Hevra Kadisha: The Final Mitzvah

BY RABBI MEL GLAZER

Full disclosure: The first time I ever touched a dead body was shortly after I arrived at my first pulpit, Congregation Ahavas Israel in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in the fall of 1976. One night the chairman of the congregation's *hevra kadisha*, or burial society, called me. "Rabbi, someone has just died. Can you meet me in the morning at the funeral home for *tahara*?" he said. (He was asking me to help prepare the body for burial.) I responded, "Sorry, but I don't do that." He answered, "There is no one else." So I went. And that was the beginning of my fascination with the hevra kadisha and the ways we Jews approach death.

I had learned about the hevra kadisha in rabbinical school, but I never thought that it was for me, for the same reason I never thought that becoming a mohel or a shochet was for me. Who needs to touch dead bodies? They are intimidating, even scary. But little did I know then that the hevra kadisha – which means "holy society" – would turn out to be my passion for the next 30 years, and counting.

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Hevrai kadisha are a relatively modern institution; the first ones were organized in Spain and in Germany in the 14th century. The first community hevra kadisha began in Prague in 1564. Unlike the earlier groups, which served only their own members, the new group's services were available to all members of the Jewish community.

Today, many communities have their own hevrai kadisha. Although most large cities in North America have a community hevra kadisha sponsored and organized by a local funeral home that caters to the needs of the entire Jewish community, sometimes the hevra kadisha is sponsored by a single synagogue, and its services are available only to members of that synagogue. More and more Conservative congregations are now creating their own hevrai kadisha, and this is certainly to be encouraged.

Usually we members of the hevra kadisha gather at the funeral home the evening before a funeral. We prepare ourselves for our holy task with words of prayer, then together we enter the tahara room. (Tahara means purification, and that is what we are there to do.) Men prepare men, and women prepare women.

Before we uncover the *met*, the dead person, we ask his or her forgiveness for any indignity that might occur accidentally. We then wash the entire body twice, first for physical cleanliness, then for spiritual purity. This is the final journey; we must make sure he or she is well prepared.

After drying the body, we now dress it in *tachrichim*, a simple white linen shroud. Every Jew prepared by the hevra kadisha is buried the same way now, but that has not always been so. In ancient times, the rich were treated much better than the poor, and in response the rabbis established rituals that resonated loudly with the belief that every human being deserves equal treatment from birth through burial. This notion of democracy in death is illustrated best by the following quotation from the Talmud, Moed Katan 27 a-b: "Formerly, they used to bring food to the house of mourning: the rich in baskets of gold and silver; the poor in baskets of willow twigs. The poor felt ashamed. Therefore, a law was established that all should use baskets of willow twigs. Formerly, they used to bring out the deceased for burial: the rich on a tall state bed, ornamented and covered with rich coverlets; the poor on a plain bier. The poor felt ashamed. Therefore, a law was established that all should be brought out on a plain bier.... Formerly, the expense of the burial was harder to bear by the family than the death itself, so that sometimes they fled to escape the expense. This was so until Rabban Gamliel insisted that he be buried in a plain linen shroud instead of costly garments. And since then we follow the principle of burial in a simple manner."

After the met is dressed in tachrichim, the members of the hevra lovingly carry the body over to the *aron*, the coffin, and place it inside. A man is buried in his own tallit, with one of the tzitzit cut off and placed beneath the pillow; a small bag of earth from Israel is place beneath the pillows of both men and women as a symbol of the connection every Jew has to the land of Israel. The aron is closed, not to be reopened. Once again, members ask for forgiveness from the met, and then they return home.

We do not leave the dead unattended; someone stays with the body from the time of death till burial. It is an additional mitzvah for members of the hevra to sit with the met all night before the funeral. This is usually done in three-hour shifts, and there is always devotional material to read. The next day is the funeral, and the hevra kadisha's job is done.

There are two overriding principles that

govern Jewish traditions of mourning: respect for the dead *(k'vod ha-met)* and respect for the living *(k'vod ha-chai)*. Both before and after death, these principles offer both an overview and a theological lens through which details can be understood.

Jewish tradition is firm in its respect for the dead. The human body is God's gift to us and must be treated with dignity at all times, even after the soul has departed. After death, the body is handled respectfully because it is the repository of the soul. Nothing may be done to the body, no procedure may be performed that disfigures it in any way, except under the most controlled of circumstances. Therefore, autopsies are for the most part strictly prohibited by Jewish law, unless civil law dictates. But if death were caused by a rare disease, Jewish law requires an autopsy, to help save the life of the next person who might be afflicted by that disease.

