

# Women, Chevra Kadisha, and the Gift Economy

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*Le concept du judaïsme Chesed Shel Emet (le vrai dans la bonté) est un acte par lequel le donneur n'attend rien en retour et qui est dit chez ceux qui s'occupent des mourants. L'auteur montre que dans la pratique juive de « tahara » présente dans le Chevra Kadisha, les hommes et les femmes (séparément) transcendent le modèle d'échange en donnant ce qu'ils ne recevront jamais en valeur ou en gratification : soigner un ami, une connaissance ou un étranger qui meurt. Cette pratique est un exemple de l'économie du don et ressemble au maternage.*

*The tahara ritual starts with a prayer: "We ask your understanding that we will do our best. We will do everything possible to ensure that all the elements are properly completed." This prayer helps to allay our fear sufficiently so that we will have the audacity to proceed.*  
—Rabbi Stuart Kelman and Dan Fendel, *Chesed Shel Emet: The Truest Act of Kindness: Exploring the Meaning of Taharah*

*Women's free labour could be understood as the economic base for a system of ideas and values different from prevailing patriarchal ideas and values. The desire to place heart over head or emotion above reason is a kind of translation of the need to put the gift paradigm above the exchange paradigm.*  
—Genevieve Vaughan, *For-Giving: A Feminist Criticism of Exchange*

## The Concept of the Gift and *Chesed Shel Emet*

Humans are born dependent; someone must care for

them after they transition into this embodied world. Women have typically been assigned this role due to social interpretation of their biological capacities. The false "manhood" agenda that privileges independence (rather than interdependence), competition (rather than cooperation), domination (rather than communication at the same level) and stoicism (rather than emotion) deeply influences the way we construct reality (Vaughan "36 Steps"). Both men and women fall into this mindset.

To counter this, in our personal lives we can validate gift values—gratitude, community, and spirituality—by engaging in gift-giving not only practically, but consciously. This is not an equal (or even unequal) exchange; the focus is on satisfying the needs of the other (Vaughan "36 Steps").

The concept in Judaism of *chesed shelemet* (which literally means the kindness of truth; the truest act of kindness) is a one-way act of lovingkindness for which the giver expects nothing in return. The ultimate example of this is the practice of caring respectfully for people who have died.

In this model, volunteers prepare deceased persons for burial. There is no exchange, no expectation of reward;<sup>1</sup> the recipient can never give thanks or acknowledge the favour. This act is called the ultimate *mitzvah*<sup>2</sup> because it does not serve to benefit the person performing it in this lifetime. It is sacred work, a final act of respect towards someone who cannot conceivably repay it.<sup>3</sup>

Put another way, "doing *tahara* [ritual purification, the central aspect of *chesed shel emet*] is not about you. It is about giving the greatest gift we have, our own spirituality, our own soulfulness, to the deceased [person] before us" (Kelman and Fendel xx).

*Kavod hamet* (honouring the dead) means that everything is done with the utmost respect as defined by the tradition.<sup>4</sup> In this liminal period for the deceased, the body (*met/metah* in Hebrew)<sup>5</sup> is treated both as if it were still connected to life and with an acknowledgement of the fact that the person has died (Langer). Burial should be within twenty-four hours.

Although both men and women engage in this practice, they do so separately: men only prepare the bodies of men, while women take care of women. This paper is based

Rabbi Stuart Kelman and Dan Fendel teach that we set aside our own understandings and misgivings and beliefs or non-beliefs to do *tabara* properly because we are not there to engage in our own theology. We are there on behalf of the deceased person and to assure her family and the community that she is being taken care of according to tradition and practice.

Knowing that no one will see her, special care is taken anyway, straightening hems and sleeves and tying special bows (Katz).

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primarily on the stories of women, although in practice the attitudes of the men do not differ significantly.

### ***Chevrá Kadisha*<sup>6</sup>**

Jewish burial preparation is carried out by a *chevrá kadisha*, which literally means “holy society” or “holy friends.”<sup>7</sup> Run by the community, or by a religious institution, these volunteers from every walk of life can be called at any time, no matter how tired they are, regardless of the weather, to prepare, ritually and physically, the bodies of those who have died, people they knew and people they didn’t, infants and adults, whatever their manner of death. Individuals serve without compensation, although the organization may levy a charge to cover the cost of building maintenance and supplies.

*Chevrá kadisha* volunteers may provide other assistance along the spectrum of services, including tending the dying person, funeral arrangements and support, plot allotment, and cemetery maintenance, as well as food and religious services for the family afterwards.

