In the 1980s, in my late twenties, I was studying in a yeshiva for young women who had no religious education. Newly arrived in Israel, I was often invited to various homes for Shabbat meals. I was the same age as many of my hosts—even though they already had four or five children. They knew how to cook and serve and be gracious. I would eat an immense quantity of food and just when I thought dessert would be served, they would bring out another course. Why were they being so nice?

In my parents’ home, we had guests twice a year. Sally and David and their son, Tommy, would join us for Passover and Thanksgiving: For both holidays, my mother threw an enormous turkey in the oven and my grandmother made chicken soup. Sally brought a salad with bottled dressing.

To my surprise, in Israel I soon got engaged to a yeshiva student and was becoming religiously observant. Today, after 25 years of experience, I can host 20 people without flinching. I make soup stock and grill eggplant and roast peppers and garlic. I can prepare Moroccan fish and pesto and salsa verde and Chicken Marbella and homemade lime sorbet.

Yet I have not learned to be gracious. For example, one Shabbat last July, we had vegetarian guests. No big deal; I made extra side dishes.

A young blond woman wearing a flowing skirt arrived for dinner and handed me a package of sprouts. “They were going bad,” she said. Her bald husband handed me a halla. It was so heavy—not to mention ugly and misshapen—it almost fell from my hands. “She’s allergic to eggs,” he explained.

As I seethed, my husband, good soul that he is, made a hamotzi on the rock-hard offering and passed it around to the 18 guests at the table.

Next, the woman pulled a small bowl out of her hemp bag: It was dark green and wormy looking. “This is so healthy for you,” she said. I passed it around after sampling the bitter mix.

After the meal, we retired to the living room. The blond said, “I can’t sit in this room. I can’t sit in air conditioning.”

“Is it too cold for you? I can bring you a wrap,” I offered.

“No, it’s not that,” she said. “I don’t believe in air conditioning.”

Israel was going through a sharav, a desert heat wave, and she didn’t believe in air conditioning.

“It makes a hole in the ozone layer.”

The next day, when the couple came for lunch proffering another loaf of halla, I said, “We are not using that for the motzi.”

This is my confession, but also an admonition. A host has a job, but so does the guest: not to ask for more than the host can provide. I would like to be more environmentally responsible, too, but I am thrilled to have air conditioning after living without it in the Israeli desert for 12 years.

I thought back to forefather Abraham, who invited three travelers to stop at his tent. He says, “And I will fetch a morsel of bread and satiate your heart…” (Genesis 18:5), but makes a huge meal for them despite having just undergone a brit mila at age 99. Sarah helps cook the meal, but I can see her fuming: Why why why?

And yet, after that meal the 90-year-old Sarah is told that she will be blessed with a miracle—a baby boy.

I lost my patience because I had worked hard to prepare a beautiful meal and my guest did not appreciate it. Still, she gave me the opportunity to become like Abraham, to give without expectation of receiving.

Thanks for that, blondie. Next time, I won’t let a guest unsettle me. I will be courteous (even when she is clueless). I will appreciate that she may be heaven sent.
Great writers count themselves successful, and their readers rejoice, if they can manage to create a world in a volume. In Binocular Vision (Lookout Books), Edith Pearlman creates not a single world but 34. The only wonder, as author Ann Patchett notes in the introduction to this masterful collection of short stories, is that Pearlman is not better known. Famous or not, she is the recipient of the 2012 Harold U. Ribalow Prize, the literary award administered by Hadassah Magazine.

IN THE STORY EXCERPTED HERE, Jay, an aging Jewish man from suburban Boston, returns from his grandson’s wedding in Tokyo and decides to study Japanese, the better to communicate with the new branch of his family. For two years, Jay makes steady progress with engaging teachers, but in his third year he encounters a teacher with a different set of qualities and a new world of surprises.

2012 Harold U. Ribalow Prize Winner
Binocular Vision: New & Selected Stories by Edith Pearlman

Relic and Type

Jay’s grandson—his only child’s only child—married a young woman born in Kyoto. Mika had an enchanting chin, like a little teaspoon. She wore sweet pastel suits with bits of lace creeping out of their Vs. Who would believe that she spent her days making money from money? The young couple occupied an apartment in Tokyo where appliances folded up to fit inside other appliances. Woody, too, was an investment analyst.

