

The work of "The Holy Committee" in performing a Jewish tahara

A group interview with Zena Marks, Katarzyna Rolzinski & Helen Sizemore
Introduction by Eva Strauss-Rosen

Eva Strauss-Rosen:

I am proud to live here in Willits. In our community, people participate and help each other in birth, death and other life-cycle events. I have realized that even if you are a very private person, as I am, you can't be successful in going through difficult situations all alone. When I lost my first husband fifteen years ago, I didn't know how to respond adequately. I found that the next best thing was to help somebody else. So when Rabbi Margaret Holub from the Mendocino coast started a group to study the tradition of the chevra kadisha (holy committee) that performs the tahara (ritual washing and preparation of the body after death), I was eager to join. We studied and met together monthly for about a year. I learned many things about this tradition that goes back thousands of years. For instance, the garments a person is buried in have the same names and shapes as those worn by the high priest in the temple in Jerusalem. The only difference is

that a burial shroud is made from simple cotton cloth.

In Judaism, there are 613 mitzvot (good deeds). A tahara is considered a mitzvah (good deed). These practices give meaning to my life so much more than the material things. Doing the mitzvah of the tahara has been tremendously rewarding. When you receive a phone call that someone has died, everyday activities cease. Since burial must take place within twenty-four hours, the implements we use are stored at someone's house and available to us when we need them. When women are doing the tahara, the men take care of the practical matters of the burial arrangements.

It is very helpful to have a ritual to follow when someone dies. It is not generally recommended that a family member be present at the tahara because of their emotional state, but if they so wish, they are welcome to participate. I was happy to be the one to lead the tahara for Zena's mother, and that Zena joined us in the ceremony when she felt that calling.

Zena Marks:

My mother died of lung cancer on October 2, 1997. I remember a number of things about that time. One was being connected to a community of women friends and to the feeling of support I had from them.

My mom died on the morning of the last day of the Jewish year, Rosh Hashanah—a very symbolic time. We didn't expect her to hold on so long, and I actually believe that on some level, she chose this time to pass away. I went from the experience of losing

her in the morning to Rosh Hashanah services in the evening.

A *tahara* was planned for the next day. I didn't know any of the specifics of

what was to happen except that it involved ritual washing. My mother also had no knowledge of it. From the time of her childhood she had rejected the ritual

aspects of Judaism. A non-Jewish woman named Ellie, who took care of my mother for us occasionally, told us that mom outlined exactly what was going to happen, describing every aspect of the ritual. This was also very mystifying to me. I have to believe that my mother saw the ritual in a vision because she had no intellectual knowledge of this



Helen Sizemore, Zena Marks & Katarzyna Rolzinski (l. to r.) Photo by Jerri-Jo Idarius

tradition. What Ellie had shared with me was overwhelming to my rational mind, but at the same time it opened me up to questions of a spiritual nature: What is time—present, future and past? Do we exist in all times simultaneously, and are we capable of visiting every aspect of our lives in life and death?

My mother felt that she had a very good and long life. This acceptance made her death easier for me. In the terminal days she was hallucinating a lot. On occasion I believe she was describing angels floating above and circling around her. I tried to help her let go by telling her to fly with the angels.

As I sat in the funeral home with Kararzyna before the others arrived, I didn't want to participate in the ritual. Halfway through, however, that feeling changed and I knew I needed to become part of the process. It was the right time, and definitely the right decision.

Katarzyna Rolzinski:

As I listen to you describe your mother's death and angels coming for her, the theme of taking a journey comes to mind.

I remember the actual moment when I was invited to participate in the *chevra kadisha* as clearly as if it were right now. I was writing a paper on one of the Eleusinian Mysteries—the mother-daughter ritual story of Persephone and Demeter—and the phone rang. It was Helen Sizemore asking me if I would like to participate in a Jewish ritual to wash Zena's mother's body after she died. My body immediately went through a number of visceral changes. I was taken aback, but I also felt this would be a profound opportunity for me and immediately agreed to do it. I felt as if I were preparing to take a trip to a foreign and faraway place where I didn't know the language or the customs. It also felt like a special honor. I would be the only non-Jewish participant, but was also the only one who had been close to Rae. I had known her daughter, Zena, for over twenty-five years.