### **Steps in the *Tabara* Process**

The details are governed by *halakha* (Jewish law) and by customs which vary in different communities (Freudenstein). They also differ depending on the physical setting and equipment (funeral parlour, hospital morgue, private home). The central steps, accompanied by prayers, are physical washing,<sup>8</sup> spiritual cleansing/purifying,<sup>9</sup> and dressing for burial.<sup>10</sup> The casket, a plain wooden box,<sup>11</sup> is closed at once.<sup>12</sup>

### **Midwifing Both Ends of Life: The Gift of Mothering**

There is a strong connection in Judaism between “purification” at the end of life and “purification” after childbirth.

In the Torah,<sup>13</sup> *tum’ah* (ritual defilement) results from physical contact with the mysterious sources of life and death: blood, semen, childbirth, diseased skin, and corpses. This taboo has to do with improper contact with the portals of birth and death, the limits of life as we know it. People in the midst of life are to be protected from its entry- and exit-ways. Various ritual remedies are offered to “purify” or restore these people to the world of the properly living. The broad meaning of *tabara* is a state of ritual purity, brought about either by careful avoidance of defilement or by observing rites of purification (Green).

“Midwife,” which means “with woman,” is associated with taking care of the “wife” by delivering her baby. Tova Hinda Siegel<sup>14</sup> explains that as a midwife she plays many roles during the life cycle of a woman. Attending births, she lifts the baby to her mother’s breast. She provides medical care and emotional support during pregnancy and after, often looking after the newborn as well. Thus, she is “with woman” for the entirety of her life cycle. A logical extension of being “with woman,” however, was never covered in her training: *tabara*, actions performed by women for another woman. When a pregnant woman comes under her care, a sacred trust exists between them. Within this trust is Siegel’s implicit promise: “I will be sensitive to you, to your needs. I will respect you and this new existence that you are creating. I will be there to

help your transition from one state to another.” In *chevra kadisha* training, she felt a sense of eager anticipation for her first *tabara*, but she was also nervous: How would she react? What if she did something wrong? She felt the same concerns as she had with her first birth. When a woman is in labour, we acknowledge the need for modesty and dignity. Likewise, at the *tabara*, there was the same silence, the same respect, the same depth of feeling, the same sense of privilege and knowledge that she had been given a gift of witnessing the transition of a soul.

As with mothering, midwifery is not limited to women. Richard Light’s guidelines for performing *tabara*, entitled *To Midwife A Soul*, is based on his personal experiences.

### **Intimate Physical Care and Clothing**

*Tabara*, like infant care, requires physical tasks. Everyone is equal at birth, clothed in blood and other less palatable but no less universal substances (Wisenberg). Dead bodies are also messy. Varda Branfman adds, “Together we prepared to return her to the God who created her, as clean and unadorned as she arrived in this world.”

As Kathryn Engber observed to Debra B. Darvick, the fact that the *chevra kadisha* were all mothers framed their approach; they all felt the link between the intimate hands-on care they gave their infants and the care they give the deceased person. “When you care for a newborn,” says Engber, “you want each touch to be done with love, you want your child exposed to everything soft and gentle. That is also the sensation we want to come to the [*metab*] through our hands” (qtd. in Darvick). They often talk as women do to children: “Now we are washing your left arm, now we are washing the upper part of your body, your back” (Engber qtd. in Darvick).

Careful washing and dressing is done to ready the individual for the next stage in the journey. Toby Katz thinks of the women she cares for as children who are going to see their loved ones. She pictures their brothers and sisters and husbands and fathers and especially their mothers, who will now be reunited with their daughters. Although these are old ladies, the process is reminiscent of cleaning and dressing children. Diana Bletter describes the sensation: “When I slide my hand into the sleeve of the shroud-shirt to pull the woman’s arm through, I’m reminded of dressing my newborn babies.”

And the clothing<sup>15</sup> is similar. The winding sheet can be thought of as swaddling. Katarzyna Rolzinski reminds us that when a baby comes into the world, we buy it a layette with loose clothing and booties. The shrouds also fasten with the same bows as the miniature kimonos used to dress newborns in hospital nurseries (see “Ties that Bind”).

### **Dependence and Helplessness**

Like those of infants, the needs of newly dead people can’t be put off for a more convenient time. They are entirely helpless, and performing a *tabara* therefore requires one to have compassion. Sari, who had recently given birth, pointed out the fact that newborn people and dead people are both totally dependent on the kindness of others. With its purifying waters and white shrouds, the *tabara* carries this process further so that the soul, restored to its essence, can proceed on its journey (Branfman).

Other similarities between caring for a newborn and caring for a dead person:

- The job is temporary; it consists of protecting the individual and then passing her on to others;
- Life outside continues; other family members need to be fed;
- And there is lots of cleaning up and shopping to be done.