“I think I’ll take up Japanese,” Jay told his daughter on the flight home from the wedding. She looked at him. At your age!—but she didn’t say that. She was as tactful as his late wife, Jay thought, his eyes briefly stinging: Wellesley girls both. His daughter also didn’t point out that there was no need for so heroic an effort—the young couple was fluently bilingual, and if they had children the hybrids would be brought up bilingual, too; and anyway, how often would Jay lay eyes on those children? She and her husband were hale enough to make the exhausting trip from Godolphin to Tokyo and back two or three times a year. Not Jay. Nor did his daughter mention that language study required an unimpaired memory. At seventy-five, Jay had difficulty recalling the names of traded Red Sox players, and it was a good thing that name tags had been provided to the members of his Class for their fiftieth reunion. At the Night at Pops the lyrics to “Fair Harvard” had also been handed out, another aid to recollection. The Class stood and sang:

O Relic and Type of our ancestors’ worth,
That hast long kept their memory warm,
First flow’r of their wilderness! Star of their night!
Calm rising thro’ change and thro’ storm.

Jay still had a respectable baritone. Sonny Fessel, his old roommate, who had made a fortune in rhinoplasty, could barely manage a croak. But Jay, despite his strong voice, wasn’t altogether well. He suffered from a blood disorder. The disease was indolent now, but who knew what it had in mind. And his pressure was high.

The ivory hands of the stewardess removed his tray. “I’m looking for something to do,” he explained to his daughter. He was retired from a career as an actuary that had ended with an honorable stint as state insurance commissioner (Woody had inherited Jay’s skill with numbers; “numeracy,” they called it these days). He’d given up his weekly squash game when the club adopted the new, soft ball and enlarged the old courts. His town, Godolphin, a leafy wedge of Boston, was governed by a town meeting—a glorious circus—but its week-long sessions occurred only twice a year. The rituals of Judaism left him cold. His immigrant grandfather wrapped in a tallith was a sentimental memory, not a model. His father’s religious involvement had begun and ended with Brotherhood breakfasts, and Jay himself had quit Sunday school the day after his bar

ILLUSTRATIONS BY KOREN SHADMI

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mitzvah. But now...he was dawdling through his days, his appetite flat, his blood thin. The study of anything might be a tonic.

Once back home he investigated workshops for elders at Godolphin High School. Bookbinding? Stained glass? He considered the nonsectarian courses given at the temple: Is Zionism Dead? maybe, or Great Jewish Women, taught by the rabbi herself, a blonde with an old-fashioned pageboy haircut. But Japanese I, offered at the Godolphin Language Center, trumped Theodor Herzl and Rosa Luxemburg. When Jay read the course description he breathed again the scent and heard the sounds of his recent week in Japan—blossoming, rustling trees; glowing incense sticks at noisy city shrines; a soupy smell at a particular noodle shop where “The Girl From Ipanema” had been playing on a radio next to the register. He remembered fabrics, too. On the Philosopher’s Walk, in Kyoto, he had encountered a group of uniformed children who did not separate to let him pass but instead surrounded him, engulfed him in their soft navy serge. He almost hadn’t recognized her when the family met in a restaurant a few days later—she was wearing her everyday pants and turtleneck then. Her English was serviceable. “Hoody is gentle and kind,” she said to Jay. We are so pleased, she implied.

“Mika is a shaineh maideleh,” he said, dredging up two of his fifty Yiddish words. He grinned—an air of mischief had always endeared him to women. “A lovely girl,” he said, though he failed to tell her he was translating. She would think her hard-won English defective; oh well.

The austere beauty of the teacher of Japanese I eclipsed Mika’s prettiness as the sun the moon. Nakabuta-sensei remained standing for the entire ninety minutes of the first weekly class. Twelve pupils around a table stared up at her. The classroom in this converted hilltop mansion looked out across the river at Cambridge, at the brick Houses of Harvard, with their bell towers. The leftmost House had sheltered Jay and Sonny Fesssel. “Japanese grammar,” Nakabuta told them in her rich, unaccented English, “will seem at first incomprehensible. Please forget your attachment to plurals. Please divorce yourself from pronouns. Try to float like a lotus on our pond of suggestion and indirectness.”