After morning Rosh Hashanah services in Ukiah, I drove over to Lake County with Zena and her husband. They were going to bury Rae in Los Angeles next to

Zena's father, so we were packing and making preparations for the trip. That was another part of the journey.

At the mortuary Zena and I sat in the room with the pine coffin, listening to chant music and looking through various books on death and dying. As though looking through travel guides to a totally unknown place, we still didn't know how to prepare. When the other women arrived with the various accoutrements for our journey, we went to the embalming room, and Helen put scarves on our heads.

Helen Sizemore:

The *chevra kadisha* participates in holy work—work you can't do unless you have made a conscious decision and are ready. You cannot be part of a holy committee and not embrace holiness. To step into the circle to go on that journey usually requires a hardship, beginning with carving out the space in your calendar and making mental and emotional preparations as well. A ritual takes you into another realm. Going into the sacred arena is one part. Coming out on the other side requires certain practices and time frames. Stepping back into daily activity has to be done with care.

After the burial, the immediate family can sit *shivah*—have a week of mourning at their house with the community visiting and bringing food and diversion to sustain and help them with the transition. People coming to support family members for the week hopefully gives enough time for them to go through a day without breaking down. They can begin to come back to life.

The fact that Rae's death occurred during the context of a high holy day is noteworthy. A practitioner of Judaism has obligations as a worshipper to do things at the right time, and the high holy days create special parameters.

That Rae's body had to be transported hundreds of miles was another unique factor. This meant that burial was delayed beyond the required twenty-four-hour time frame. In today's world, the *chevra kadisha* has to decide how to handle these and other special circumstances. For instance, more people are choosing cremation, which is also not traditionally

acceptable in Jewish practice.

Of the four *taharas* I have participated in, only one was followed by a traditional Jewish burial. One was for a non-Jewish family. The daughter wanted a spiritual ceremony in preparation for her mother's burial, and although we performed the ritual washing, we did not follow the *tahara* structure.

Katarzyna:

At the end of the *tahara* for Rae, we respectfully rolled the gurney from the embalming room to the area where the coffin was sitting. We physically placed her body into the coffin, Zena put some personal items in with her, and then we closed the lid. I feel tingles even now to think of that finalizing act. We then stood in a circle, sang and chanted, hugged each other, and left. I felt jarred by having to climb into the van for the ride back to Ukiah. Some of the women were quiet, and some talked about their everyday lives. This part of the journey seemed like a twilight zone—as if we were between two worlds, trying to locate the bridge. Nothing we said seemed to relate to anything, as if we were speaking in tongues.

When I got home, I remember not functioning for about three days. I didn't answer the telephone; I didn't go out of my house. I have learned that it takes me a long time to make a transition, so I didn't fight it. I stayed in that sacred realm. Experience had acquainted me with a deep place in myself that was waiting to be found. It seemed like an old friend—death. I don't feel we can truly live until we become acquainted with death and open to it.

Zena:

I left right after saying goodbye to Mom. We drove to my son's home in Fremont, slept for a few hours, and then got up and drove to Los Angeles. When we got there, my mother's body hadn't arrived yet. We were feeling quite frantic—afraid she wouldn't get there in time for her own funeral! She just barely did. We had a small private ceremony, with just a few relatives and a wonderful rabbi.

Mother wrote beautifully. After her cancer diagnosis, I encouraged her to write down her thoughts. She wrote them

on bits and pieces of scratch paper and was thrilled when I put them together on the computer. She wanted this writing to be given to people after she died. Sharing her words and memories became part of the service and was a help to us all. The rabbi was happy to know something of her thoughts. When he said he wished he had known her when she was alive, I felt he meant it; he was a very soulful person.

We drove back home that night, and I had to go to work right away. That next day I found myself working by rote; I wasn't really there.

Katarzyna:

Back to when we walked into the embalming room—I had no idea what to expect. The place was antiseptic and not at all cozy-looking, but it was practical. There was a drain on the floor for the water. I noticed a gurney on one end, and a sheet-covered body. I looked around the room and thought, “Ah-ha—that must be Rae over there. I wonder what it will be like when that sheet is lifted.” I had never even seen a dead body before and was very aware of all the ways my senses were being affected.

