

The Jewish Response to Death: Care, Dignity & Comfort
Yom Kippur 5769
Rabbi Francine Roston
Congregation Beth El
South Orange, NJ

Yom Kippur is a dress rehearsal for death, a preparation for death, a mini-death experience. Think about it—we are not supposed to satisfy any of our physical needs, we do not eat, we do not drink, we do not have sexual relations. We are not supposed to bathe, brush our teeth, or shave. What are we supposed to do?!—focus on our spirit, pray and confess, meditate and study. We wear white garments to represent purity, some wear kittels which are worn at various life cycle events including our death. As we negate the physicality of our lives, we ponder the nature of life and death, we consider the year past and those who have died, and as we pray the U'netaneh Tokef prayer, we ask ourselves who will live and will die in the upcoming year. We can't help but think of ourselves, our own health, the risks we take in our lives and the questions we have about our own future.

Why do we do this? To give us a better perspective on our lives and also a better perspective on death. Death is something to be feared by many of us and yet our tradition gives us this experience for a reason. As Jews we do not deny death, cover it up, put off dealing with its reality until the moment is near. We ponder death, and in so doing remember the most important things in our lives. We experience death, and in so doing experiment with letting go and giving ourselves over to some greater purpose.

Dorothy Thompson writes: “Anything that reminds us of the inescapable fact that we are to die seems morbid to us. Yet without the serene acceptance of death as inexorable we lose all the magic and wonder of life and live in constant unconscious fear. For only when one is no longer afraid to die is one no longer afraid at all. And only when we are no longer afraid do we begin to live in every experience, painful or joyous; to live in gratitude for every moment, to live abundantly.”

Most of us fear death and want nothing to do with any thing related to death. We don't like to talk about people dying, we certainly don't want to see people dying and we don't want to be near someone who has died. Yet, the experience of Yom Kippur challenges us. *What are we afraid of?* Many of us are afraid to die because we are afraid to be alone, we are afraid of what will happen to us in death and after death, and we are afraid for our loved ones whom we leave behind.

The Jewish traditions of honoring the dead and caring for the mourner speak to and answer our fears. Traditionally, in every Jewish community, there is a *chevra kadisha*, or a sacred society, whose mission is to care for the dead and comfort the mourner. There is no greater mitzvah than to perform the duties of the *chevra kadisha*, they are mitzvot done with no anticipation of reward or thanks and are referred to as *chesed shel emet*, true acts of loving kindness. We are beginning to form a *chevra kadisha* here at Beth El and I hope you will consider volunteering your time and energy to this sacred task.

One of the concepts in Judaism which makes me most proud is our belief in the sanctity of each and every individual. We are all equalized in life *and death* because we are all created in the image of God, bearing a divine spirit. In life this concept reminds us to respect each and every individual no matter who they are, where they come from, what candidate they are voting for...

In Jewish tradition, each and every individual is united in his divine qualities and in his mortality. We all will die and we are each to be treated with care and respect. Whether rich or poor, known or unknown, no matter what we did in life, in death we are all treated with the dignity due a creature of God. These beliefs have been translated into practice regarding how a person is to be cared for when they die, what they are buried in and how they are mourned. There is one standard that connects and equalizes us all.

In a moving passage from the Talmud (Moed Katan 27b), the rabbis tell us that the expense of burial had become so excessive that the burial fell harder on the next of kin than his own death. Frequently, the dead man's next of kin would abandon the deceased and flee town, embarrassed at his inability to care for his loved one and provide the customary burial rites.

Rabban Gamliel came forward and, disregarding his own dignity, ordered that he be dressed in simple linen cloth instead of the customary expensive, woolen garments of honor when the time came for his funeral. Thereafter, the people followed his lead to dress their deceased in modest linen clothing. As a result of Rabban Gamliel's example, a series of funeral reforms took place due to a desire to respect the poor. Formerly, the rich would be brought out for burial on ornamental, tall, stately beds covered with rich materials, while the poor were placed on a plain bier, a box. The poor felt ashamed, and *mipnei kavodan shel aniyim*, "out of respect for the poor," the Rabbis instead insisted that all deceased should be buried in a plain box.

It is a powerful statement about the value of the individual that each and every one of us is to be treated the same. There are customs for how we are cared for after we die, how we are laid to rest and how we are mourned. These traditions unite the community to care for each and every person with care and respect.

When I worked in a Cardiac Intensive Care Unit, one of the most disturbing aspects of the work was how easily the care for the dying could become common and we would live as if the death was not happening around us. Around a patient who was dying, no care would be taken in the way people talked or acted. One of my goals became reminding the nurses of the sanctity of that individual and that moment. I shared Jewish traditions about how to care for the dead and dying with the nurses in an attempt to bring more sanctity to the entire process. I taught them the tradition that we should not do anything to interrupt the spirit of the dead or dying, such as speak loudly, laugh, say ill things about the person or tell jokes. When a chevra kadisha gathers to prepare a dead body for burial, the only words they speak are prayers asking the person for forgiveness for any discomfort or disrespect they may inadvertently cause and the reading of texts that account for the past beauty of the human being.

