

Disclaimer

The following is an adaptation of a power point presentation (.PPT) by Robin Black concerning closing ceremonies/rituals at the conclusion of Taharah. It is based on a class project she undertook as part of her studies in Gamliel class 1 in 2012.

This adaptation is intended to be used by those who are not in a position to participate in the presentation (live or recorded). Of necessity, some materials may be less clear than they would be if experienced as part of the full presentation. I have attempted to overcome anything that may be lost by adding information, but it is not a replacement for the actual presentation.

Any lack or missing information is due entirely to the adaptation I have done, and those reading this material are urged to contact Robin Black directly with questions. I apologize for any failure of clarity or lack of information I may have caused in this adaptation.

Rabbi Joe Blair

The Importance of Taharah Ritual

Closing Ceremonies

By Robin Black

Introduction

At the time of this project, Robin Black was relatively new to Chevrah Kadisha work. As she became involved in her community in this way, she found that the Taharah ritual was very moving and felt important, but it was emotionally impactful, at times perhaps even disturbing, and required something that would mark the end of the Taharah in a positive way. After some conversations with a few class members, she realized that this was something that varied widely from Chevrah to Chevrah. Convinced by her informal conversations that it was worth pursuing, Ms. Black took on finding out what other groups did, which led to this presentation.

[For those not already familiar with it:]

Introduction to Taharah

Taharah is the Jewish Ritual of body preparation for burial after death. The goal is to perform this act of loving kindness with the greatest possible respect for the deceased.

The initial step of the Taharah ritual has members of the community cleanse the body physically.

After the cleansing, the ritual purification of the body is accomplished with water, in a similar fashion as a person is purified by immersion in a Mikvah (ritual bath).

The ritual includes the recitation of appropriate prayers, psalms, and readings throughout that seek to raise the actions of the group from one of simply performing physical cleansing of the body to performing an action on a ritual and spiritual level.

Once the purification has been completed, the members of the group dress the body in tachrichim (shrouds).

In the process of dressing, they tie special symbolic knots that spell out a name for G-d.

When the deceased is dressed, they carefully place the body in the Aron (casket).

Members of the Taharah group then clean up the room and themselves, and only then leave the deceased.

[Initial findings]

Taharah Debriefing

Following a Taharah, based on observations and anecdotal evidence, there appears to be a benefit to the members of the Taharah team to have some form of concluding activity before the group disbands and leaves. For this reason, it is suggested that there be gentle encouragement for the members of the Taharah group to gather, be given an opportunity to communicate their feelings about the experience in a safe and private environment, and to mark the completion of the Taharah itself with some form of ritual. Such a ritual provides closure to team members prior to returning to work, home, or otherwise transitioning back to day to day activities. This 'debriefing' can also be thought of as a Taharah Closing Ritual, though it need not be so styled, and it may well vary from group to group, and perhaps even between men and women, or with the composition of a particular Taharah team.

Purpose of A Taharah Debriefing

A debriefing brings a much needed closure to an intense experience, and creates a transitioning process that helps restore us to our day to day rhythms.

It provides an opportunity before departing to head our separate ways to comfort each person in the Taharah team, as needed.

Why Do This Project?

The purpose of this project was:

To explore the emotional and spiritual journey of the volunteers who perform the Taharah in a slightly more formal manner than purely anecdotal.

To discuss personal reactions, and to find a means to allow individuals to listen and process the experience of being part of the Taharah team.

To provide closure and a safe outlet for those involved in the Taharah, while maintaining the confidentiality of the Taharah.

To help teams bond following this profoundly intense event they have shared, and to allow individuals to acknowledge what being part of the team means for them personally.

Project Goals

To look at a variety of Taharah closing practices currently being used by members of the Gamliel Institute class, and other Taharah teams in the U.S., Canada, and Europe.

To provide this information as a resource to help groups develop a meaningful closing ritual.

“My own group did not have a strong practice, so initially I wanted to collect this information and bring it back to my own group.” --- Robin Black

Gathering Information For this Project

Methodology:

A request was sent to Gamliel Institute classmates (Course 1, 2012), and on the wider web to the Kavod v'Nichum run www.Jewish-funerals.org discussion group, asking all contacted to send responses on closing practices in use in their groups.

