

## Family Matters

# Pure and Prosaic

*According to Jewish tradition, the task of the living is to prepare a soul for the world to come by cleansing its earthly home—the body—before its sojourn.*

By **Miriam Karp**

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.

**N**OW, 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, *alei hem ha-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.

*Alei hem ha-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 *hesed 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

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mining the treasures of Jewish thought and mysticism. But sometimes I still long for those intense experiences, albeit in a Jewish way.

The burial committee is traditionally called the *hevra kadisha*, holy society. With a name like that, I had thought, they must be privy to some deep, mysterious truths.

**T**HE TAHARA WAS, LIKE MOST OF Jewish life, where the search for rarified spirituality never turns out as expected.

Was it profound, quiet, hushed, *spiritual*? Yes—and no.

The *tahara* was surprisingly prosaic, earthy, even ordinary. Naama, the group leader, a brisk and efficient woman, dispelled my initial discomfort by referring to Rachel as “her.”

“Move her over here,” she instructed. “Hold up her head.”

There was nothing macabre about the scene, though my subconscious offered up images from different horror films, accompanied by a Gothic organ’s pitched tone. We were about to help a real woman. We had a job to do.

I watched my experienced partners’ faces for cues in this new universe, and I felt both humbled and relieved: Humbled by their ability to quickly assess the situation and figure out the way to proceed with earnest respect for the deceased; relieved to see signs of compassion, even distress, at some of the bodily marks of the suffering Rachel had endured over these last few months. My initial glance at Rachel’s body was difficult. It was hard for them, too, but they each took a breath and continued.

The first touch was even more difficult. The other women started washing Rachel with washcloths, all the while keeping her face and body covered as much as was possible, respecting her privacy.

Initially I stood back, watching

them work with hands folded. I knew that it would be best for me to jump right in, so as they turned Rachel over to wash her back, I reached out tentatively and held her hand to prevent it from flopping over.

The words dead weight and rigor mortis echoed through my mind. Rachel’s hand was cold, heavy and stiff. I had imagined an appendage

with the pulse of life flowing through it. This was different.

I helped more and more, following my friends’ spoken guidance. We gently washed her entire body—a body that had lived and loved and borne children. It was somehow similar to bathing an infant, with its total dependence, as we hovered protectively around.

Our 19th Year!



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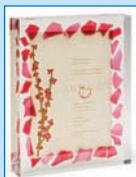
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Trying to talk only as necessary, we gave each other instructions in subdued voices. The quiet was punctuated by coughs, sighs, the sound of water pouring into containers and the snap of latex gloves.

Anything that came between Rachel's body and the purifying water had to be removed.

We took off bandages and removed her frosted pink nail polish. We were stripping away her earthly life. I imagined a kind nurse or grandchild sitting patiently with Rachel and applying the colored lacquer to her worn, fading hand.

That is all behind her now.

In an unbroken sequence, Naama, Ruth and Malka spilled water from the mikve over Rachel. "Tahara hee. She is pure," they intoned over and over in a rhythmic chant—asserting, defining. The sound of water splashing against the metal table accented their words.

Pausing at several points, Naama murmured prayers and psalms, the familiar sounds of the ancient Hebrew washing over us. We listened, understanding the intent, even if we could not translate each word. Our wishes for this woman cushioned and cloaked her.

Then, together we gently patted her dry. Ruth brushed her hair, and I watched as the wet gray and white strands sprang into soft, fine curls.

Working together, we dressed Rachel in *takbrikhim*, simple white linen garments: tunic, pants, gown

where she would wait for the next step of her voyage.

We walked out of that quiet, win-

## Helping the dead is called *hesed shel emet*—true kindness: You give with no possibility of being paid back.

and bonnet—each put on and tied in a special way.

We gently lowered her into the unadorned wood casket. Fulfilling the declaration in Genesis 3:19, From the dust you came, to the dust you shall return, holes are drilled into the bottom of the casket, allowing the body contact with the dust of the earth.

Naama placed a shard of pottery on each of Rachel's eyes and on her mouth, symbolizing human frailty. Golden sand from Israel was lightly sprinkled over her. We covered Rachel's face with a cloth and asked her forgiveness for any rough or disrespectful handling. We wished her a speedy journey to *olam ha-ba*—the world to come.

Lifting the heavy casket cover and positioning it onto its fastening pegs felt like an act of finality. Ruth opened the door to the refrigerated room.

The whoosh and blast of cold air was startling, breaking the meditative mood. We wheeled Rachel inside,

dowless room into the world of daily responsibilities and busy schedules. After we collected our purses and cell phones, we stepped out into the sunny summer daylight.

INITIALLY, THE CASUAL CHATTER IN the car on the drive back home was strange after the intensity of the *tahara*. But I soon relaxed, realizing that the conversation offered a soothing transition. Easing back to daily reality, I even drew a blank at first when Malka asked me, "So, how was it?"

"It was O.K.," I said with a quiet smile, downplaying both my relief that it was over and my sense of accomplishment.

I felt buoyed throughout the day. Speaking on the phone with my daughter, a new mother, I told her, "I did my first *tahara*."

She gasped. "Really?"

Rachel's face flittered though my mind throughout the rest of the day. It was not morbid. Just the image of a friend I was glad to have helped.

Early Thursday, I awoke and again thought about her. I recited the *Modeh Ani*, a short prayer expressing thanks for the new day. No rote recital this time; I really felt it.

Rachel was in her place in God's universe—stripped to her essence and purified of her worldly concerns. And I was thankful to be in mine: unfinished business, chaos, imperfection and all. **H**

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