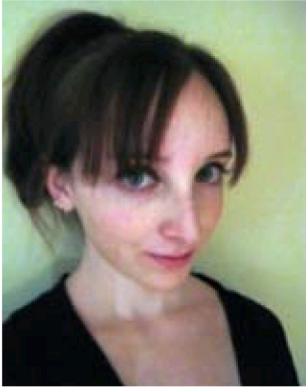


Keeping Death Alive:

How Burial Preparation Became a Rite of Passage

By **JD**



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JD is an undergraduate student at New York University. She is the youngest person in the United States to do work with a Jewish organization called Chevra Kadisha, which prepares bodies for burial.

—DJB

...Blood kept seeping out of her mouth and trickling down the sides of her neck. The blood was such a bright red color against her yellow skin. I put cotton in her mouth to stop the bleeding. Her eyes were half way open watching us prepare her. I helped turn her to one side. As I was doing so I felt her cold, clammy skin stick to my forearm. We washed her once. Dried her. Washed her a second time. One of the women had to leave the room a few times for fresh air. Without leaving I pulled my mask higher up above the bridge of my nose. A woman cracked two eggs to wash in the hair and she mixed them with red wine. We had a difficult time dressing her in a muslin shirt and pants. I stuck my arm through the sleeve of the shirt and pulled her boney fingers through it. I could feel her cold skin through my glove. We removed a lot of straw from the coffin so she could fit inside. Then we used a mechanical lift to lower her in the pine box. After we sprinkled soil from Israel and said a prayer, a woman placed pottery pieces on her eyes and lips. We placed a wooden cover on the coffin and we spread a black cover on top. I threw away my mask, apron, and gloves. We left the woman in the box in the cold room. My dad picked me up and we went to a street fair. I saw an old man walking near us and all I could think was, "Someday he will be yellow and purple inside a wooden box."

Since the age of 12 I have recorded all of the taharas I volunteer for in a Jewish organization called Chevra Kadisha, which prepares the spirit to move on from the deceased body. Tahara means, "restoration of its pure state." Evidently, these taharas led me to believe in a very daunting perspective about death and dying. When I physically prepared the deceased for burial it took me a long time to realize the unity of body and mind because I was only experiencing half of this holistic consciousness. Now I perform taharas in a new light. I realized how the psychedelic experience illuminates the true core of religions, which keep death alive.

Psychedelics led me through "a process of deep self-exploration and inner transformation." I experienced a psychological death and re-birth. Joan Halifax and Stanislav Grof describe in *The Human Encounter With Death* that this experience leads one to realize how, "a positive feeling about life and a deep sense of the meaning of one's own existence are not contingent on complicated external conditions." After acknowledging how love is the core of my true self, I remained connected with this commonality in every other human and in Eastern and Western belief systems.

According to Judaism, performing a tahara is the greatest mitzvah, or act of human kindness, one can perform because the deceased cannot return the favor. This kind of act also exists through dharma which means "duty," "righteousness," "law and order," or "religion," and mitzvah literally means "commandment." In the Jewish and Buddhist tradition performing mitzvahs and following one's dharma leads to liberation. During a tahara the deceased are not embalmed, their muslin clothing symbolizes a newborn's blanket, and they are buried in a bio-degradable wooden coffin. They return naturally to the earth the same way they arrived. In Hebrew, ruach translates as "the breath of god." Judaism uses it to describe the soul. Similarly, in Buddhism atman is the vital breath of human beings and can be translated as soul. During birth, the ruach or atman trusts others to bring it into this world and during a tahara the soul trusts others to organically retire its body back into the earth. These spiritual parallels (among others) are interconnected throughout various belief systems and their foundational commonalities are what keep us in tune with one another. The death and re-birth experience reveals a universal light which illuminates the undying love in us all. •