite a few years ago in her community of East Rogers Park, Chicago, because there was such a glaring lack of services. "In 1967, my husband was working at the University of Illinois," she explains, "and one of his friends there recruited him — he needed another person for the *chevra kadisha*. I joined in 1968, when my youngest was six months old.

"At the time, there were only a few elderly people doing kosher *taharas* in Chicago. Most people were using funeral homes, which were doing everything the wrong way: open viewings, embalming, metal caskets. And since the preparations take place out of view, often the families had no idea what was really going on."

It took a European Rav, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Meisels (also known as the Veitzener Rav), *ztz"l*, to start things moving in the proper direction. "Nobody had learned the halachos of *taharah* in the schools, but even I knew when I started doing *taharas* that there were problems, especially in the area of *tzniyus*," Mrs. Goldberg said.

"Most women did not even receive a real *taharah*. They were prepared by male employees of the funeral home, by embalming, makeup, and other preparations for viewing. They were dressed in clothing, not *tachrichim*. Most of the deceased, male or female, were not prepared in the Jewish way according to halachah." This

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deplorable state of affairs sealed her resolve to work with the *chevra kadisha*, for she felt someone needed to champion the dignity of the deceased women. "I couldn't stand the idea of the lack of *tzniyus*," she says. "I felt I had to protect the women from this abuse."

With Rabbi Meisels, the Jewish Sacred Society/Chevra Kadisha of Chicago was formed. "We began with an education campaign," Mrs. Goldberg says. "We took out ads to inform people about proper Jewish burial. We began publishing a form, a sort of living

will, to help people express their desire for a religious burial in an official way." The JSS/Chevra Kadisha composed and published two booklets: "Regulations and Procedures, Including Traditional Prayers, for the Jewish Sacred Society,"

and "Basic Guide to Jewish Laws and Customs of Mourning." "The former was produced under the guidance of Rav Tzvi Hirsch Meisels, Rav Aaron Soloveitchik, and Rabbi Chaim David Regensberg," Mrs. Goldberg says. "The latter was largely based on a sefer by Rav Aharon Felder entitled *Yesodei Smochos*." (The JSS still publishes and disseminates these booklets for its own members and any interested parties.)

All beginnings are hard, and the JSS was no different. June Goldberg had young children and taught in a public school. As she happened to live near a funeral home, she found herself called on frequently for *taharas*, sometimes as often as three times a day. "Sometimes it would take us hours to get a group together," she remembers. "When we started, we only had about twenty volunteers. [Today the JSS boasts about 200 men and 200 women.] It's not easy — you're always on call, whether you're trying to finish a kugel on a Friday morning or dancing at a wedding. And as the Society became more well known, we would get calls from further afield — there were times we drove four or five hours in the snow to Indiana to do a *taharah*!"

She says it is "persistence" that has carried her through more than forty years of *chevra kadisha* work. Are there other personality traits that made her especially suited for this work? "I never felt any particular aversion to this work," she says. "I saw a need, and I knew not everyone would be able to do it.

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aspects of life; no subject was taboo. I know people who tried seven, eight times to help in the *chevra*, but they just couldn't handle it. But that was never my problem." She redirects the participants who feel unable to do *taharabs* to auxiliary *chevra kadisha* work, such as driving and making phone calls.

"There's no 'typical' *chevra kadisha* worker," Mrs. Goldberg says. "We have women with ten kids and women with only one; women who are professionals and others who are housewives; women who are very stylish and women who dress very simply. There's just no rule. What they do have in common is a desire to do *chesed*, a willingness to work on this very physical level, and a willingness to work behind the scenes without any public recognition."

She adds that American *chevra kadisha* workers tend to be younger than their counterparts several generations ago in the Old Country. "There, they used to start much later; the elderly generally did it," she says. "Maybe they were made of stronger stuff than us! We complain of backaches even though we're younger!"

Still, the gravity of the situation calls for a certain maturity. "Even when *sheilos* arise, it is imperative that there be *shalom* during a *taharah*. The *neshamah* is present," Mrs. Goldberg says. "You can never forget that you owe the *neshamah* all the peace and dignity possible."

### From One Friend to Many

Andy Nof came to *chevra kadisha* work sixteen years ago, after a friend she had been taking care of for a year and a half passed away from cancer. "I joined the *chevra* as a tribute to my friend," she says. "But everyone has a story. Many people join the *chevra kadisha* following the death of a close family member or friend."

Andy had worked in other community organizations and in nursing homes. "I was a volunteer in different capacities my whole life," she recounts. "I was already quite familiar with the human body. In fact, I find nurses make some of the best *chevra kadisha* workers."

Hence, she didn't find the mitzvah particularly difficult or abhorrent. "It's in your gut," she says. "Some people are just made for it. Others try, but they find they can't handle it. Others can handle the *taharabs* but don't realize the amount of details involved or the constraints it can put on your time."

It sounds like the toughest piece for Andy was having to run out to *taharabs* when her children were still small. Like Celia Rapp, she worked for the Chevra Kadisha of Queens/Long Island, which is the largest in the world — they do an average of seven *taharabs* a day, about 2,500 a year, across several counties. Given the size of Long Island, Andy's work often involves considerable travel time. "It's not unusual for me to come home at four or five in the morning," she says. "My children used to complain, 'You take more care of the dead than you do of the living!'"

