

WHAT

WOULD LOVE DO?



QUESTIONS AND
THOUGHTS
TO HELP YOU DECIDE
IF OFFERING
IN-HOME AND

FAMILY-CENTERED TAHARA IS RIGHT FOR
YOUR CHEVRAH.

BY BIRGITTA KASTENBUAM

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GRATITUDE

Thank you to Kavod v'Nichum for being the learning home for Chevrah Kadisha and supporting their growth.

This booklet was created in reciprocity as a thank you to the excellent Gamliel teachers who shared knowledge and wisdom, invited questions and conversation, encouraged us, and shepherded me along the way.

I am grateful to my fellow students for the countless hours of joint study, deep inquiries, and insights and for encouraging me to create this resource.

A special thank you to Rick Light and Avivah Erlich for writing their book Exploring the Soul Of Taharah

This is a thank you to all who have walked the path of reimagining ritual and how we care for one another before us.

Recognizing those joining the path now and those who will come after us.

Above all, it is a deep bow to all the souls (Neshamas) who allowed me to serve them before and after their last breaths.

They are my/our truest teachers.

KAVANAH AND DEDICATION

I dedicate this booklet to all those denied access to Tahara's loving kindness in the past, present, and future.

May this booklet soften hearts and support the finding of ways to serve those excluded from funeral-home Taharas and those for whom funeral home Tahara doesn't resonate.

May his booklet support you and your Chevrah in exploring a more inclusive Tahara offering through In-Home and Family-centered Tahara
A BOOKLET OF QUESTIONS?

This booklet isn't a guide or how-to book.

It is merely a compilation of thoughts and questions that I have asked myself and that have been part of my lived experience; I hope it will serve those considering whether In-Home Tahara might be something their Chevrah wants to offer.

Some might find this booklet too radical, and others not radical enough! Nothing here is written to persuade or dissuade you; instead, it is a starting point for wondering and conversation.

This document does not teach the steps of Tahara.

This document is specifically for Chevrah, who currently offer Tahara services in a funeral home and are exploring including Family-centered or/and In-Home Tahara.

What makes a Tahara holy?

If the following statements resonate with you, this booklet might be interesting to you.

It is the spirit of Tahara that makes it holy, not the funeral home setting.

It is the spirit of Tahara, not the amount of water used, that purifies the body and soul of our Met/ah and readies it for its journey.

It is the kavanah/intention of the Tahara team, not their ability to read the written word, that makes the Tahara holy.

It is the kavanah/intention of the Tahara team that makes a Tahara holy, not the way we tie the knots.

A BOOKLET OF QUESTIONS?

A document in two parts.

The first explores questions to determine if offering family-centered Tahara and in-home Tahara might be right for your Chevrah. It explores the Soul and Kavanah of In-Home and Family-centered Tahara.

The second part shares a sample of the physical items of an In-home tahara kit with commentary on some items.

If you are new to exploring, please try not to skip ahead to the second part. Part one will help you decide if you and your Chevrah can and want to add In-Home and Family-centered as an option for families; With a proper Kavanah honoring the soul of Tahara.

Well prepared, so no unintentional harm is caused by a Tahara team serving families outside the funeral home or with family involvement in the funeral home.

Foundational texts to support your questions and wonderings regarding In-Home and Family-centered Taharah

Exploring the Soul Of Taharah by Rick Light and Avivah Ehrlich. It is an excellent book for understanding the differences between Tahara in a funeral home and at In-Home, as well as the historical context and Halacha and minhag questions.

To Midwife A Soul, Guidelines For Performing Taharah, written by Rick Light. An inclusive Taharah Manual intended for use by any community regardless of their level of observance.

FAMILY-CENTERED & IN-HOME TAHARA ISN'T FOR EVERYONE.

Family-centered Tahara/home Tahara isn't for everyone, and that is okay. More accurately, the idea of family-centered Tahara does not resonate with everyone.

The Idea of re-imagining Tahara will shock some and bless others. The growing trend and interest in alternative after-death care, including home funerals and green burials, opens up new questions and opportunities for Chevroh, who might be asked and want to serve increasingly diverse communities.

Family-centered/home Tahara might or might not work for your Chevrah. Each Chevrah must decide for themselves on this and the particulars of who and how they will serve. Family-centered/home Tahara isn't a decision to make spur of the moment, although a sudden request might force the issue, as it did for my Chevrah.

Family-centered Tahara Considerations

Could Family-centered/home Tahara work for your Chevrah? Here are a few questions that might help you gain clarity for your Chevrah to answer:

Who does your Chevrah serve, how flexible is your Chevrah on this?

What relationship does your Chevrah have with tradition and religion?

What policy does your Chevrah have regarding family involvement?

