



What is Tahara?

by Ruth Chevin and Jeff Klein

This is the second of three articles on the subject of Jewish responses to death.

The first article, published in the September issue of Kol Israel, talked about funeral homes in our area. To review: The Hevra Kadisha has researched local funeral homes, especially in light of the closure of Goodwin, and recommends three that are particularly open and sensitive to Jewish ritual. They are Lambert in Manchester, Petit- Roan in Suncook, Waters in Concord. We will go wherever you need us, but we ask that you consider choosing one of these three.

The third article on this subject, slated for the November issue, will go into some detail about the Hevra Kadisha, its members and its history.

Today we will discuss *tahara*.

Tahara means purification. It is a physical and spiritual cleansing of the deceased Jew in preparation for internment in the earth.

Tahara is done by men for men, and by women for women. For the most part these rituals are performed by volunteers from the Jewish community who train specifically for this purpose and who make themselves available when a Jew dies.

But what is it? What is *tahara* like?

First of all, today, *tahara* is a choice. When someone dies, the family will decide whether they want *tahara* for their person - in the same way as *bar* and *bat mitzvah* is a choice, as are all the other Jewish rituals - *brit mila*, naming, marriage etc. *Tahara* is the penultimate ritual done for a Jewish person, to be followed by burial.

When there is a call for *tahara*, the Hevra Kadisha convenes in the funeral home. Four men or four women will enter the room where the *met/meta* (deceased person) awaits, covered and ready.

The process begins with a long prayer in Hebrew in which those present ask for mercy for this specific person, invoking the person's Hebrew name and the names of his or her parents, praying for a release from all bad things, for forgiveness for any sins or misdeeds, in the names of our ancestors, etc.

Observing all modesty, there follows a gentle patting with wet cloths, removing remains of bandages or signs of illness. There is a manicure and combing of hair.

A psalm is recited from the Song of Songs in which the *met/meta* is praised in particular for their physical beauty - their beautiful hair and skin and eyes, and also their good deeds in life.

Then comes the pouring of 9 *kavim* of water over the deceased person, while declaring in Hebrew, *tahar hu*, or *tahara hi*, meaning "he is pure," or "she is pure." Technically, nine *kavim* of water is a substitute for *mikvah*. Nine *kavim* is approximately 27 quarts of water. It is poured over the person in one continuous flow from neck to feet, for which the group uses 3 buckets of warm water. As one bucket empties, the next begins.

Following the washing, the person is dried, and dressed in *tachrichim*, the white linen "equalizer" in the sense that at death, if not in life, all Jews are equal, as symbolized by the fact that they are dressed alike, except for minor differences between men's and women's outfits. Both men and women have pants, a long shirt, a jacket with a collar over the shirt, a hat, face cover and a sash. Each part of the outfit is tied with special knots. All the while that the person is being dressed, more psalms are being recited.

It's hard to describe just how clean and pure the *met/meta* looks after the white linen *tachrichim* have been put on. You would have to be there.

The kosher coffin, called an *aron*, is ready and waiting, and the person is placed inside. More psalms. Sand from Israel is sprinkled inside.

Finally, one or more members of the Hevra address the deceased in their own words. They ask for forgiveness if they have done anything wrong. The intention was to purify physically and spiritually to the satisfaction of the deceased. Please accept an apology for any errors.

The wooden lid is put in place. The coffin is wheeled out while a final prayer is said. It's a familiar one - *va y'hi binsoah ha aron va yomer Moshe...*

The Hevra members do a ritual hand washing for themselves. That's it.

The question remains, why do this? For an answer to that question, it would be best to attend Rabbi Gary's forthcoming class on this subject, date and time to be announced. Look for a notice after the holidays.

Best wishes for a shana tova, stay healthy and live long!