

human comfort that our tradition and our Jewish community should have offered.

These rituals provide comfort by structuring those agonizing hours and days immediately after a death, and far beyond as well. In one sense, it doesn't even altogether matter what the content of the ritual might be—just that one lights a candle, opens a window, tears a shirt, covers a mirror, provides comfort, does *something* to begin recovering from the rending of death. It is additionally comforting that these rites have been performed by our ancestors for generations, that they are observed in memory of others in the community, and that they will no doubt be conducted on our behalf one day as well. And behind the particular symbols and words of Jewish burial tradition there is a theology that is wise and coherent. Mourners may not be thinking about theology, but the water, the light, and the roundness are all comforting and healing at whatever level they are received.

Jewish traditions also provide an opportunity for the Jewish community to extend itself to a person in grief. Janet and her family were well known and loved. But many of the people who visited, cooked, dug, built, hauled, and mourned were not close friends. They were community, and they knew that a mitzvah needed to be done. I am quite certain that almost every person who helped out while Janet was ill and after she died counts it as a privilege to have been involved. Had we not known and practiced these Jewish traditions, there would have been no less goodwill. But it would have been much harder to figure out how to demonstrate it.

Since we have been organized, our Hevra Kadisha has offered its services to other households in which neither the person who died nor the survivors have identified themselves as particularly Jewish. The fact that our community is becoming knowledgeable about these customs—that we have dedicated a Jewish cemetery, that we store a kosher coffin and shrouds right there with our Torah-school supplies and prayer books, and that we as a community have found meaning in these mitzvot—has made them accessible to people who might not know to request them on their own. Family and friends in our Jewish community who have elected tra-

ditional burial for their loved ones have inevitably been moved and comforted by the traditions themselves and by the *kavvanah*, the intentionality, with which we offer them. And these experiences have drawn people toward other facets of Jewish life as well.

Over and over, both Jews and non-Jews have remarked to me how lucky the Jewish people is to have this remarkable body of tradition to offer for comfort and healing when there is a death. It has been true for us, and not just about death. I believe that these practices have made us more connected to each other and to the rest of Jewish tradition. Our *b'nei mitzvah* celebrations are more festive than they were. When my husband and I married last year, our Jewish community was present for us in ways that still overwhelm us when we recall them. I don't think that this would be true were it not for the experiences we have had struggling to be present when someone here has died. These traditions that surround death have brought us Jewishly to life.

## Bubby's Last Gift

Debbie Friedman

She was so rigid. It was unlike her. There was a time when she was free and easy and open. When I touched her, she didn't respond to me at all. Her smile was gone, her touch was cold. She would not look at me. And no matter how loudly I called to her, she would not answer me.

It was hard to be angry with her. After all, this was all beyond her control. She would have been different if she could have been. I know that.

Once she was five feet two. She was only about four feet eight now. She was ninety-two. Soon she would be ninety-three.

She had put on some weight since she had stopped walking. She had forgotten her routine. Her body had more wrinkles than years. One knew by looking that this was a body that had endured years of challenge and hard times. One could see that perseverance and determination kept her alive. It filtered down to all of us as well.

Though our wrinkles were not yet showing, we were who we were because of her.

She was so cold. I guess they kept her in the refrigerator. It was hard to imagine that she didn't need a blanket or a sweater or something to keep her warm. I wondered if she was even there. I think that she had finally left to go be with all of the family and friends whom she so loyally and routinely blessed in Gan Eden every Shabbat as she blessed the candles.

I have often stood at the kitchen sink preparing dinner. I have scrubbed the vegetables clean to make certain there was no mud and have attempted to use a special solution from the health-food store that would neutralize and ingest any toxic chemicals present.

I have stood at the sink night after night in preparation for bed. First I flossed, then I put toothpaste on my toothbrush, and soap on my hands and face, and washed myself so that I would be fresh for bed.

I have often snuggled with my dog and found a flea or two, and in a frantic neurotic moment, I have run her into the shower with me and covered her with herbal antiflea shampoo to suffocate the fleas and attempt to make the eggs very unhappy.

It was December 1992. It was not time for bed, there were no insecticides present, there were no fleas. Bubby had died.

