

Title- "Have you ever done anyone who was murdered?"

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"Have you ever done anyone who was murdered?" asked one child.

"No" I said as I chuckled to myself. I explained that those people who died a violent death are not allowed to have a taharah, the ritual cleaning but their bodies are respectfully clothed and put in a coffin for burial.

"Is there a lot of blood?" "Well...sometimes there is blood and you have to make sure you get it all wiped up and the wipes stays with the deceased, called the met in Hebrew, in the coffin", I answered.

"Are they naked?" "When we are doing the taharah they are naked but then afterwards we dress them in a special shroud".

"Are they wrinkled?" "If they are very elderly, they are wrinkled", I replied.

"Have you ever done a baby?" I shuddered and thank goodness I could answer "no".

These were some of the questions asked by the children in the 5th grade Shabbat School class. The class was studying the Jewish tradition and laws concerning death and mourning. I was there as a guest speaker to talk about the Hevra Kadisha of which I am a member. I

could see the parents cringing as the kids were asking what seemed to the parents as inappropriate questions. I thought it was great. I loved this captivated audience. I was there to talk about something that I consider so special and spiritual to me. I was there to share my experiences of being part of a process that gives dignity to a person who has just died.

Hevra Kadisha means holy society. It is the group of people who take on the task of shmira, the guarding of the deceased and taharah, purification and dressing of the deceased. In Judaism the respect, care and consideration shown to the dead person is of great importance starting with referring to the deceased as a met, a dead person, instead of a body. The soul is still there. Furthermore, everyone is treated equally in death. Tradition dictates that everyone is buried in a plain white shroud in a plain pine box.

" Why do you do it?" I'm asked whenever someone finds out I am a member of the Hevra. Usually you do not share that you are a member of the Hevra Kadisha. There seems to be a code that you don't go around bragging that you are a member. Yes it is an honor to belong. Yes it is considered a great mitzvah because you cannot be repaid. However that is not why I belong. You do not get any special recognition for being part of the Hevra.

This is what I believe. Life is a journey and death is a part of it. When someone dies, I believe there is a journey the soul of the met takes until burial. I believe the taharah ritual gives the met dignity and helps the soul in its passage. I believe by the gentle washing, the

purifying and saying "tahorah hi" while pouring the warm water from the silver buckets, dressing & wrapping the met in the simple white shroud and oh so carefully and reverently placing the met in the coffin I am participating in helping that soul on its way. I find it very meaningful and spiritual.

It isn't easy. There have been some taharot that were emotionally as well as physically difficult. I have known a few of the deceased. I did the taharah for one of my best friends who had died of a brain tumor. I had watched Laurie die over 20 months and here I was in the same room with her after her death. It was hard to keep from breaking down as I lovingly washed and dressed her. I remember her getting a pedicure just the week before and her loving that simple pleasure. And now here I was removing the polish from her toes. I was feeling such pain and sadness with her death but I was also so comforted that I could participate in this beautiful ritual and help her on her way.

"I want you to tell me all about it!" Said one daughter at her mother's funeral.

"I'm sorry but I cannot share that with you." I replied. I have done the taharot of mothers of friends of mine. The hard part was being asked by my friends to share details of the taharah and to gently let them know that I could not discuss it with them. While I wanted them to be comforted by knowing their mothers were carefully cared for, I didn't feel it was appropriate for them to know the details. To this day I will carry with me the memory of my friend, Laurie, as I placed her in the coffin. It was gut wrenching. I truly understand why family members are not allowed to take part in the taharah. It is a memory no one should have of their loved one.

The most difficult taharah I have ever participated in was of a young mother. I knew who the deceased was. I knew the circumstances of her death. I knew the pain the community was experiencing. I volunteered to do this taharah. I especially wanted to help her on her journey. I wanted to make sure that she was taken care of. This was a way I could pay my respects to her. Afterwards, I broke down sobbing. I never really think of God when I am participating in a taharah. I am doing a mitzvah that is part of my belief and spiritual system. However this was one of those "this is so wrong" times. I kept thinking of the young son who lost his mother. I came away from the taharah not feeling that I helped the deceased on her way. I came away pained and questioning.

I loved sharing with those 5th graders how important the rituals for death and mourning are in Judaism. I was so glad to let them and their parents know about the incredibly spiritual and respectful care given to the deceased. Maybe when their loved ones die, they will remember this process and get comfort from it.