Taharah and Shmirah: An Introduction and Overview

By Rick Light
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Taharah & Shmirah – Where to Begin…

- These are central rituals performed by the Chevrah Kadisha to provide *kavod hameit* (honor for the dead)
- *Shmirah* is the ritual accompaniment of the dead between death and burial
- *Taharah* is the ritual means through which Jewish bodies are prepared for burial
What is a Ritual?

- A ritual is a sequence of activities involving gestures, words, actions, or objects, performed according to a set sequence.
- Religious rituals include sacred intent, specific liturgy related to tradition, accompanied by specific actions that lead to a desired outcome or benefit.
- *Taharah* and *shmirah* are rituals intended to benefit the soul of the deceased, while comforting the family left behind.
Taharah & Shmirah – Where to Begin…

Every action, every reading is based in respect:
- Respect for God and holiness
- Respect for the deceased body
- Respect for the holy soul in transition
- Respect for the family of the deceased
- Respect for the chevrah team members
- Respect for Jewish tradition
What is Shmirah?

Shmirah, a definition:

- We believe the soul is present between death and burial as it navigates its journey between realms
- We keep the soul company – we “accompany” it, to comfort it during this time
- Communities often arrange for a number of people to do this, usually for a few hours at a time, for the time between death and burial
  - Some communities pay *shomrim*, others use volunteers
What is Shmirah?

Shmirah, a definition:

- *Shomrim* (plural of *shomer*, one who accompanies) usually sit at the funeral home; during covid, some communities do this online.
- It is traditional for those who “sit shmirah” to read Psalms or other meaningful readings, perhaps things loved by the deceased.
- Some communities have a “shmirah box” of reading materials.
- When it cannot be arranged for people to sit, some communities light a candle to connect with the soul and let it know we care.
Shmirah is quintessentially a process of soul-guiding. Kabbalistic sources tell us that in the hours and days after a death, the spirit of the deceased hovers near the body. Reading of Psalms during the time of shmirah is designed to help the soul move on. But what does that mean? How can a person reading Psalms in the presence of a dead body help the soul in the transition? It’s actually quite simple: Think of soul-guiding as a contemplative nonverbal communication between the world of the living and the realm of the discarnate soul. Sitting in front of the deceased, reciting Psalms, one should hold an attitude of loving connection with the person who has died. In the heart and mind, imagine sending a message that says, “It’s OK to leave behind the world and move on.” The task requires trusting intuition and one’s inner voices, listening inwardly for a response, and being attentive to synchronistic meaningful experiences. Soul-guiding is not a science; it’s an art.

– Reb Simcha Raphael, Jewish Views of the Afterlife
What is *Taharah*?

*Taharah*, a definition:

- A **ritual performed by a group of Jews to prepare a body for burial** and in the process midwife the soul of the deceased from this world to the next
  - Members of the community under the umbrella of the *Chevra Kadisha*, with *kavanah* (holy intention) and a liturgy, lovingly and gently wash, purify, and dress the body of the deceased as preparation for burial
- The ritual includes physical actions accompanied by a liturgy
- The team performing the ritual is usually 3-5 people of the same gender as the deceased (to honor modesty and dignity of the deceased)
- This ritual usually takes 45 to 90 minutes to perform
- The ritual is usually performed in a funeral home preparation room, but could be created at home
The Taharah Ritual Procedure

Order of events during the taharah ritual

1. **Pre-briefing** – mental, emotional preparation
2. **Preparation** – laying out equipment; setting intentions
3. **Washing the deceased** – physical cleansing – like a sponge bath
4. **Taharah** – spiritual cleansing – pouring water in a ritual way
5. **Dressing the deceased** – dressing in burial garments
6. **Placing the deceased into the aron** (casket) – plain wooden box
7. **Cleaning up** – straightening the room, putting equipment away
8. **Debriefing** – emotional support; improvements for future rituals

Readings from the taharah liturgy are recited during each phase of action, events 2 through 6 above.
Typical Taharah Room
What is the Taharah Ritual Procedure?

