

What is *Taharah Ruchanit*?

In July of 2020, we are in the midst of the worst world-wide pandemic in recent history, with many communities in lock-down, over 500,000 dead world-wide, and thousands of every-day people infected. *Chevrot Kadisha* are advised to refrain from in-person *taharah* during this pandemic to reduce the risk of acquiring the virus, especially from the other members of the *taharah* team.

When challenges present themselves, the higher nature of human beings prevails, inspiring creativity on all levels to meet and overcome the difficulties of the times. In this case, many dedicated people have come together to create new liturgies to allow us to honor the dead, with whom we are not allowed to be present, while also honoring the living, the team members who are advise not to come within 6 feet of each other.

A new form of *taharah* has now emerged — *taharah ruchanit* (“spiritual *taharah*”) – the ritual of midwifing a soul without being near the body of the deceased. *Taharah ruchanit* can be described as a *taharah* ritual focused primarily through and for Spirit, *b’shem haNiftar*, on behalf of the one who has departed. In this ritual, we do not have a body for which to perform the ritual of *taharah*; hence we must use visualization techniques. This can be done either with modern technology that allows us to video- or tele-conference together in order to perform the new ritual for this soul, or by performing the ritual together simultaneously without electronic connections. There are various implementations of this approach, including new *taharah* manuals that give specific directions.

The new ritual is appropriate for any situation in which physical co-location of the team and the deceased is not possible. The *taharah ruchanit* ritual can be used during pandemic, as is our current situation, or perhaps if a person is lost at sea or the body is never found from an avalanche situation or other devastating accident. It is recognized that the spiritual non-physical intentions and words of the team can create the vessel in which the soul of the deceased can be held tenderly and supportively as it leaves this world, without physical contact. It is a sensitive and loving way to honor, cradle, and uplift the soul of the deceased without the physical presence of their body.

Some have questioned whether this new approach is appropriate. Experience to date indicates that family members can feel comforted knowing that if their loved ones received *taharah ruchanit*, they were thought of with utmost respect, and tenderly and

lovingly honored with the same rich and meaningful liturgy that is used during traditional in-person *taharot*. This new approach is no way a diminishment in tradition.

Chevrah Kadisha members who do this ritual have reported that their *kavanah*—holy intention and focus during the ritual—can be richer and more loving than in-person *taharah* experiences. *Taharah ruchanit* has opened new channels of connection between and among the team members, the soul of the deceased, and the Divine, enabling and promoting the sacredness of the ritual and its effectiveness in assisting the soul in transition.

To date, most *chevrah* members throughout North America have not yet experienced these contemporary rites. How ubiquitous this new method will become is yet to be seen. As this developing ritual format evolves and unfolds in the next few months and years, it may significantly change the customs and approaches that local *chevrot* take to performing the holy work of honoring the dead.

For an examples of modern *taharah* manuals that include *taharah ruchanit* liturgy, see [To Midwife A Soul](#), by Richard A. Light, the [Kehilla Community Synagogue Adapted Taharah Manual](#), the [Pittsburgh \(NCCK\) Women's Virtual Taharah Manual](#), or the [Portland, OR, Chevra Kavod haMet Guide to Tahara l'Nefesh \(men's version\)](#).

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