I had called the mortuary to make arrangements for Bubby's funeral. I explained that she was to go back to Utica, New York, that she was not to travel on Shabbat, and that she was to have *taharah*. They charged \$175 for the *taharah*, but I did not care about the money. There was nothing too good for my bubby. I knew that this was a mitzvah and that it was inappropriate to charge for such a service.

I found out also that the Palm Springs "*Taharah Queen*" did the *taharah* herself and when she finished, she called the undertakers to help her with the body. This was not acceptable to me. Bubby was going to have a kosher *taharah* even if I had to do it myself.

I called my friend Devorah Jacobson, who was a rabbi. She had been part of a Hevra Kadisha in St. Louis. I asked her if she would help me. She said, "It would be an honor."

"Devorah," I said, "would it be okay if my mom and I helped you?" She told me that it would be fine. Mom said she would do it and arrived at the funeral home the next morning to help. Two other close friends joined us. We would need at least four people to do this.

When I was little, I walked upstairs every morning to help Bubby get dressed. She wore a bra that had about a hundred fifty hooks and eyes. For her it was an arthritic nightmare, but I helped her fasten her bra every morning. It was a big job, but I always got my reward. I got to stay upstairs and have oatmeal with Bubby and Zadie every morning. I can only imagine how she managed all those years that we were separated.

The *taharah* was to begin. "Put on rubber gloves," they said. I didn't want to do it. There was nothing of which I was afraid. My bubby was not diseased, she was dead. I put the gloves on at their insistence. They said that you never know what you might pick up in a hospital.

"Bubby," I said, "if I do anything to humiliate you or cause you embarrassment during your *taharah*, I ask your forgiveness in advance. I ask that you know that I would never do anything to cause you shame or humiliation or embarrassment."

Bubby said nothing to any of us. We all knew that she understood that we were there to help make her passage one of gentleness and comfort.

We had three very large pails filled with water. We read psalms, we read *Eishet Chayil* ("A Woman of Valor"), and poured the water from the head down to the feet as we held her and whispered, "*Taharah he*," "She is pure." We did it again and again. I took off the rubber gloves, figuring that throughout the course of history they did not have such gloves. I wanted to touch her, and I knew that God would not only understand but would keep me from contracting any disease.

As the water washed down her body, it splashed on our aprons and clothes and the floor. I flashed on what it was that I was washing away. I continued to recite, "*Taharah he*." I knew full well that the need for purification had nothing to do with the way Bubby

lived or behaved. I winced as we took the third bucket of water. It was getting close to being finished and I did not want it to be over. I did not want her to go away. I continued to recite, "*Taharah he*."

She bathed me when I was little. She dried me and put the towel over my head and rubbed my head and chanted, "Where did Debbie go?" And I said, "There she is!" I was struck by the awareness of what was to come. I would never find her again from beneath a towel, or putting on a bra, or making my oatmeal. I would never watch her meditate or stretch or walk in her Nikes. I would never hear her say to me, "Honey, I don't ever want to be a burden to you," or, "The old gray mare, she ain't what she used to be," or, "I'm having a hankering for something sweet," or, "Honey, when it comes my time to go, God will take me." Where did Bubby go? There she is. . . .

There she is. We took the towels and dried her. I wanted to put some powder and hand cream on her, but she did not need it where she was going.

Every part of her was dried now. We opened the package wrapped in cellophane. Out came three pieces: a shirt, and pants with "feeselach," little feet, attached. They were made of linen. They resembled Dr. Denton's pajamas. They were simple and not something that one would find at their local Bloomie's or Nordstrom's. They had a character all their own. The third piece was a bonnet to cover her head.

One arm at a time, one leg at a time. I thought: These were the arms that once cradled me, that kept me safe when I was terrified. These were the legs that walked with me and taught me to keep moving and trying even when it hurts. These were the little hands said, "You must always go forward." These were the little hands that always reached back to me when I reached to them—the same hands that "pached" my tushy when I stuck a napkin in the Shabbat candles and started a little fire in the house one Friday night.

Where did Bubby go?

I wanted to keep her false teeth. I loved them. I used to love them in my bathroom at night when she stayed with me. She told me that when she wanted to diet, she took them out so she wouldn't eat.

