

## Parasha Chukkat

### What have we Learned about our Tradition's Response to Death this past year?

Numbers 19:1 - 21:1, June 19, 2021

by Cynthia Whitehead

The parsha opens with Adonai instructing Moses and Aaron “This is the ritual law that Adonai has commanded” - *Zot chukkat haTorah*.

Verses 3-10 describe the ritual in detail, concluding with “This shall be a permanent law for the Israelites and for the strangers who reside among you.” But why? And why is it so important? We don't know.

Only in verse 11 are Moses and Aaron told *when* such an elaborate ritual must be performed: Anyone who touches the corpse of any human being shall be ritually impure for seven days. The ritual makes the ritually impure person who is “*tamei*” ritually pure again (*tabor*).

In verse 21, Adonai emphasizes again: “That shall be for them a law for all time.

Then in the next sentence the text then jumps ahead 38 years to when the Israelites arrive at Kadesh - a holy place - where Miriam dies and is buried.

Then they travel on to Mt. Hor, where Adonai tells Moses and Aaron to ascend the mountain where Moses removes Aaron's vestments and put them on his son Eleazar. Aaron dies. The people see Eleazar coming down the mountain in his father's vestments and know that Aaron has died. They mourn Aaron for 30 days.

So according to the text Miriam simply dies and is buried. We can only guess at the rituals that were performed so long ago, but we can believe that Miriam died surrounded by people who loved and honored her.

Aaron dies on the mountaintop in the company of only his brother, and is mourned by the people for 30 days.

Miriam's dying, death and burial are not related in the Torah, but we can imagine how she and her family would have been carried and comforted by the community through the process of dying, *tahara* - the washing, cleansing and clothing of the body for burial, burial and mourning. We can imagine how the people mourned her passing.

But Aaron, despite his honors and role as High Priest, died on Mt. Har, away from home, far from his family and people, and the Torah does not tell us what was done with his body. It does not tell us whether his helpless body received tahara. Who could have washed, cleansed and clothed Aaron's body on the mountain top? Was Eleazer, his son, given a period of transition where he could mourn his father despite immediately assuming his father's position as High Priest. Was there shiva? Shloshim? Perhaps the latter.

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Miriam's death could represent death "as usual" in the Israelite community of the time. The rituals were well-known and well-practiced so they did not need to be described.

Aaron's death is more like the deaths during the Covid pandemic this past year - alone, separated from family and community, without receiving the traditional rituals of comfort, cleansing and burial.

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Flash forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The purposes and rituals relating to the end of life and mourning in Jewish communities have evolved to meet changing circumstances and needs over the past thousands of years. We are still responding and evolving.

This past week more than 200 people from multiple countries gathered online for the 19<sup>th</sup> annual Chevra Kadisha and Jewish Cemetery conference. It was the largest and most diverse Chevra Kadisha conference ever, with 56 sessions over four days.

The Chevra Kadisha are the holy society of a Jewish community - they respond to the needs of members of the community relating the end of life, burial and mourning. At Netivot Shalom, our Chevra is ably led by Mary Breiner and Shari Rifas.

And as many of you know, our Rabbi emeritus Stuart Kelman was co-founder of Kavod v'Nichum, meaning "honor and comfort", a non-profit whose mission is to restore to Jewish death and bereavement practices, the traditions and values of honoring the dead (kavod hameit) and comforting the bereaved (nichum aveilim). A mission we all can share and participate in.

After more than 20 years of sustained, dedicated effort by Kavod v'Nichum and people throughout Jewish communities around the world, and after more than a year of suffering in this pandemic, how are our diverse communities fulfilling the mission of honoring the dead and comforting mourners during this pandemic? And where are we going from here?

First, what does it mean for a community to provide honor and comfort to its members from the first inhalation of a newborn infant to the last exhalation of the dying?

One image came up repeatedly at the conference, and one midwife nurse practitioner described it like this:

“As a midwife, I take the newborn, wet and bloody  
hold the child  
hear its first breath and cry  
wash and cloth it  
and place it down.”

And speaking as a member of a Chevra Kadisha team doing tahara – preparing the body of a person who has died for burial:

“Now I am midwifing the deceased  
who has taken their last breath  
I clean the body  
ritually wash  
spiritually cleanse the body  
clothe the body  
in plain white garments  
hold the body  
and place it down in the casket.”

We do this Chesed Shel Emet (truest act of kindness) while reciting special prayers, beseeching God to lift the soul into the Heavens and eternal rest.

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Looking ahead, Rabbi Stuart and the participants at the conference – including our member and friend Sam Salkin, Executive Director of the Chevra Kadisha and Sinai Memorial Chapel, and many people from the Bay Area – see four areas of learning and change in our Jewish rituals of death and mourning coming out of the tragedies of the Covid pandemic:

**First, tahara** – washing and cleansing the body of the deceased. We know the power of being physically present in rituals of death and mourning. This past year, we have learned the excruciating anguish of being unable to physically touch and comfort our dying loved ones, of watching over the body and standing at the grave. The profound – and profoundly comforting – rituals of tahara, burial and mourning have been cut off.

In response, some Chevra have created rituals of spiritual tahara – called tahara ruchanit – to replace the physical rituals. tahara ruchanit is a beautiful and meaningful substitute that seeks to simulate and represent fulfillment of the functions of tahara. But we will expect that we will be restoring traditional physical tahara as quickly as possible.

**Second, Shmira** – guarding the body until the burial. Here the pandemic has taught us the power of the virtual – Zoom, FaceTime, WhatsApp and other means of digital connection. People who want to participate in shmira are no longer prevented by distance. They can show their respect and say farewell to the deceased by acting as a Shomer/Shomeret from anywhere they can access a digital connection.

**Third, Shiva** – Like Shmira, this ritual has been substantially broadened and deepened to include people who are not in the same location as the body. The change has been profoundly beneficial, not only by bringing together entire families, mourners and communities. It also allows respite to the mourners because these calls can be scheduled in advance. Mourners are not forced to respond according to the schedules of the visitors.

Also, the ability to record Shiva minyanim and visits and funerals can create a lasting source of stories and comfort for the mourners. Memorial services can be streamed and recorded. Sinai Mortuary can stream from the graveside. Last week I heard the story of a man whose mother died while he was very young; today, when he had grown up and his generation had largely passed on, he was left with little sense of who she was and almost no stories about her.

**Fourth, The challenge** – in coming years is to deepen the way Jewish communities in this country deal with death. Much has been accomplished over the past 20 years to rediscover, restore and regenerate Jewish traditions providing honor and comfort at the end of life. Much remains to be done.

Let us remember the very different deaths of Miriam and Aaron. Let us promise that **together** we will bring comfort to the dying, honor the dead, comfort the mourners, and pass the learning we are constantly gaining in this holy work to ever-widening circles of our communities.

From the first inhalation and cry of a newborn child to the last exhalation and ultimate silence of someone we love.

Shabbat shalom.