Approximately 30 responses were received. This presentation is the compilation of these responses.

Associated Conversations

The inquiry sent out for this Survey also stimulated a dialogue between several Chevrah groups, and between members of the men's and women's Taharah groups on the list serve and in class, allowing for the sharing of insights by each.

In addition to providing answers to the questions posed, these conversations sparked between the groups gave feedback to persons having difficulties with group processes and processing, and provided comfort, particularly showing that those who wanted some form of ritual closure were not alone or unique.

Sometimes the feedback only briefly described the specifics of the closings, but instead focused more on the details of group dynamics, practical matters, and logistics, but even that was useful to others, letting them know that other groups faced similar issues.

The provision of this information in turn stimulated more feedback from members of other groups on dealing with challenges and issues that may arise. Some of the responses were practical suggestions while others were supportive and empathic. These conversations seemed to ease the strain felt by some people.

Taharah History

The Torah and Talmud mention how Jewish people historically cared for the deceased, and honored their memory throughout the year.

Rabban Gamliel set the standard that all are honored and equal. Death is the great leveler. In the same way that we came into this world, we should all be treated the same, and buried in simple garments, in a simple casket (where caskets are used).

Jewish assertions of equality in the eyes of our Creator is a driving force to support these practices.

Jewish burial societies were common throughout Europe. They all followed the same practices of Taharah (cleansing the body) and shomrim (watchers guarding the soul) until burial, though the details of how it was done varied.

Water was almost universally used as part of the purifying process, either by pouring or immersion.

In biblical times people who came in contact with the dead had to have water - purified by the ashes of the red Heifer - sprinkled over them, in order for them to become ritually pure or cleansed again. It is possible that this, or something like it, was done for people caring for the bodies of the deceased.

Today we typically wash hands ritually at various times before and after the ceremony, and many groups choose to end the work of the Taharah group with a time of sharing and blessings as they leave the site.

Emotions

Dealing with the deceased, and facing the reality of death may force us to confront our fears concerning our own death.

This task may also emphasize our losses -i.e., memories of our parents & other lost loved ones. It may force us to confront and deal with other buried feelings, or it may uncover places or longings in our lives, and can motivate our spiritual processes or practices.

Taharah may also be a tremendous opportunity that can help us to look inward, to grow, and to re-evaluate our priorities in life. The participation in a Taharah team may spiritually awaken the participants.

Robin noted that she heard that involvement in Taharot (plural of Taharah) has motivated some to take on the custom of reciting the morning blessings which express thanks for the gift of life.

Gender Differences

In researching this project, there appeared to be a split along gender lines in regard to the types and frequency of existence of Taharah Closing Rituals. The results are presented here with the differences preserved.

Women's Chevrah Group Approaches To Closing Rituals

"I find it [the Taharah closing ritual] is a perfect balance - finding a safe, private place to discuss questions or reactions during [the] Taharah [among ourselves]. Then we share a group blessing praising the Lord for enabling us to fulfill this sacred work." [See Appendix A below for this Group Blessing]

"After we wash, we say together, 'May we go out and rejoin our daily life activities carrying with us an even greater reverence for your gift of life. Amen.'"

"We end with a niggun [wordless tune]."

Other Rituals of Conclusion of Taharah by some Women's Chevrah Groups

"Allowing family members in at the end of the Taharah, for final prayers and sprinkling of the dirt before closing of the Aron (casket)." [Another response included on the Gamliel Institute class Forum website also said that that group allowed the family to tie the final knot on the Tachrichim/Shrouds.]

"Meeting as a group to study Taharah texts at another time and place."

Atmosphere in Women's Chevrah Groups

"We join hands standing around the Aron (casket) in the room where the Shomrim (guardians of the soul) will sit."

"We state the deceased's Hebrew name (if known), & share what this experience has meant to me, (their own Hebrew name)."

"If we knew the meitah, we briefly talk about her."

"Most say that it is an "Honor & a privilege" to participate."

"We hug each other."

"This is a powerful few minutes."

