

## What Happens When We Die?

Cremation in the Jewish community is growing at disturbing rates, with advertisements appearing in Jewish newspapers promoting it as a legitimate post-death option, including in some cases, shockingly, endorsements by rabbis. The prohibitive cost of traditional burial is often given as a reason for this trend, but it undoubtedly is the result of ignorance as well.

It is not just the secular and unaffiliated that are uneducated about the Jewish approach to death and dying. Most people don't learn about death until they encounter it with the loss of a family member or good friend. Questions like what happens at death, where does the soul go, how do we prepare the body, and what is the afterlife like remain mysterious and unknown. Historically the Chevra Kadisha has always been a modest society who does its work without attention, fanfare or even credit. Those that serve on it do so privately and quietly. But that doesn't mean that the work it does or the why and how it does it should remain a secret.

Educating about the Jewish view of death doesn't only prepare people and bring comfort and solace in a painful time that everyone will inevitably face, but in my experience it also inspires living a more meaningful and rich life.

This week, to the great credit of Rabbi Jonathan Kroll, Head of School, senior girls at Weinbaum Yeshiva High School [began an eight-session course](#) titled "The Final Journey: How Judaism Dignifies the Passage." This pioneering project, a brainchild of Rochel Berman, author of "[Dignity Beyond Death: The Jewish Preparation for Burial](#)," is designed to expose students to both the philosophy of what happens at death as well as the practical procedures of the Chevra Kadisha. The course includes a field trip to a funeral home to see the tahara room, tachrichin, and a halachikly appropriate casket.

I had the privilege of teaching the introductory class, in which I attempted to put death in the context of life. At the core of every answer to the myriad of questions revolving around death is the following critical statement: We don't have a soul; we are a soul. A lifetime of caring for our bodies, pampering ourselves, and seeking physical pleasure often leaves us confused and with the mistaken notion that we are a body and we have a soul. Judaism teaches that in fact, it is the opposite.

Our soul has existed since creation itself and as an extension and expression of the Almighty, it will continue to exist eternally. Our soul is housed in a vessel called the body for what in the span of eternity is a very short period of time: seventy, eighty, or even one hundred and twenty years. Our rabbis don't refer to what happens at the end of life as death. They call it *yetzias ha'neshama*, the extraction of the soul from the body because in truth people don't die, bodies die and people aren't buried, bodies are buried.

How does the soul experience its transition from the body? Is it painful or pleasurable? The answer is it depends on how that soul lived life when it was housed in the body. The righteous person who throughout his or her life always identified themselves as a soul that had a body and while caring about the body truly invested in nourishing and nurturing the soul, experiences its extraction as a moment of bliss and great joy. The righteous see the body as a burden, a source of temptation and distraction that holds back the soul. Of course they recognize that only with the body can the soul express free will and therefore shape and mold it. They therefore don't pray for death or welcome it.

However, when it happens, our greatest leaders are described as experiencing a kiss of death, a moment of bliss, when their soul was liberated from the shackles of the body. Rav Nachman of Breslov wrote (*Sichos Ha'Ran* #179), "I can't wait to divest myself of this garment that is my body..." To the righteous, removing the body from the soul is as painless and indeed pleasurable as taking off one's suit and tie at the end of a difficult day.

The average person who identified with his or her body throughout life and who invested in nurturing and nourishing

the body while neglecting the soul, experiences its extraction very differently. Our tradition teaches that the soul hovers over the body when it is first removed, pained by the startling realization that the body they looked at in the mirror and saw as themselves all those years was only a vessel, a vehicle for the soul. The soul is confused and anxious by the sudden awareness that in fact, we are a soul and only had a body, not the other way around.

The primary responsibility of the Chevra Kadisha is to comfort that soul through its journey and transition. The Shulchan Aruch (Y.D. 33) tells us that it is forbidden to leave a dying person alone. The least we can do is provide that soul with companionship and love during its difficult time. We have a shomer with that soul all the way until the body is buried at which time the soul can begin to ascend on high.

If the body is just a temporary vessel, a source of ephemeral pleasure, why do we treat it with such respect, dignity and affection before placing it in the ground? If what matters is the soul, why not discard the body by any means? The soul of the average person which sees itself as inextricably connected to the body endures pain by the separation. After all, they lived together for a lifetime, engaged the world as one, made choices and experienced events, people and places together.

Shlomo Ha'Melech taught (Kohelles 12:7) "The dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit returns to God Who gave it." The soul finds solace and returns to God only after seeing its body return to the earth with dignity and respect. Everything about the tahara, the burial preparation, is designed to allow the soul to observe us treat its formal body with great respect. We carefully wash the body from head to toe, we clean under the fingernails, in the ears, and we remove all tubes, lines and catheters. We purify the body by immersing it in a mikvah or pouring 9 kabim of water of it. And then we dress the body in shrouds that are both simple and majestic. We don't talk about extraneous things in the *tahara* room, we have a candle lit to represent the *neschama*, and we don't pass things over the body treating it like an object or piece of furniture.

When performing a *tahara* there is an acute awareness that the *neschama* of the individual is palpably present in the room, watching, observing and grieving. I have walked away from every *tahara* I have been privileged to participate in with a greater consciousness of my soul, a greater drive to nourish it, and a renewed mindfulness that in fact, I don't have a soul; I am a soul that has a body.

Imagine the pain of the soul that, rather than witness its body treated with love, affection and dignity, sees it incinerated and cremated into a pile of ash. From our perspective cremation may not seem that different than placing a body in the ground, but from the perspective of the soul in the world of truth, it can be the difference between comfort and grief, consolation or profound pain.

I would like to believe that Hashem Has a way of providing comfort for those that choose cremation or a mausoleum rather than traditional burial out of a lack of Jewish education or experience. However, it is our responsibility to educate as widely as possible on the beauty and deep meaning of the authentic Jewish view of death and mourning.

I concluded my class by encouraging the students to get involved in the holy work of the Chevra Kadisha. There are few things more satisfying and fulfilling than participating in *chesed shel emes*, lovingness that cannot be repaid. Contact with death inspires greater meaning in life and provides contact with our souls in a way few other things can. There are so many ways to get involved not only in the tahara room, but serving as shomrim, setting up shiva homes, helping make shiva minyanim, stocking supplies, making meals and more.

I am grateful to Rochel Berman and Weinbaum Yeshiva High School for piloting this program and I hope it will be emulated all over, not only for students but adults as well.

**To see a greater discussion with further sources on this subject, [please see here](#).**