For the same reason, a Jew is prohibited from donating his or her entire body to medical science, because it is unavoidable that the body will be mutilated in a medical school setting. Donating individual organs, however, such as corneas, hearts, and livers, is halachically approved. Saving a human life is the absolutely highest priority in Jewish tradition. Donating organs is admired as a great act of mercy and compassion for God's creatures.

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I have been a devoted member of many hevrai kadisha and I have had the honor of creating three synagogue hevrai kadisha. I have learned much about life and death; about how we reach upward in holiness each time we participate in a tahara, about how ordinary people like you and me can perform extraordinary acts of caring and kindness. The hevra kadisha has been my teacher in many ways.

It provides an echo of God's presence and gives us the opportunity to imitate the works of God. As God buries the dead, so we bury the dead. As God consoles the emotionally and spiritually troubled or feeds the hungry or clothes the naked, so must we. As God acts with justice and compassion, so do we. As God cares for us, so we care for others, even after their lives in this world have come to an end. Indeed, by doing so, we are reminding ourselves that when our own time comes, God, perhaps in the form of a future hevra kadisha, will continue to care for us.

When I finish preparing a body and I leave the funeral home, I am filled with gratitude. It is better that I should be alive, able to prepare yet another Jew to meet his or her maker, than someone else should be standing over me preparing my body. Once more I stand in the presence of death and once more I am privileged to walk away, still alive, still able to serve God and God's creations.

It is an echo of pure compassion. This aspect of hevra kadisha is perhaps the most appealing to its members. In the outside world, we do almost everything expecting some reward. The notion of reciprocity is a normative part of our society. How refreshing it is be with volunteers who are passionate about being able to give freely of themselves to someone else, simply because that is the tradition of our people. Would that the rest of our society could emulate their example! The mitzvah itself is its compensation. We serve with no possibility or expectation of money or public accolades. We serve on the hevra kadisha only to prepare our fellow Jews for what may be their entrance into God's very Presence.

"If you do me a favor after my death, that is called hesed shel emet," we learn in Genesis Rabba 96:5. *Hesed shel emet* is any act that is done for someone after his or her death; there is purity of motivation and no expectation of reward.

Hesed means an act of compassion, and emet means truth. A hesed shel emet act is the ultimate pure and true act of compassion. (Understood slightly differently, it also could mean an act done for the sake of God, the ultimate source of truth.) This is the altruistic act performed by members of a hevra kadisha.

Many hevra volunteers say that although they first joined because they were asked do so, they remain because they feel that they are carrying on an ancient tradition. Although not all hevra kadisha members understand all the meanings or ramifications of what they do, nonetheless they are there for the sake of the tradition, which they believe in and want to preserve. "This is how we Jews do it" is a constant refrain. Even we Jews who do not know a word of Hebrew, or keep Shabbat, or eat only kosher food, or pray daily. Even we Jews who may not even believe in God. This is a mitzvah for all Jews.

Many hevra members feel that the respect for the human body evident in tahara is the most moving aspect of the process. Women compare tahara with caring for an infant. The mothering instinct is strong among women, and the act of performing tahara allowed some to overcome their fears of handling the dead.

It is perfectly normal to feel a bit queasy and uncomfortable about handling a dead body. Many people feel strongly that they can't do it. I know that feeling, I felt the same way 30 years ago. Please know that this unease is often quickly overcome when we remind ourselves why we are there. During your first tahara, when you can act as an assistant standing away from the body, you might begin to feel more comfortable. If so, you can participate fully next time. And if not, there will be many other ways for you to be involved in hevra kadisha activities. When you let the mitzvah speak to your heart, your fear will soon disappear.

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I am pleased to see our Conservative congregations begin to reclaim hevrai kadisha for ourselves. Conservative Jews attend the annual conferences of *Kavod V'Nichum* (Honor and Comfort), the new national organization that deals with issues surrounding death and burial. At my recent seminar on hevrai kadisha at United Synagogue's convention, I heard from congregations from across North America that wanted to explore the possibility of starting their own hevrai kadisha. And that can happen!

I have discovered time and time again that many synagogue members who do not attend services or participate in other shul programs regularly chose to serve on the hevra kadisha. There is a hunger for spirituality in our movement that cannot always be met in our day-to-day activities. The hevra kadisha touches the very edge of life. It offers us not only a glimpse of death but also an echo of eternity.

Serving on a hevra kadisha has become one of my greatest privileges. I invite you to share the privilege and the mitzvah. From death comes life.

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