Detail of events during the taharah ritual

1. **Pre-briefing** – mental, emotional preparation
   The team meets in a side room to ensure emotional/mental readiness

2. **Preparation** – laying out equipment; setting intentions
   The team sets intentions together, dons protective equipment, washes hands (like netiyat yadayyim without a blessing), lays out tachrichim (burial garments), arranges towels, sheets, other equipment; team greets deceased

3. **Washing the deceased** – physical cleansing – like a sponge bath
   The deceased is given a physical washing, gently with cotton batting or towels, cleaning the entire body, trimming nails as needed, removing medical devices as needed

4. **Taharah** – spiritual cleansing – pouring water in a ritual way
   Water is poured in a continuous flow over the body, or the body is immersed in a mikvah bath
What is the *Taharah* Ritual Procedure?

- Detail of events during the *taharah* ritual

5. **Dressing the deceased** – dressing in burial garments
   
   The body is dried thoroughly along with the table; then it is dressed in *tachrichim* (burial garments)

6. **Placing the deceased into the *aron* (casket) – plain wooden box**
   
   The *sovev* (burial sheet) is draped into/over the open casket diagonally, the *tallit* (prayer shawl, if used) is placed on top of this, then the body is laid gently into the casket; earth from Israel is sprinkled inside, the *tallit* and *sovev* are wrapped around the body, and the casket is closed; the team asks for forgiveness from the deceased for anything that did not show respect

7. **Cleaning up** – straightening the room, putting equipment away
   
   Casket is moved out of the preparation room; often a candle is placed on top

8. **Debriefing** – emotional support; improvements for future rituals
   
   Team meets in a side room to ensure emotional/mental health, review what just happened, discuss as needed
Physical Washing
Spiritual Washing

Photo © Janice Rubin
Asking for Forgiveness

Photo © Janice Rubin
Kavanah – Sacred Intention

- Central to this holy work is maintaining a presence, the awareness of the sacred, while infusing intention into the work
  - The intention is to honor a Jew who has died – Kavod HaMeit – showing respect and dignity to the dead
  - The intention is to uplift the soul of the deceased – help them move between worlds of existence (from olam hazeh to olam haba’ah)
  - The team can do no wrong if they approach taharah with the right kavanah
The Taharah Liturgy

- The liturgy is what makes taharah work
- The liturgy includes readings from Song of Songs, Zechariah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Talmud, and other sources
- It infuses the ritual with *kavanah* (holy intention), and gives order to the procedure
- The taharah liturgy works on many levels
- It puts forth the intentions to honor God, uplift and honor the holy soul in transition, protect and guide the taharah team along with the soul of the deceased, and to remind us of the holiness of life and of death
Modern manuals give the order of procedures, the written liturgy in Hebrew and English (and possibly other languages), and often some guidance.

This liturgy supports the order of events in the ritual, and ensures what we do supports the soul in transition.

Most teams assign one person to be the main “reader” who leads the liturgical readings – either reading alone or leading others to read together as a group.

- Reading can be in Hebrew, in English, or both – it’s nice if everyone in the room understands what is being read.
- Some groups chant the Hebrew softly while English is read simultaneously.
- Each physical action of the ritual has an accompanying reading.
Some Modern Taharah Manuals
Sacred Undertaking

- How I got involved in *Chevrah Kadisha* work
  - *There I was, 46 years old, dead ...*

- Sacred Undertaking – *How important is this work?*

- *Sometimes it’s so hard ...*
Where Do These Come From?

- Jews have honored our dead since the time of Abraham
- Our death rites have changed and evolved like all Jewish practice
- By the 1300’s we know there were dedicated organizations to take care of the dead; By 1516, there was a well-developed organization called the Hebrat Gemilut Hasadim in Modena
- In Prague in the 1500’s we have details of the formation of a formal Chevrah Kadisha for the first time; the Prague Act of 1564 creates the Prague Chevrah Kadisha
- In Italy a book published in 1626 detailed the exact liturgy and rites for honoring the dead (Ma’avar Yabbok by Rabbi Aaron Berechia)
  - This is the foundation for today’s taharah manauls
- The placards painted in 1772 in Prague document the full spectrum of care
  - This is the model we follow today, caring from illness through death, burial, mourning and yahrzeit
Prague Placards Show Scope of CK Work

Introduction

The Prague Brothel Society, formally called the Chevrah Kadisha Gomle Chasadim, was established in 1564 to provide burial services, and the Holy Society of Benevolent Women, caring for deceased women, was formally acknowledged in 1692. With over 10,000 Jews, Prague had the largest Jewish population of any European city at the end of the 17th century.