### **Rewards: Personal and Spiritual Benefits**

Some people are eager to participate in the *tabara*, for a variety of reasons: because in their community, people help each other in life-cycle events; because after losing a family member they want to help others; because they are searching for a meaningful Jewish life for themselves and their children; or because they would like to live a full life, develop inner strength, and encounter new enriching experiences (Feuerstein). Others get recruited reluctantly. Pessie Busel Novick, for example, could not refuse when her friend asked her. When faced with a loved one’s death, Carol Abadi imagined dying; she pictured her soul hovering unheard over her body, scared and confused, begging to be prepared correctly and sent to heaven. She realized this would happen to her beloved family member unless she, Abadi, consented to do the preparation.

Although there cannot be direct reciprocity, women who do this work do speak of what they get out of it. “These practices give meaning to my life so much more than the material things,” says Eva Strauss-Rosen, adding, “Doing the *mitzvah* of the *tabara* has been tremendously rewarding.”

Much of this reward could fall under the general heading of “enhancing Jewishness,” from participating in an age-old ritual to a personal feeling of spiritual fulfilment.

### **Connection Through Time and Space**

“I connected with everyone doing those tasks all around the world,” explains Rachel Barenblat, “with the people

who washed and shrouded the bodies of my ancestors and the people who will sanctify the bodies of my children.” Diana Bletter also felt a sense of her place in the chain of Jewish history.

Nancy Kalikow Maxwell wondered if someone washed the arm of her *bubbe* (grandmother) like this. Her thoughts moved to her *bubbe’s bubbe* and to her *bubbe*, and then to all the *bubbes* who have washed and been washed by women just like her. “Suddenly,” she says, “I am part of the permanence of the Jewish people who have performed this

shared forged a bond of love between us. I knew Ruth would do no less for me, and I would never have a better friend.”

Although family and friends may be comforted by knowing how their loved one was taken care of, members of the *chevra kadisha* traditionally do not discuss the *tahara* on any particular person. In fact, according to Susan Esther Barnes, some *chevra kadisha* members take umbrage at any attempt to thank them; even an email saying “Thank you to everyone who assisted with a *tahara* this year” will be

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ritual for centuries.” She leaves exhausted, but strangely exhilarated, feeling proud, satisfied and more intimately connected to her roots.

Another positive aspect of performing the *tahara* is the connection its practitioners feel to their own families; many of the women are the daughters of men or women who were also part of a *chevra kadisha*. Judy Freudenstein’s mother, who had lived an upper-class life with servants, still answered every call with unpretentious dedication. Freudenstein remembers this as now she is the same age her mother was at that time.

Participants also feel a connection to the future, because they expect that their act of lovingkindness will be paid forward. As Mildred L. Covert puts it, “[I] know, with great peace of mind, that when my times comes, I will be sent to my eternal abode with all the care, compassion, and blessings of those who will continue to uphold and perform [*tahara*].”

Another theme of connection is giving back. As Dr. Batya Ludman says, “My interest [is] in some small way, possibly being able to give back to someone in mourning what she had just given to me.”

### **Relationship with Other Members and the Family**

Accompanying the (vertical) sense of continuity is a (horizontal) sense of communal responsibility and being part of a like-minded community. To Juliet Spitzer, the *chevra kadisha* forms not only a “Holy Society” but a “Society of Shared Secrets.”

Pessie Busel Novick explains: “Ruth drove me home without saying a word, but the experience that we had

met with an admonition not to say thank you to this group.

Ludman had a different experience; a close friend of her mother informed her how peaceful and beautiful her mother looked in death. She found this knowledge both calming and comforting.

### **Gratitude from the Deceased Person**

It is an accepted Jewish belief that the soul of the person departs from the body upon death, but remains nearby until the burial, aware of what transpires to and around the body. Susan Esther Barnes notes that “a sense of profound satisfaction and peace descends on us as we view the body in the casket, laid out in ... shrouds, before we close the lid and declare our work done.” She imagines a sensation of peace coming from the soul of the person who is hovering over the body, and continues, “Maybe, just maybe, s/he is thanking us, after all.”

Other women performing *tahara* have experienced a direct response from the *metah*. As Spitzer expresses it, “There have been many occasions when we ... have a collective, shared awareness of some tangible shift of energy in the room.”

Branfman, at her first *tahara*, “sensed the existence of the soul independent of the body.” She describes the experience: “I witnessed with my own eyes how the soul had departed, leaving the body an empty shell.” Gloria Blum describes a series of experiences, from sensing a sparkling vibrant energy from her friend after death, to feeling herself ascend a shaft of light together with the presence of her friend, who then passed through an open door filled with light.