Unfortunately the Halakhah said that they had to be with her. I could not keep them. Eating with Bubby was like being in the percussion section of the symphony orchestra. Those teeth, though functional, were very noisy. For every bite she took, we could get up and dance the samba.

It was time. We were almost finished dressing her.

In 1978, the man she married after Zaidie's death had died. A week later, I received a phone call from a woman. Out of the blue, she told me that she was the granddaughter of a friend of Bubby's and that the two grandmothers were to arrive in Houston that evening. I thought that it was a joke, but it wasn't. That evening, I picked her up at the airport.

I had a one-bedroom apartment. She slept with me in a queen-size bed. The first day she was there, I was awakened suddenly by a set of seventy-eight-year-old gums sunk into my biceps. "Are you awake?" she said. I said, "Bubby, what are you doing?" She said, "I used to bite you all the time when you were a little girl."

I said, "Bubby, what time is it?" She answered, "Four-thirty. I have to meditate. Meditate with me. All you have to do is say, 'One, one, one.' Your sister Barbara taught me how to do it. Come on, it's good for you."

My sister had taught her "omm." Bubby did her own variations on a theme. Her arrival at my home reestablished our relationship as it had been when she and Zaidie lived upstairs on Baker Avenue.

In 1980 she had a heart attack. We sent her to Pritikin. She walked three miles every day. She did her stretching and her volunteer work. She went three days a week and on Shabbat to the Home for the Aged, where most of the residents were her age or older.

I would ask her to come visit me and her response was always, "Honey, if I am not at the home, the volunteers don't give the people the right Pokeno cards and the people are all confused. The volunteers don't help the residents with the Kiddush wine and cake. If they are not helped, they spill all over. They count on me. I'll come see you soon, but better you should come here."

When we were together, we walked every day. I ran from her and then back to her. And so continued our exercise routine. One

day I lost her in the park. I told her where to turn around so that she could meet me, but she kept going. Everyone jogging in Balboa Park had their eyes out for her. My bubby, the Queen of Balboa Park.

We sent my aunt out to look for her. Given that they were from the same gene pool, it came as no surprise to any of us: my aunt got lost as well. Both were well exercised.

On our walks together we would talk about ideas and feelings. I said, "Bubby, you and I need to talk about what you want when you die. You have to tell me so that I make certain that you have exactly what you want."

"I want it kosher," she said.

"You want *taharah*?"

"Yes."

"Does it bother you to talk about it?"

"Honey, when it comes my time to go, it's my time to go. God will take me when He's ready."

We put her into the coffin. I kissed her forehead just as she had done to me all of my life. I did not want her to go. I was flooded with memories but I would not cry. She did not like it when I cried. I was intent upon honoring her ways. These were, after all, her last moments.

When I turned to walk out of the room, I turned back one more time to see her. I talked to her under my breath and said, "I stayed as long as I could, Bubby. I was with you until the last possible moment. You will be with me forever, in every song and every thought and every act of lovingkindness that I may muster up in my life. You taught me what I know about love. It felt funny to do *taharah* on you, Bubby, you were so pure. I'll miss you."

The undertaker waited for us to leave the room. In his funeral voice he asked, "How will you be paying for this?" Jokingly, I said, "Do you take Visa? I would love to get mileage." He said yes. I could hear Bubby laughing at my having gotten mileage for her funeral arrangements. She loved a bargain. She loved life.

Some think that dead bodies are frightening. Some people flinch at the thought of touching or being in the presence of a dead body. I believe that the fear arises from the confrontation with our own

mortality. There are those who have the same response to live bodies. The thought of closeness, the thought of touching or being touched either physically or emotionally by another human being is frightening. This fear may be connected to the idea of loss. The fear of death and the fear of life may be one and the same: that a being suddenly disappears from the realm of our physical existence may be more than we care to acknowledge. This idea of potential loss may rule our lives and even keep us at a distance from the relationships we want most in our lives.

There was great comfort in knowing that for the first time in my life I could do something for someone who could not say, "Thank you." For me, this was a special gift. My life has not been the same since then. I am aware of the fact that caring for the dead is the highest mitzvah that one may perform, but it seems that another lesson has to do with the notion of *kal v'chomer* (how much the more so!). If one is capable of giving to one who is dead, how much more so to those still in life. This insight was Bubby's last gift to me.