In researching for this sermon, I read an account of a member of a chevra kadisha who was also the child of survivors. For her the mitzvah of caring for the dead was a way to redeem the sanctity of the human being in death—in opposition to the destruction and dehumanization that occurred in the Holocaust. “This death is personal,” she writes. “Every death is personal. This person will not be mistreated, [an] unidentifiable, anonymous body. This woman’s body will be respected; this body will be treated as a vessel that once housed precious Life and is therefore to be honored.”

The moment between death and burial is this time when the rabbis saw a person existing in two realms, the ultimate liminal moment. While their breath of life is gone, their soul lingers. And so, we treat someone who is dead as if they are alive, as if they can hear us. We trim their nails, comb their hair and when the body is washed and dressed in white linen, warm water is used and the body is never exposed more than it needs to be. Each act is done with care and respect so that this person’s life and body are honored not disgraced.

As one member of a chevra kadisha explained to an observer: “Everyone gets this same outfit to show we are all the same in the sight of God. We ... anoint [the dead with a beaten egg mixture] which symbolizes the perpetual wheel of life. We also sprinkle this earth from Israel on her...And we cover her eyes with ... broken pottery to show that the vessel of her soul is now broken.” Each ritual reminds us of the beauty and sacredness of each and every individual and their connection with the People of Israel.

While I know these details might be difficult to hear, I think it they are such an important part of our tradition and that they should give us comfort. What are many of us most afraid of in death? Being mistreated, suffering indignity, and of being alone and of leaving our loved ones alone. The Chevra Kadisha cares for the deceased so that none of these fears come to be.

From the time a Jew dies until she is buried, she is not to be left alone. One of the roles of the Chevra Kadisha is to provide shomrim, literally guards, who sit with the deceased and make sure that they are not alone. Guard is really such a harsh term. I see the shomer or shomeret as a guide, the person who stays to comfort the lingering soul and protect the body.

I have sat twice as a shomeret for friends and each time was a moving experience. As you sit in the room with the deceased, you quietly read from the book of Psalms. As you read there is a spiritual conversation that is happening between you and the deceased, between you and God, between you and every person that has recited Psalms in times of distress going back to King David and every person that will recite them in the future. The psalms cry out in pain, they cry out in thanksgiving, they lead you on a journey through the range of feelings that can be experienced in life and in the face of death.

The dead are honored with attendants who care for them and safely guide the body on its journey back to the dust from which it came. And the survivors, what about them? They are not alone in the Jewish community. Just as the rituals of tahara treat everyone equally, the rituals of mourning are meant to give each mourner an experience of community support. As Rabbi Morris Adler expressed so eloquently:

The friends are no longer individuals come to express sympathy, each in his particular way, with the feeling that the degree of his own friendship with the mourner dictates. The individuals have merged into a “minyan”, a congregation... Thus does a community symbolically and actually share in the sorrow of one of its members. The grief of the individual re-echoes in the life of the group. No Jew stands alone in bereavement, while his personal anguish serves as a wall between him and all those upon whose way in life the dark shadow has not fallen. A people closes ranks and encircles its stricken members within the warmth of brotherly sympathy.”

There are a number of people in our congregation who have started studying and discussing the ways of the *chevra kadisha*, led by Cantor Fine. In a community that works so hard to offer comfort and support to each other, a community that cherishes the mitzvot and seeks to constantly push ourselves to grow and learn, what better step to take than starting a *chevra kadisha*. I hope you will consider volunteering your time to support the tasks of a *chevra kadisha*—whether it is helping with administration, sitting as a *shomer* or *shomeret*, joining others for the task of *tahara*, or helping to support the mourners in our community, there are a range of opportunities for us all. Whether you volunteer or not, if our community successfully creates this *chevra kadisha*, we will be able to offer each other the blessings of care, dignity and comfort for the deceased and for the mourners they leave behind.

When death and tragedy strike our congregation, there are many people who step forward to ask: what can I do? This is one way to make a difference in people’s lives and in the experience of death. We will work in partnership with the local funeral homes. We will be able to provide the reassurance to our community that in death we will care for each other, as we do in life. And, we will provide each of us with the opportunity to perform a mitzvah that gives us a healthy perspective on death and dying.

As we remember our loved ones on this day, let us remember them in all their glory, the way they laughed, the way they loved, the way they lived their lives. And as we consider the meaning of their lives and the lessons that we have learned from them, let us not forget the lessons of their death. For as we come from the earth, we return to it. As we entered this world, we will each leave it. May we honor the memories of our loved ones by approaching death with respect / kavod. May we honor the memories of our loved ones by treating each other in life as we should also treat each other in death. May we honor the memories of our loved ones as we strengthen this kehillah kedoshah, this sacred congregation, with a *chevra kadisha*.....Kein y’hi ratzon.