Feelings develop as well. Barenblat, while washing the *metab*, felt an outpouring of tenderness, occasionally giving in to the impulse to stroke her hair or her arm, thinking, “It’s okay, dear. We’re here.” And Novick points out that “only the three of us would see her in this state, almost as though we shared a secret with Mrs. Goodstein, one we would keep forever....” Barenblat again: “Then, suddenly... I was shaking with silent tears. I leaned on the edge of the coffin of a woman I had never known and understood what we had done for her and wept and wept.”

the *tabara* process. Bletter, when she finds out she has to do a *tabara*, feels humbled. Whatever she is going through—standing too long in line at the bank or celebrating a just-published short story—suddenly loses significance. Abadi explains that, when she is called to participate in a *tabara*, she goes into “a daze” and starts feeling “a special love; peace and serenity encompass ... [her] whole being.” It seems as if her soul has taken over and knows exactly what to do. “It seems like only a few minutes,” she says, “as if we had surpassed time and space.”

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**“I feel as if I’m the one that benefited from it all. What a great opportunity it was for me to learn about our totally awesome religion and what is really important in our life.... It is an incredibly beautiful spiritual experience, and nothing can be more important than sending off a soul, to join G-d, with love and caring; and pure again.”**

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### God<sup>16</sup>

Another belief within Judaism is that preparing people for burial is preparing them for their final appearance and judgement before God and their passage into the *Olam Ha’ba* (World to Come). Within this practice is the belief that death is not the end of life, but the transition into another world that may include the reunion with loved ones.

Kelman and Fendel explain that acting as if the *neshamah* (soul) is there hovering over our shoulder “gives us a chance to do what we do soulfully and powerfully, and to focus on the objective: preparing for the meeting with the Divine.”

The presence of God is experienced in various ways. Branfman finds it in the act of caregiving: “In my attentiveness to every action of the *tabara*, I submit myself to an Intelligence infinitely greater than my own.” Bletter describes a similar experience: “The work fills me with a sense of the inexplicable and the divinely mysterious.”

To perform this service it is not necessary, however, to believe in an afterlife. One can look at the process as theatre—the people preparing the body are the actors and the deceased person has a non-speaking part. Belief in God is not necessary either, but we can nevertheless imagine God and the *neshamah* (soul) as the audience. When we watch a play, we agree to believe that the actors are really the characters they represent; we likewise need to suspend our disbelief in order to enter fully into the drama that is *tabara* (Kelman and Fendel).

### Doing a Good Deed, Being at Peace

Positive feelings are often experienced before and during

Participants also report positive feelings afterwards. Joel A. Stein explains that during the brief ride home after performing the *tabara*, “a spirit of satisfaction mingled with relief” filled the car. The conversation was “lighter, more animated.” They will never have direct contact with the family of the deceased, but rather have “the inner satisfaction” of knowing they have served their community and “given the dead the respect they deserved.”

Abadi describes the experience: “I feel as if I’m the one that benefited from it all. What a great opportunity it was for me to learn about our totally awesome religion and what is really important in our life.... It is an incredibly beautiful spiritual experience, and nothing can be more important than sending off a soul, to join G-d, with love and caring; and pure again.”

Barenblat feels that “meeting death face-to-face seems like a way of accustoming myself to the koan that lives end. What does it mean to be embodied, yet more than our bodies? What becomes of us when our bodies die? What does it mean to be holy in the face of finality and loss? These are some of the biggest questions I know, and serving on the *chevra kadisha* seemed like an opportunity to learn.” Spitzer agrees: “Caring for a body from which the Life Source has departed forces us to confront our own mortality and the existential questions of life and death.”

To Engber, as reported to Darvick, being a part of the *chevra kadisha* makes her appreciate life much more. When there’s a *simcha*, a celebration, she has a really, really good time. Bletter speaks of a sense of being gratefully, utterly, miraculously alive. To Rochel Berman, participating in these egalitarian customs reaffirms her philosophy of life.

When Lynn Greenough participates in a *tabara*, she is

reminded to show kindnesses to the living, to not wait for their deaths to open her heart.

## Conclusion

The fundamental behaviour of gift-giving is traditionally performed by women, who are usually thought to be the “other-tenders” (Vaughan *For-Giving*) of the species. They take care of children, other family members, and friends by giving directly to satisfy the needs of the other, sometimes at the expense of their own needs.