An Example of A Transitional Processes – Response From Rabbi Regina Sandler-Phillips

“I believe in having a transitional space and time for members to share their reactions in the privacy of a group. Honor and respect require us to keep all details of Taharah private. There should be no discussion outside of the Taharah team, so this space to talk with the Taharah group is important. We share a group blessing with special prayers.”
[See Appendix B below for the page from the Park Slope Jewish Center for closing prayers and songs]

Sharing within the Women’s Taharah team

“After the Taharah: We take 30 min, go out of building, wash hands, do group sharing and a group blessing. Then share a bar of chocolate.”

“An informal closing – holding hands, sharing, hugs- make for a meaningful transition back to everyday world.”

“Outside the Taharah room we discuss this Taharah and resolve any issues that arose. We are looking for a more moving closing practice.”

“We use the closing from the book Chesed Shel Emet. [See Appendix C below for this closing.] ‘I am still moved by it.’”

Blessing of Hands following Taharah

Response from Rabbi Me’irah Illinsky, who developed this ritual

Gather outside the Taharah room (after clean up) and debrief whatever is on people’s minds. Either the team leader can perform this simple ritual for each of the other team members, or begin with one person, and that one does the next person, etc.:

1. Ask that person for permission to give a “blessing of the hands” to them [We learn in chaplaincy training that if you are going to touch someone you should first ask them for permission.]
2. After receiving permission, using mild scented oil with lavender, put a drop in person’s palms, gently massage into the palm.
3. Hold the person’s hands in your own, all palms turned upward, and look the person in the eye, and say the following:
“May these hands be blessed for the loving care they give,
May these hands be blessed for the kindness they show,
May these hands be blessed for the great mitzvah they have performed.”
4. Close the hands palms together, and say,
“May there be a great blessing on these hands.”
[See Appendix D below for information on Blessing of the Hands Cards.]

Men's Chevrah Group Approaches to Closing Rituals

Responses received (a very small sample) suggested that men's Taharah teams are focused more on the work, & they may give less attention or expression to the emotions that may arise. It appears that there is much less attention given to any formal type of closing ritual than among women's groups.

Men's closing rituals were described as follows:

"We share a bottle of schnapps, drinking and wishing each other L'Chaim. Then we go our way."

"We go out and have a meal together afterwards."

"We finish with a quick, loud, non-unison recitation of the closing blessings (Hinei Mitaso & Y'verech'cha), clean up & dispose of garbage, each one of us is given a Coke, and then we leave."

There were a few dismissive statements that "additional ceremonies are not necessary"; and "nothing is done as a closing ritual."

"There is a push to complete the details (clean up and paperwork) so we can go home, feeling satisfaction in completing a holy job."

Out of the "Norm" for Chevrah Groups

A few of the responses seemed to go against the general trend of this gender difference.

One Men's Chevrah group that used Stuart Kelman's book Chesed Shel Emet said that the group gathers & shares feelings before departing.

One woman reported that her group had no debriefing or closing. She wished there had been a debriefing. Their final act of lifting the deceased into the Aron (casket), then they left with no closing or ritual. She said "it was shocking to 'abandon' the Aron; an interesting, but weird feeling" – having no closing left a sense of something lacking or undone.

Analysis

Women's teams are more likely to have planned Taharah ritual closings than men's teams.

Women seem to attend more to the emotional process, through talking, listening, and processing group feelings and concerns.

Holding hands, hugs, and embracing are accepted forms of comfort & bonding women have developed, that men seem not to use.

The Taharah closing ritual is experienced as an action of absolute caring and concern, and awe-inspiring respect, for the deceased, for the task, and for the members of the Taharah group.

Some women use a musical niggun to end.

Conclusions

No matter how we individually or as groups approach the task of Taharah, we are all exposed to the symbols, encounter death, and recite the blessings and liturgy. This provokes an emotional response, consciously or not.

We can be confronting psychological issues whether we acknowledge or voice them, or not.

The Taharah will leave a spiritual impression on anyone/everyone who participates.

In a Taharah we are going to hard places and doing hard things that not everyone can handle. Even those who are able to do this work may need some support to return to their daily life, and to be able to return to do this work again.

