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Temple Reyim

Yom Kippur Yizkor

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*Learning To Die*

*L'shanah tovah and gmar chatimah tovah.*

May we all be sealed for a year of blessing, healing and strength.

This past year, I began participating in a ritual called *tabara*, preparing the body of one who has died for burial.

Until recently, the opportunity to be involved in *tabara* in the Boston area was limited. But a group of dedicated members of the Jewish community including rabbis and lay leaders of local congregations began meeting and working closely with funeral homes to develop a more inclusive community-based model.

I'm very proud that Temple Reyim is one of over thirty supporting synagogues, and that we have members of our community who are actively involved, not only as participants but as leaders.

After completing the training program, I knew that at some point in the near future, I would receive a call from one of the coordinators asking me to come to the funeral home and prepare a body for burial.

I was still caught completely off-guard by the call. I imagine, in retrospect, that this was to be expected. There may be no way to prepare to encounter death in such an unmediated way.

I answered the phone.

“Hi, Daniel.”

“Yes.”

“A man, about 65, died of a heart attack yesterday. His family would like for our community to wash and prepare his body for burial. Are you available?”

“I am,” I said.

“The burial is tomorrow morning. The *tabara* will be tonight. I know it’s short notice. Is 7 pm ok?”

“It is.” I said.

I had two immediate thoughts. First, I felt immense pride in our tradition. What an extraordinary privilege to even have an opportunity to be involved in the intimacy of this act.

Second, I asked myself, why did I sign up for this? I’m not up for this.

In his own Yizkor sermon last year, Rabbi David Lerner of Temple Emunah, one of the founding members and architects of this community-led effort, shared a similar response. When he was first called to participate, he asked himself, “do I really need to do this? I could be a fine rabbi without this.”

“But,” he said, in response to his own question, “they called me.”

Ultimately, this is the meaning of mitzvah: responding to a call.

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Before visiting one who is ill or at the end of his or her life, or a funeral or shiva home, I try to prepare myself to be present and aware of the sacredness of the moment. I quiet my often-speeding mind. I turn off any noise I can control, and pay attention to details around me that I don’t otherwise tend to notice.

Looking at my calendar for the day ahead, I wasn’t sure how to fit in time for preparation for *tabara*. There was too much to do already and not nearly enough time.

I rushed to the funeral home that evening, without an opportunity to prepare.

Other members of the team were coming in at the same time. We greeted each other with a gesture of acknowledgment but didn’t talk.

We walked downstairs to the *tahara* room. The room is unusual: cold, and detached; but intimate and peaceful all at once.

The leader of the group, known as the *rosh*, was a young doctor. Because of the complicated nature of the death, we needed a physician who could work with the body medically as well.

As we gathered around the body, the *rosh* began a prayer seeking forgiveness. There is a formal prayer one might offer in the moment, but he chose to speak spontaneously: “It is for you that we’re here,” he said, addressing the person lying before us. “Nothing else matters in this moment.”

“The life you have lived is sacred. We will do our best to care for you, as you have cared for so many others. If we make a mistake, or cause you any dishonor, or forget what we are doing even for a moment, please forgive us.”

He called us all to stand by the body and begin the process of cleansing.

This Jewish approach to caring for the body is called *kavod hamet*, meaning honoring the one who has died. Everything we do is meant to bring *kavod* to this person.

For the next two hours, our work was to care for the physical body that has been animated by a soul that was unknown to those of us in the room.

One feels a sense of the Sacred in that moment. It’s palpable, more concrete than other experiences. In the rawness of the work, there is contact with the Life Force that animates our lives.

We said very little, unless necessary to support our work. We prayed a lot and sang a *niggun*, a wordless melody, at one point. Otherwise, we were quiet.

We followed the proscribed order of tasks, step by step, working as a group: cleaning and washing, pouring water gently over each part of him as a ritual bath. There was never a moment when we left the body exposed. His head was covered with a sheet.

As we began the ritual bath, pouring water so it touches every part of the body, we began a chant, in Hebrew, declaring the body pure.

We dressed the body in *takbrikhin*, the white linen shrouds that Jews have been buried in for thousands of years, reflecting the dressing of the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest in the Holy Temple. Then, we placed him gently in the wooden casket.

The Hebrew word for casket is *aron*. The same word, *aron*, means the ark in which we keep our *sifrei Torah*, our Torah scrolls, and the ark in which the holy Tabernacle was kept during the Israelites' journey to *Eretz Yisrael*. At death, we're reminded of the sacred nature of the life that is carried in - and held by - an *aron*.

All *tahara* rituals are performed with these exact steps. No one is treated differently – rich or poor, learned or not, observant or not. Rabbi Felicia Sol of Congregation Bnei Jeshurun in New York City wrote a beautiful essay on her experience of *tahara*. She writes: “*tahara* is the living embodiment that, regardless of what our story in life is, no matter how rich or poor we are, we are all equal in death. We all are washed in the same way. We are all given our final mikveh in the same way. We are all dressed in the same garments, and once the casket is closed, the same Hebrew words are spoken.”

I asked a member of our community who participates in *tahara* to share his experience with me. “When you’re standing before a person in the *tahara* room,” he said, “his death is the same as all others. What’s left is the love the person gave and the deeds he did.”

Our deaths are equal; our mortality is shared; our humanity is up to us.

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Many religious traditions believe in a soul - a reflection of the Divine that dwells within every living being. Some imagine that the soul of a person departs at the moment of death, and is shepherded towards the after-life by an aspect of God that dwells as an immanent presence in our lives.