A few cowed pupils dropped out early in the semester. Those who hung on were businessmen or scientists or programmers whose work took them frequently to Japan, or they were young people who had lived for a while in the country and could conduct a slangy conversation. Jay was a category unto himself: the tall old man with a few streaks of red in his white hair, stains refusing to fade; the codger who hoped to converse with descendants as yet unconceived.

In July the young couple came to Godolphin to visit Jay’s daughter and son-in-law. And Jay, too, of course. Jay told Mika, in Japanese, that warm weather had arrived early in Massachusetts next spring; no, last spring; no, this spring. The tomatoes were delicious, weren’t they. He inquired after her father and mother and grandmother, chichi and haba and haba, remembering too late that these appellations were overfamiliar. She replied that her family’s health was good, thanks, and she was sorry to see he was using a cane. She spoke in considerably slow Japanese. Ah, just his arthritis attacking, he explained; flaring up was the phrase he would have preferred, but you said the words you knew, which were not always the ones you meant.

The second year, Sugiyama-sensei, small and plain, introduced the class to the passive mood, which sometimes implied reluctance and sometimes even exploitation. She gave vocabulary quizzes every week, and taught the students to count strokes when they were learning to write kanji—like slaves counting lashes, Jay thought. She counseled them to practice the ideograms without paper and pencil, to limn the things with their fingertips on any convenient surface.

During that summer’s visit Jay took the pregnant Mika for several walks around Godolphin. His arthritis was better and he didn’t need the cane. He showed her the apartment building he’d grown up in, the park he’d played ball in, the high school he’d graduated from—all outwardly unchanged through the years. The delt even is still doing business, he reported, his syntax correct in Japanese and faithful to Yiddish, too. The population was not so diverse when I was a boy, he managed to say, though the
I took a deep breath and joined the three women in the refrigerated room. Within lay two meisim, newly deceased and covered with long sheets. One of them was Rachel. I recognized her bulky shape from visiting her during her months of decline. Everything else faded into the background. I followed nervously as Naama, Ruth and Malka wheeled Rachel into the adjoining preparation room. The four of us had come together that Wednesday morning to fulfill a special mitzva—a tahara, purification, helping ready a Jewish body for burial.

For several years I had been thinking about taking part in the mitzva. I was both touched and intrigued when I had heard about it some 30 years ago. At that time, however, I was focused on pregnancies and nursing—busy with children and their constant needs and demands. I had been nurturing life, not yet physically or emotionally ready to deal with its end.

Now, in my fifties and with my children out of the house, I felt ready, and even obligated, to join the burial committee. Obligated because purifying a meis is a sacred custom, performed with care by Jews all over the world. Some unknown tahara team had performed this task for my grandparents and in-laws, alehem ba-shalom, may they rest in peace. In our community in Cincinnati, we all share the joys and responsibilities of Torah life. Every set of willing hands counts.

Alehem ba-shalom. According to Jewish law and tradition, the living help prepare a soul for the world to come by cleansing its earthly home—the body—before its sojourn through specific rituals: washing the body, dressing the body in white shrouds and prayer.

These rituals are performed with the utmost dignity, privacy and respect. Rather than creating an attractive façade for the funeral, the rituals focus on purity and simplicity, each step suffused with meaning.

Still, could I do it? Helping the dead is called besed shel emes—true kindness: You give with no possibility of being paid back. To be honest, I was not there just for altruistic reasons, beautiful and compelling as they were. I wanted to expand my spiritual horizons.

Maybe I would even become a better wife and mother, waste less energy on trivialities and develop a greater appreciation for the gift of life. Perhaps this encounter with mortality would make me a more sensitive artist and writer.

As a teenager, I had explored New Age philosophies, trying to quench an inner thirst. Today, I am a rabbi’s wife and a Judaic studies teacher busy...