Vaughan, who coined the word “masculation” for the process through which a boy is socialized into a false, non-nurturing identity, incarnating the word that alienates him, points out,

Even when our spiritual intuition and our hearts draw us towards altruism, these patterns pull us and our interpretations of religion back to the masculated model.... Gift-giving—the female model—comes to consciousness filtered through masculation and exchange. Now feminism and the women’s movement have allowed us to detach the mother from her “other.” (*For-Giving* 377)

In the Jewish practice of *tahara* carried out by a *chevra kadisha*, both men and women (separately) transcend the exchange model by giving the gift for which they will never receive exchange value or even direct gratitude: caring for a friend, acquaintance or stranger who has died.

This article begins with a prayer. I circle back to end the same way:

*I ask for understanding that I have done my best. I have done everything possible to ensure that all the elements are properly completed. Having had the audacity to proceed with this article, I add a final prayer: that the spirit of tahara, of lovingkindness, of giving without expectation of reward, transcend this specific practice and become the guiding principle of the world at large.*

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>In the gift paradigm, no repayment is necessary. The bond grows out of the direct satisfaction of needs; it is not constrained by a need for reciprocity (Vaughan, *For-Giving*).

<sup>2</sup>*Mitzvah* commonly means “good deed”; it is also translated as “commandment.”

<sup>3</sup>That “the highest act of lovingkindness is that which is done for the dead, for there can never be any thought of repayment” was first published in 1522 in *Midrash Tan-chuma Vayechi* 107A (Kelman and Fendel ix).

<sup>4</sup>Like all Jewish rituals, those surrounding death represent an accumulation of authoritative biblical and rabbinic precedents combined with later accretions less universally required (Langer).

<sup>5</sup>The body of the deceased person. Hebrew is a gendered language with different words for males and females. *Metah*, the female version, will be used here.

<sup>6</sup>Also transliterated *Hevra kadishah*.

<sup>7</sup>Most Jews are not prepared in this way, although the practice is growing in North America.

<sup>8</sup>Nail polish is removed and hair combed. One section at a time is exposed, cleaned and re-covered.

<sup>9</sup>By immersion or by continuous flow of water over the body, which is then dried. This fulfills Ecclesiastes 5:14: “As we come forth, so we shall return.”

<sup>10</sup>In *tachrichim*, white muslin or linen shrouds, tied with ritual knots.

<sup>11</sup>Not needed in Israel. In Ontario, a box is not required by law, but may be under cemetery bylaws.

<sup>12</sup>Viewing is considered a dishonour.

<sup>13</sup>The Five Books of Moses.

<sup>14</sup>Kavod v’Nichum and Gamliel Institute provide resources, education, and training along the Jewish end-of-life continuum. Part of their educational program includes the views of people who have carried out *tahara*. Some describe their participation in a specific event, and others are a more general discussion of the experience. I have drawn on those articles here; I have not myself formally interviewed members of a *chevra kadisha* nor been a member of one.

<sup>15</sup>More usually compared to the garment of the High Priest, worn by men on some ritual occasions.

<sup>16</sup>Often written G-d or G!d as a form of respect.

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**K-LYNN**

## **Prairie Heartbeats**

*In Memory of Tracy Latimer*

Clear blue dipping onto the white-cruited fields of October  
 Defined by her birth, spastic, speechless  
 A decade and two years of prairie farming  
 Emotional turmoil gloved his weather worn hands  
 Cab of the pickup truck willingly demarcated  
 Wheelchair empty of her cheerful, mischievous spirit  
 Their hearts beat in shattered rhythm  
 His iron weighted footsteps trudge a distance  
 Smothering blanket of exhaust fumes invade  
 Gasping! Choking! Lungs bursting her demise—confined!  
 Watching the gassy fog become her grave, he waits  
 Tick tock, tick tock, thirty strokes of time she fades  
 The engine stops!  
 His hands touching her limp silhouette;  
 Laid in the comfort of her bed; a quilt of denial is tucked around her shoulders  
 Her words never to be revealed; his, “For the love of my child!”  
 Checks damp with wintriness reality  
 Advocates, grieve in synchronicity for justice  
 In pandemonium, throats cry out  
 Did her eyes blink once for yes, twice for no  
 Were their teardrops gushing waterfalls or barren Saskatchewan lands  
 Was her mind screaming *DADDY, DDAAADDY* don’t make me go  
 Or thinking it’s time now we both know?  
 Only their hearts intertwined  
 Defending his heart beat in a casket of second-degree murder  
 Still,  
 her heart beat  
 Remember?

*“Free verse poetry is a malnourished passion that is taking the lead in her life,” emphasizes K-Lynn. Born and raised in Alberta, K-Lynn has found her home in Calgary. She is a registered social worker who enjoys kayaking, biking, and volunteering.*