It was very important to have the container of a structured ritual. Eva led it. She told us that for the next hour and a half we should plan to be quiet. She further described ways to show respect for Rae's body. We washed our hands, put on rubber gloves, lit candles, used clean white cotton, and did everything in a ritualized sequence.

Rae was quite short, and used to dye her hair red. When she talked, her eyes would sparkle and glitter. I realized that her body was no more “Rae” than the gloves I was wearing. It was devoid of Rae's brightness and energy. I kept asking myself, “What is life? What does it mean to be somebody?”

As we washed Rae, parts of me became more present and alive. We removed the sheet for each specific part of the body we washed, and recited prescribed prayers. I thought to myself, “If she were alive, her fingers, hands, arms, and so many parts could be removed, but as long as her spirit remained, she would be Rae.”

Other thoughts also came through: “What if my own body were lying there?” or “What if this were my mother's body?” When she was first taken out of refrigeration and was so cold, I remember thinking, “This is what a turkey is like when it is thawed out—oh, but this isn't appropriate!” There were so many layers and levels to the experience. As we prayed words from the “Song of Songs,” I felt we were acknowledging the beauty and importance of the life Rae had known.

Helen:

One important part of the Jewish tradition is to send a person to burial with as little blood lost as possible. In the case of an open wound, you have to be very careful not to wash away blood; if there is blood on any clothing, the person has to be buried in that clothing. This changes the action, but not the intention.

The primary idea is purification. Gloves are optional but commonly used—due to our awareness of blood-borne pathogens and transmissible germs. We purify ourselves to do our work; the dead person can't take a shower to get ready to move into the next realm, so we wash her as if she is having a *mikvah*—a ritual bath. We clean her well and thoroughly, front and back, using a measured eight quarts of warm water. After she is physically clean, we do the spiritual washing, using another measured amount of warm water, and then dress her in the white burial shroud.

Katarzyna:

During a short break between two parts of the ritual, Zena came in. She didn't know that she was entering during the break, but her timing was perfect.

Zena:

Yes, I felt moved to go in at that moment.

Helen:

After the cleansing part of the ritual, a blessing is given and then three quarts of warm water are poured in a continuous flow—always with respect—while keeping all other parts of the body covered for modesty. After drying, the body is dressed in the shroud. It is next to impossible to put regular clothes on a dead person; the clothes have to be cut

to get them on. The shroud, on the other hand, has big openings for the arms and drawstring pieces. It is yardage that has been cut and shaped. In our simplistic view of heaven, the angels are sitting around on clouds, all dressed in these same clothes. Everybody is equal. She will travel the same route as other Jews have traveled for the past 5,000 years—in a dignified way.

A bow is tied with three loops to represent *shin*, a letter of the alphabet associated with a specific number and Kabbalistic meaning. In Israel, or in a big city, someone would be designated as “the reader” of various prayers and scriptures. These words help maintain the intention and eliminate mind chatter. Since we don't all speak Hebrew, there is a benefit to listening to the readings in both Hebrew and English.

Katarzyna:

I liked that each of us read some of the prayers. This made us seem more like a community, and that was very important to me. Seven women came together and participated in this very profound, intimate, spiritual time together, and then dispersed. Now, when I see any of these women around town, I feel an unspoken connection with them.

In the ritual dressing for Rae's journey, the final pieces of clothing were a bonnet, and a piece of cloth on her face. I was reminded of when a baby comes into the world and we buy it a layette with loose clothing and booties.

Helen:

What I like about the Jewish Renewal Movement is that I can go to a very old tradition and pull out pieces to practice today. Some things are being reworked because they don't resonate with us any more or because they disempower us. But there is a strong energy among women to revisit the Jewish path, and to renew certain very old traditions and to bring them into the twenty-first century.

Katarzyna:

The importance of ritual is to make meaningful connection in community. Having the body of the deceased person in the home and washing, preparing and

dressing it for burial were common even in the early twentieth century. Death was part of the rhythm of life. Today we deny old age and death, but the option to care for the dying person at home is returning. With programs such as Hospice, perhaps a critical mass of baby boomers will consider new options for death and dying.