In Jewish thought, at death, the soul is released, but stays close, hovering over the person’s head.

The mitzvah of *tahara* is not simply to prepare a body; it is to stand in the presence of the soul, to be mindful of the reflection of God before us.

Hovering over the body, the soul is very much with us in that room, as if involved in the *tabara* ritual itself. To honor the soul, we never pass anything over the body, so as not to interfere with its presence. We don't stand by the person's head, where the soul is at its most illuminated, potent and present. We try to stand in relationship with the *nesbama* that hovers and comforts, that is eternal, ever-present. That *nesbama* needs to be cared for, as it will be drawn upon for strength and for blessing by those who are living.

I left that first *tabara* and came up the stairs to the street. The street I left as I went into the funeral home felt different than the street I re-entered. It was dark now, and the night people had begun to replace the evening people. The weather had cooled. The energy in a town is different at night. ***It was disorienting to re-enter the world we are used to inhabiting - a jarring reminder how important it is to fill this more typical world with intimacy, touch, and mitzvah.***

Rabbi Felicia Sol's words are again so instructive here. She writes, "Tahara has taught me to be less afraid of death. Tahara has given me comfort to know that when [a member of my own family] died, that the hevra was caring for her with the utmost dignity and respect. That is true for all who go through this final ritual.

(paraphrasing)...Each life is ushered out of this world as if the life was the Torah. And it is. Each life is Torah, for it is a sacred story that we carry on, that we continue to read and learn, that we grapple with, that has a beginning, a middle and an end, but is also eternal. And just like whenever the Torah is taken out of the ark, someone has the honor and privilege of holding this sacred scroll, so too have I had the most humble honor of holding these women with women as they make the transition from the end of their lives, to life eternal and for that, my Torah will never be the same."

What I love about the essay is that it alludes to the inevitability of being both one who washes, and one who will be washed. While preparing the body, it's hard not to imagine being there myself. Who will be by my side, washing me, dressing me, trying not to interfere with my *nesbama* that hovers over me, and preparing me to return to the earth?

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One of the essential and primary Jewish teachings is that being mindful of our deaths will help us live. In the Talmudic tractate of Shabbat, we find the story of Rabbi Eliezar and his students. During a daily lesson, Rabbi Eliezar teaches them about repentance. “Repent one day before your death,” he tells them. His students are confused. “But Rabbi, does a person know which day he will die?” Rabbi Eliezar responded: “Certainly then a person should repent today, for perhaps tomorrow he will die - so that in all his days he is repenting.” (Talmud Shabbat 153a)

A separate text (Tamid (32a)) teaches that: “Whoever wants to live, must make himself dead.”

What do these texts mean?

***Learn how to die, and you will learn how to live. When we see our lives through the prism of how short and sweet they are, we act differently, with a calmer and more holistic frame of mind. Relationships with people come forward. Things fall back.***

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Borrowing again from the wisdom of Rabbi Lerner, the ancient rabbis refer to the rituals of burial as *chesed shel emet* – the truest act of love, since for every other act of kindness we do for someone else, the other person can repay us, but, for this act, the person can never repay us.

According to rabbinic tradition, our caring for the dead is modeled on the way that God buried Moses.

The *midrash* paints a portrait of Moses praying to God just before dying: “Lord of the world! Be mindful of the day when You did reveal Yourself to me in the bush of thorns, and be mindful of the day when I ascended into heaven and during forty days neither ate or drank. You, Gracious and Merciful, deliver me not into the hands of the angel of death.”

“God replied: ‘I have heard your prayer. I Myself shall attend to you and bury you.’”

God takes Moses’ soul with a Divine kiss, gently closes his eyes and buries him.

This is the Jewish model of caring for those who have died. *Chesed shel emet*, the truest act of love.

This is the great gift of Yizkor: we are standing together with the *neshamot* of those we have loved and lost. As in those moments before burial, the *nesbama* is hovering, protecting, is potent and present, comforting and loving. ***If we're open to it, we can feel the souls of those we've lost next to us as we remember their lives.***

During this Yizkor, may those whom you are remembering at this time be a blessing in your life. May you be enriched by their memory, even as you acknowledge the pain of their loss. Before we begin the memorial prayers, take this time to remember those you have lost. What did they look like? How did they laugh? What was the tone of their voice?

We lost many members of the Temple Reyim family this past year. Together we remember their lives as a blessing and a source of strength.

***We remember.***

Hank Greene

Eileen Darman (Lisa Miller's mother)

Sheldon Bloom (Joel Bloom's father)

Arthur Percy (Lisa Percy's father)

Judy Young, (Larry Young's sister-in-law)

Elsbeth Lewin, (Eva Radding's mother)

Mervin Gray

Dorothy Mascoop, (Ethan Mascoop's mother)

David Singer (Carol Stollar's brother)

Lionel Tabas, (Doris Josephson's brother)

Lenny Brick

Sally Pollack, (Amy Baker's mother)

Lester Klein, (Amy Worth's father)

Annie Greenside

Marilyn Shade

Arlene Cutler Davidson, (Ellen Alperin's mother)

Alvin Essig

Adrienne Wilson

Donald Smith and

Eunice Silver

Their *neshamot* continue to echo through our lives and this sacred space.

May their lives – and the lives of all those we have lost - be a blessing for strength, for healing and for meaning.

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