The paintings were created about 1772, with an additional four produced some years later. Each painting is a separate piece and was commissioned by the Jewish community, often by the family of the deceased. The paintings document the activities of the Burial Society, from visiting the sick, prayers at the deathbed, preparation of the body, memorialization, to honoring the mourners. According to the Talmud, no person may profit from the death of another, so all the profits and donations raised by the Society's work went for the good of the Jewish community, including a hospital and orphanage, contributions to Talmudic schools, support for the poor, and overseeing the cemeteries.

The iconic cemetery depicted in the original series served the Jewish community of Prague for three centuries beginning in the 1400s. Due to lack of space, soil was added according to Jewish law, so that there are layers upon layers of people buried, creating a mound. As each layer was added, the old headstones were removed and placed on top with the new ones, giving the cemetery its unusual number of matzevot (tombstones) close to one another.

At the time the paintings were created, the influence of both Christian authorities and the growing popularity of the Enlightenment among Jews had brought criticism of traditional Jewish burial practices. These paintings are a project to show how everyone and all the mourning rituals were done properly, and to demonstrate that traditions are meaningful and respectful of the deceased. The paintings depict death as part of the cycle of life, and provide an invaluable window into the traditions of the time, traditions that are once again increasing in acceptance as we seek meaning, community, and care at the end of life.
Prague Placards Show Scope of CK Work
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Why Do These Rituals?

- **Respect** – these are part of how we honor our dead
- **Comfort** – for the soul of the deceased, for the family left behind, for the community
- **Spirituality** – helping a soul move on
- **Life** – these rituals teach us how to live – with humility, respect, joy, and honor for the sacredness of each moment
  - Near death experiences help us appreciate life more
- **History/tradition** – this is what has been done for centuries by Jews for Jews
  - Some context – consider the larger continuum of care from Prague
Chevrah Work and Life Priorities

- *Setting Aside the Super Bowl, Just Once, for a Holy Act*,
  by Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz
What’s Really Important in Taharah?

1. Emotional and physical health of the Chevra Kadisha team
2. **Kavod hameit** – honoring the deceased, midwifing a soul
   - Remember: Why are you doing this?
3. **Kavanah** (sacred intentions) of everyone involved – this is holy work
4. Patience and kindness – ”we do the best we can”
   - You can do no wrong if you are there to honor the dead
   - You can always ask for help, get answers to questions
   - There is no right or wrong in holy work when you embody love
One Last Thought: The Evolving Taharah Liturgy

- Today’s taharah procedures have been greatly affected by COVID-19
  - New liturgy adaptations have emerged
    - Taharah Ruchanit – non-physical, spiritual ritual to midwife a soul without being present with the physical body
    - Post-burial grave-side rituals to honor those who could not have in-person taharah
    - Hybrid rituals with ruchanit-like aspects with accompanying in-funeral-home personnel doing actions in coordination with online liturgy recitation

- Questions emerging as to changes to the liturgy – how should it evolve?
  - How to preserve essence of the ritual, adapt to the times, not lose Kabbalistic power and depth of ancient ritual
  - What happens next? What’s coming to meet post-pandemic needs?
Who Benefits from these Rituals?