We (the members of the Chevrah) deserve respect, love, and care.

The development of a Taharah Closing Ritual is essential to creating closure to a powerful experience. The specifics of these rituals will differ, but there is a need to acknowledge the impact of this sacred work on those who do it.

If no opportunity is offered to provide closure, Taharah team members may leave a Taharah with no way to deal with distress or any other emotional response, which risks them not coming back to participate in this mitzvah in future.

A closing Taharah ritual is needed to support the health and well-being of the member of the Taharah team, as well as of the Chevrah Kadishahh.

APPENDICES

A-D

Appendix A.

Group Blessing

"Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheynu melech ha-olam.... Blessed are You, Creator of the universe, for enabling us to fulfill this sacred mitzvah. Having just completed this holy work in accordance with Your commandments, may we now go out and rejoin our daily life activities carrying with us an even greater reverence for Your gift of life. Amen"

[Some groups sang niggunim. A source suggested was from Rabbi Shefa Gold's collections.]

Appendix B.

PARK SLOPE JEWISH CENTER

Rabbi Regina Sandler-Phillips

FOR BRIEFING AND/OR DEBRIEFING:

The whole entire world
is a very narrow bridge
and the main thing
is not to fear at all.

Kol ha'olam kulo
Gesher tzar me'od
Veha'ikar
Lo lefakhed klal.

כָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּלוֹ
גֶּשֶׁר צָר מְאֹד
וְהַעִיקָר
לֹא לִפְחֹד כְּלָל.

Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav (1772 - 1811)

This verse is often sung to a traditional tune.

FOR THE CLOSE OF DEBRIEFING:

Return us, O God, to You
and we will return;
Renew our days as of old.

Hashiveinu (2x)
Adonai elekha
Venashuvah (2x)
Hadesh (2x)
yameinu kekedem.

הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ יי אֱלֹהִים
וְנָשׁוּבָה
חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקִדְמָה:

Lamentations 5:21

This verse is often sung to a traditional tune.

Appendix C.

A Group Blessing, From Chesed Shel Emet 2nd and 3rd Editions, Rabbi Stuart Kelman

The members of the Chevrah Kadishah may recite the next prayer together.

Creator of the universe, we have just completed our act of g'milut chesed for (name of deceased). We thank You for the strength and courage to perform this mitzvah. We appreciate participating in this Chevrah Kaddisha, and cherish the bond that brings us together.

Team members should observe a moment of silence for private meditation and reflection.

Personal statements

[Each participant, optional but encouraged.]

All the people participating in the Taharah should sit facing each other. Each person should recite his/her name in English and Hebrew (including names of mother and father, if possible). After members have stated their names they may make a personal statement about the Taharah just completed.

The Taharah team may recite the following prayer responsively.

I wait for You. I wait with longing, I wait for your word. My longing is for You more than the watchman's is for the morning. Psalm 130:5-6

My soul longs for your deliverance; I hope for your word; my eyes pine away for your promise; I say, "When will you comfort me?" Psalm 119:81

My eyes are ever towards God, who will pluck my feet out of the net. Turn to me, and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Psalm 4:8

You have made Adam lacking but little of the divine, and have crowned the human (Adam) with glory and honor. You have given the human (Adam) dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under our (his) feet. Psalm 8: 6-7

Adonai, Our God that you are mindful of him (us), the children (son) of the human (Adam) that you care for us (him). Psalm 8:5

Concluding ritual From Chesed Shel Emet 2nd and 3rd Editions p. 50

Upon completion of the above, all participants should rise and recite:

“Ner Adonai nishmat adam chofesh kol chadrei vatan.”

The lamp of the Eternal One is the soul of a person searching all the inner chambers of the body”.

Proverbs 20:27

Prayer for a premature Death

In the noon time of my days I must depart, I must pass through the gates of the realm of the dead, robbed of the remainder of my years....

My dwelling is plucked up, taken from me like a shepherd's tent. Isaiah 38:10, 12 Ff

Appendix D.

Blessing of the Hands cards Available on Zazzle from Rabbi Me'irah Illinsky



Blessing of the Hands Cards

by RabbiMeirah

Order this product

Find more at Zazzle.