Zena:

My mother wanted to die with dignity at home and not at the hospital. That wouldn't have been possible without Hospice. Through Hospice, a chaplain came to our house, and although he wasn't Jewish he tried to find Hebrew prayers for her. Although she had little to do with Christians, she responded to this man because she could see that he respected her beliefs. Often they remained in silence, just being there together for periods of time.

Katarzyna:

My personal connection with Rae was a springboard to the mystery and



Zena and Rae Photo provided

beauty of the journey—to an intimacy with death. The ritual contains ancient wisdom, recognizing the human need to keep a focus that allows spirit to take us through the phases of the death transition.

It would be a comforting thought to know that when I die, this ritual would happen for me. I feel it is important to recognize different traditions, and also to be reminded that there is a spiritual wisdom that can contain us all.

Eva Strauss-Rosen was born in Copenhagen and emigrated to Israel in 1968. She studied several fine arts in both countries and moved to Willits in 1984, where she maintains a jewelry studio. Her Judaica jewelry designs can be seen on the web at www.hamsa.com.

Zena Marks, M.S.W., came to northern California in 1974 and over the years worked as a psychotherapist at the Department of Mental Health in both Mendocino and Lake counties. After retirement at the end of 1998, she accepted part-time employment at the Mendocino Community Health Clinic at their Lakeport office. She and her husband have recently relocated to Cloverdale.

Katarzyna Rolzinski came to Ukiah in 1968. She was a supervisor at the Department of Social Services, and then deputy director of CEMR until 1980, when she moved to Washington, D.C. to do national education and consulting work. In 1991 she went to Guatemala, and returned to Ukiah in 1993. She will graduate with a Ph.D. from the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco in May 2000.

Helen Sizemore moved to Ukiah in 1976. She has worked locally for Assemblyman Dan Hauser and in the successful political campaigns of Dan Hamburg (U.S. House of Representatives) and Kristy Kelly (Ukiah City Council). She was executive assistant and human resources manager at Real Goods, Inc., for five years, and is currently working in the human resources department of North Coast Opportunities. ~

Crémation on the Ganges

by Julie, a spiritual pilgrim

In India I had the powerful experience of watching a cremation on the Ganges River, at the burning ghats at Varanasi. The wealthy people pay someone to take the body there and to do the work of the cremation, but the poor people do it themselves. This is quite a job. As I stood and watched for a couple of hours from a bridge, I felt that I saw the purpose of that work and how the poor people get the most benefit.

The body is put on a pile of burning logs, and has to be kept there until it completely burns. When it starts to fall apart, the parts have to be put back on the fire. The person in charge has to stay until there is nothing left but ashes. They have to leave it clean for the next person. This entire process takes about four hours.

Watching this was such a beautiful experience for me. It took just long enough that I got through my thinking and came into a stillness. For a certain amount of time the body was

enshrouded recognizably, and in one piece. You could still think of it as that person, but as you watched and grieved and remembered, the form would become less and less like a body. Parts would come off and disappear into ashes. By the end, the concept of the person that has been locked into your mind is also gone. When you watch someone turn to ashes, your mind cannot hold on to them.

I think it is important for us, and even for children, to see what happens to the body after death. In this way, we won't have false ideas that the person might come back or that they are asleep. For me, watching the burning was a spiritual experience. The person turns into something ethereal, and smoke is the closest representation of that transformation on the physical level. The soul is released, free to go to the plane of immortality. The body, as the sacred vehicle, has finished its journey and is ready for reconfiguration into something else. ~

everything wants to return

*a flame as it burns
is only going back to its beginnings
a tree stretching towards the sky
is actually tilting
is really seeking the center of the earth
that is the tree's return
the fish tires of its flesh as soon as
it is spawned and wants to reveal
its elegant skeleton
the flower wants to be seed
the grass aches for its wheaty demise
what's thrown towards heaven craves descent
everything wants to return
look
my fingers begin their early
curling inward my hair would be the color
of nothing my eyes the same dimming from
sky to cloud
my teeth, tired of their white story
seem to remember ancient stones will go
back there will go back
and bones have their own dream of returning
will fragment split and splinter
sift descend settle
until the final
—listen—
sigh*

by Susan Maeder

from *White Song*
Pot Shard Press, Comptche