And yet it seems that, underneath, they were proud of her. "My oldest daughter grew up very inspired by my work," Andy

says. "And now that she just got married, she plans to join me in this mitzvah [most *chevra kadishas* require their members to be married]. We have a few mother-daughter teams in our *chevra*."

How did she explain her work to her children when they were young? "I told them, 'I'm preparing people for Gan Eden,'" she says. "They were able to hear that, and take pride despite the occasional kvetching."

Andy herself clearly finds a certain beauty in the *taharah* process. "Sometimes family members come in — not the immediate family, though. The visitors aren't allowed to look, just to stand by, but they say goodbye to the *meis*. Often they will ask *mechilah*. It helps give them a sense of closure."

The team itself has its own sense of closure after each *taharah*. "We see every kind of death, some of them not so pretty," she says.



**WHAT'S INVOLVED IN A TAHARAH**

Most *taharabs* take place in the mortuary of a funeral home. Those that are Jewish are often equipped for the procedure; others are not.

*Taharah* teams are ideally comprised of four to five members. In more sizeable communities, only married women are eligible for this mitzvah, although smaller communities may need to draw on their population of singles. A new member may be the fifth partner, helping with sundry tasks as needed, or reading Tehillim. A tefillah is repeatedly said to ask *mechilah* from the *meis* for any indignities that may be suffered in the course of the *taharah*. There are special tefillos to be said as each part of the body is washed (some traditions involve covering the *meis* with a sheet the entire time; others uncover only the section being washed). If no *mikveh* is available to immerse the body, then buckets of water are poured over the body, which is either held up on boards or by two members of the *taharah* team (this is called a "stand up" *taharah*).

The body is then dressed in linen *tachrichim* that resemble the garments of the Kohanim of the Beis HaMikdash, handsewn and without pockets, since the deceased person will not be carrying anything into the Next World. The ties of the garments are knotted to resemble the letter *shin*, a reminder of one of Hashem's names. The body is placed in a plain wooden casket along with some earth from Eretz Yisrael. The entire *taharah* is performed in silence, unless instructions need to be given, and with as much respect as possible.

"We once had a woman who was found in a forest. She had no family, and had been there a few months before she was found and identified. There is such a difference between how the person looks when we start with a *taharah* and when we finish. I finish with a sense of completion, thinking to myself, 'Okay, now this person is ready to go to Gan Eden!'"

When Nellie Blumner, whom Andy calls "the matriarch of the *chevra*," passed away (Mrs. Blumner trained hundreds of women), she included a needle and thread with her *tachrichim* "just in case" they tore. "I was with her when she passed away," Andy says. "She had left detailed instructions on how she wanted to be taken care of, and she had prepared *tachrichim* for herself and her husband, made in the Breuer's tradition, in advance." Knowing exactly what was in store, she made sure to prepare everything perfectly.

But there isn't usually a needle and thread in the *tachrichim* kit, and sometimes they do tear. "That's an example of one of the many small miracles that occur in the course of doing this work," Andy says. "More than once, when I've had to repair a tear, all of a sudden I find a needle and thread in the box waiting for me. It really makes you feel that Hashem is helping."

### "The Eibishter Is With Us"

Mrs. Cynthia Berns, who has worked with the *chevra kadisha* of Crown Heights for many years and is the group's cocoordinator, feels that *siyata d'Shmayta* is with her every step of the way. "If you think you can do it, Hashem will help you. I am constantly asking Him for help."

She claims the advances of medical science often work to make her job more difficult. "Sometimes tubes are left in the body, which

we can't take out without causing a lot of bleeding," she says. "But we're not allowed to leave metal in the body, so we have to try and take out any pieces that contain metal." Many medical *sheilos* arise because of the state the hospitals leave the body in; for example, an older person's skin may be so delicate it tears from the washing.

Mrs. Berns says customs vary slightly among communities. "Lubavitch *tachrichim* are slightly different," she says. "Also, whether or not parts of the body are uncovered during the *taharah* or a sheet covers the body the entire time is also a matter of *minhag*."

While this mitzvah, perhaps more than any other, is pure, disinterested *chesed*, Mrs. Berns says a fulfilling offshoot of her work are the very special bonds she has developed with the other ladies in the *chevra*. "We feel a camaraderie that goes beyond friendship," she says. "We see so many *yissurim* together, and work together on so much *chesed*. It has left us with a very deep connection."

She also derives satisfaction simply from knowing she has done an important job. "People should try to do it," she advises. "When you finish, you have such a tremendous sense of having done a *chesed*."

The comparison has often been made between a deceased person and a baby. Neither one is capable of doing anything to care for himself, and that helplessness necessarily pulls forth our deepest reserves of compassion — when we give to them, we expect nothing in return. In the same way that mothers bring children into the world and help them integrate into human society, the Jewish *nshei chayil* who take care of the deceased help ease them out of This World and gently transition them into the Next. Seen in this light, the scary memories from horror movies somehow fade away. All that is left is human care and the true sense of "rest in peace." ■

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