- The **soul** of the deceased – comfort, honor, and midwifing
- The **family** of the deceased – comfort and honor; practical help
- The **chevrah team** members – opportunity to work in liminal space between death and life; heightened awareness of life as a gift; mitzvah of helping
- The **community** at large – comfort in knowing someone cares – my family will be taken care of; spiritual connections; continuity of tradition
Some Questions to Consider

- Who should get involved in this work?
- Do I really need to touch dead bodies?
- What do we do next, now that we’ve had this intro?
Resources

- Finding help and learning more:
  - *Taharah and Shmirah Overview*
  - [Jewish-Funerals.org](http://Jewish-Funerals.org)
  - *Gamliel Institute courses* – especially Core Course 2: *Taharah and Shmirah*
  - *Kavod v’Nichum local trainings*
  - *Kavod v’Nichum annual conference*
  - *Books, books, books*
    - *Jewish Rites of Death, Stories of Beauty and Transformation*
    - *Chesed Shel Emet*
    - *To Midwife a Soul*
    - *Health and Safety Precautions for Taharah*
  - Learn from other *chevrah* members, leaders, teachers, clergy
Questions?
Epilogue – Some Historical Context

- For a detailed history of Chevrah Kadisha in the context of world history, please see a historical overview including a timeline and PowerPoint presentation [here](#).
- The following slides give a summary of the main events that led us to today’s taharah ritual liturgy and practice.
Jewish values relating to the end of life start in the Torah:

- Burial at Machpelah: Gen 23
- Joseph's (false) death: Gen 37: 29-35
- Jacob's burial: Gen 47:28-31, Gen 50:1-14
- Aaron's death: Num 20:24-29
- Miriam's death: Num 20:1
- Moses' death: Deut 34:1-8
- Same-day burial: Deut 21:23
- Shiva: Job 2:13
- Parah Aduma: Num 19
- Eglah Arufah Deut 21:1-9
Jewish death practices are discussed in the Talmud and Mishnah in various places. To begin with, consider:

- Sotah 14a
- Moed Katan 27a and 27b
Big Picture – Context

Jewish death practices are discussed in the Talmud and Mishnah in various places. To begin with, consider:

- First mention of Jewish death practices since Biblical times
  - Sotah 14a – requirement to bury
  - S’machot 7:5 – societies to visit sick
  - Baba Batra 8a, Moed Katan 27b – public associations to bury the dead

- Rabban Gamliel established equality and simplicity for Jewish burial – Moed Katan 27a, 27b
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**Sotah 14a:**

Rabbi Hama son of Rabbi Hanina further said: What does the text mean: You shall walk after the Adonai your God? (Deut. 13:5) Is it, then, possible for a human being to walk after the Shechinah; for has it not been said: For Adonai your God is a devouring fire? (Deut. 4:24). But [the meaning is] to walk after the qualities of character (midot) of the Holy One, blessed be God.

As God clothes the naked, for it is written (Gen.3:21):

> And Adonai God made Adam and his wife coats of skin, and clothed them, so do you also clothe the naked.

The Holy One, blessed be God, visited the sick, for it is written (Gen.18:1):

> And Adonai appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, so do you also visit the sick.

The Holy One, blessed be God, comforted mourners, for it is written (Gen. 25:11):

> And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son, so do you also comfort mourners.

The Holy One, blessed be God, buried the dead, for it is written (Deut. 34:6):

> And God buried him in the valley, so do you also bury the dead.
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And God buried him in the valley, so do you also bury the dead.

From this we learn that caring for the sick, comforting the mourning, and tending to the dead are high priorities in God's eyes. These are central to the work of the Chevrah Kadisha.
Respect

- Jewish community life revolves around family life cycle events
- Life cycle events show respect for our lives and our family members
- Death is considered part of the Jewish life cycle
- Chevrah Kadisha plays an important role in Jewish community life
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Moed Katan 27b

The Gemara relates that when Rav Hamnuna once happened to come to a place called Darumata, he heard the sound of a shofar announcing that a person had died in the town.

When he saw some people doing work, he said to them:

Let these people be under an excommunication. Is there not a dead person in town?

They said to him:

There are separate groups in the town, each one responsible for its own dead. Knowing that the deceased was not from our group, we continued our work.

He said to them:

If so, it is permitted to you, and he revoked his excommunication.

- Sefaria.com
Jewish community life revolves around family life cycle events. Life cycle events show respect for our lives and our family members. Death is considered part of the Jewish life cycle. Chevrah Kadisha plays an important role in Jewish community life.

From this we know there existed community groups dedicated to care of the dead in the 2nd century CE. These are the ancestors of today's Chevrot Kadisha.

Moed Katan 27b

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**Sotah 14a**

Moed Katan 27a and 27b:

At first ... The wealthy would bring the meal in baskets of silver and gold, and the poor would bring it in baskets of peeled willow branches. And the poor were embarrassed, as everyone would see that they were poor. The Sages instituted that everyone should bring the meal in baskets of peeled willow branches, due to the honor of the poor.

At first, they would serve wine in the house of the mourner during the first meal after the burial; the wealthy would do so in cups made from white glass, and the poor would serve this wine in cups of colored glass. And the poor were embarrassed, as everyone would see that they were poor. The Sages instituted that all should serve drinks in the house of the mourner in colored glass cups, due to the honor of the poor.

Furthermore, at first, they would uncover the faces of the wealthy who passed away and cover the faces of the poor, because their faces were blackened by famine. And the poor were embarrassed because they were buried in a different manner. The Sages instituted that everyone’s face should be covered, due to the honor of the poor. (continued next slide)
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`Sotah 14a`

`Moed Katan 27a and 27b`

Moed Katan 27a-b continued:

At first, the wealthy would take the deceased out for burial on a dargash, and the poor would take the deceased out on a plain bier made from poles that were strapped together, and the poor were embarrassed. The Sages instituted that everyone should be taken out for burial on a plain bier, due to the honor of the poor.

At first, they would place incense under the beds of those who died with an intestinal disease, because the body emitted an especially unpleasant odor. And those who were alive with an intestinal disease were embarrassed. The Sages instituted that incense should be placed under everyone, due to the honor of those with an intestinal disease who were still living.

(continued next slide)
Jewish death practices are discussed in the Talmud and Mishnah in various places. To begin with, consider:

- **Sotah 14a**

Moed Katan 27a and 27b continued:

At first, they would ritually immerse all the utensils that had been used by women who died while menstruating, and due to this, the living menstruating women were embarrassed. The Sages instituted that the utensils that had been used by all dying women must be immersed, to honor the living menstruating women. And, at first, they would ritually immerse all the utensils that had been used by zavin, men suffering from gonorrhea, who died, and due to this the living zavin felt embarrassed. The Sages instituted that the utensils that had been used by all men must be immersed, to honor the living zavin.

At first, taking the dead out for burial was more difficult for the relatives than the actual death, because it was customary to bury the dead in expensive shrouds, which the poor could not afford. So the poor would sometimes abandon the corpse and run away. This lasted until **Rabban Gamliel** waived his dignity, by leaving instructions that he be taken out for burial in linen garments. And the people adopted this practice after him and had themselves taken out for burial in linen garments. Rav Pappa said: And nowadays, everyone follows the practice of taking out the dead for burial even in plain hemp garments (**tzerada**) that cost only a dinar.

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**Rav Pappa** said: And nowadays, everyone follows the practice of taking out the dead for burial even in plain hemp garments (**tzerada**) that cost only a dinar.

From this we learn that all are equal in death, hence everyone should be treated equally –

- Simple, non-extravagant burial
- Everyone dressed in simple garments
- Funeral costs should be minimal for all

- Sefaria.com
Big Picture – Concluded

- Based on these values, Jewish death practices have evolved for more than two millennia
- Along the way, various important events colored and tailored this evolution
  - Emergence of Kabbalah as the major Jewish mystical understanding of death and afterlife
Based on these values, Jewish death practices have evolved for more than two millennia.

Along the way, various important events colored and tailored this evolution:

- Emergence of Kabbalah as the major Jewish mystical understanding of death and afterlife
- Publication of *Ma’avar Yabok* and several other books finally put in writing what was practiced, and hence, what should be practiced
- Invention of the printing press helped spread important books and thought
- Jewish expulsions forced Jews to recreate Jewish community practices, including cemeteries, burial societies, and rituals
- *Chevrot Kadisha* became the associations within Jewish society to handle death
Where Are We Now?

- Chevrot Kadisha organizations exist throughout the modern world
  - Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions both included
- The central elements and liturgy of the ritual of taharah are identical (for the most part) throughout the world
- Jews continue include respect for the living and respect for the dead as central to our values
- The past 50 years in North America have seen a rebirth of the mitzvot around the end of life in non-Orthodox communities