What Kavanah (Intention) and what obligations does your Chevrah have?

How important is it to your Chevrah to follow the exact structure, liturgy, amount of water, etc., used in a funeral home in other settings?

Could/would your Chevrah create a special Tahara team for a Family centered Tahara?

Is anyone in your Chevrah willing to educate themselves on Family centered Tahara and, in turn, educate your Chevrah?

You might gain some clarity on some of the questions in this book, or more questions might arise. Ultimately, each Chevrah and each person serving will need to ponder and answer these and other questions themselves.

WHERE DOES A STORY BEGIN?

The origins for this booklet exploring in-home Tahara or family-centered Tahara comes from 3 different places.

- 1.

My years as a Death Doula/ Death Midwife and Home Funeral Guide, serving many secular and unaffiliated Jews with a feeling in my bones that something was missing.

2.

Being a Gamliel Institute student, studying, questioning, and wondering about the intersection of my holistic end-of-life and after death support and Jewish after-death support, customs, and rituals. 3.

Becoming a member of The Valley Chevrah Kadisha in Los Angeles, serving on the taharah team, and the leadership and outreach committees.

When I “found” Taharah, I felt that my work as an end-of-life Doula/home funeral guide and my quest for Jewish ritual had beautifully collided. It was the aha moment of Awe I had been looking for without knowing it. Taharah and Smirah expressed what I intuitively had known: there is an ancient way that my hands and heart remember.

I became a student of the Gamliel Institute because I wanted to explore the carried seeds of this remembering.

Minhag/custom versus Halacha/law

Many wonder whether we are required by Jewish law to follow the common structure of Tahara without family involvement in a funeral home setting.

ADD: Quote Rick Light and Avivah Ehrlich's book - it is minhag.

Wisdom isn't the same as law.

There is much wisdom that guides us in our service of Tahara. We are a culture of wisdom keepers and are encouraged to study, question, debate, and contribute to the collective wisdom.

It is perfectly valid to follow wisdom as guidance. For some of you, this wisdom will be like a rock, solid and unmovable. Minhag, long-held traditions or customs, can feel so solid that we call it law.

However, it is also possible, and maybe as much of our history, to reimagine a newer version of a custom built on ancient wisdom or re-remember and uplift lesser-known older ways. We may serve one another as we have throughout history by needing to adjust, rethink, and reimagine what this service looks like in current circumstances and our culture.

Questioning is the age-old way of Jewish learning; adapting can be part of how culture renews, stays relevant, and survives.

May we continue learning, reshaping, and reimagining our rituals to fit the needs of all whom they can serve.

Family involvement considerations and questions

why would you want to involve family
added stress and burden for the Tahara team

At some point in our past death and after care care happened in the home.
(**Today, we are reinventing how to serve and support this achingly beautiful goodbye so that all who consider themselves Jewish, regardless of affiliation, belief, gender, sexual orientation, or financial means, can access a Tahara.)**

The added Mitzvah of tending to a family in Family-centered Tahara
Unlike Tahara at a funeral home insulated from family members, Family centered Tahara invites family participation.

Our care and concern for the family and others in the home, becomes an added consideration for the Tahara team. If we are to serve, we have to include the family in our kavanah and ensure that we, as a team, can hold space and support the family.

Will being part of the after-death care of their beloved be healing?

Are you okay with improvising and being creative?

The Rosh and the team will want to cultivate the ability to improvise and be creative. Unlike a funeral home setting, which provided a stable backdrop for Tahara, settings outside the funeral home are unstable. Examples: The Metah might be in a nursing home where space is limited. The staff might be unfamiliar with having a Tahara team serve in their space. The space might not allow for the usual amount of water or any water.

Each death, each family is different. What works one time might not work the next time.

03

concern about the emotional wellbeing of the family

general fear of death
why would you want to involve family

In-home Tahara considerations and questions
minhag/custom, not law/halacha
concern about the emotional wellbeing of the family
general fear of death
added stress and burden for the Tahara team
the gifts

The responsibilities of offering family involvement.

The Roshah and the team will want to cultivate the ability to improvise and be creative. Unlike a funeral home setting, which provided a stable backdrop for Tahara, settings outside the funeral home are unstable. Examples: The Metah might be in a nursing home where space is limited. The staff might be unfamiliar with having a Tahara team serve in their space. The space might not allow for the usual amount of water or any water.

The family might want music to be played

If your Chevrah decides to allow family involvement

The responsibilities of offering family involvement
Each death, each family is different. what works one time might not work the next time.

If your Chevrah decides to allow family involvement, how will you insure that no harm is done to the family or to the Met/ha in your care?

At some point in our past, home funerals and in-home Tahara were the norm. Both left the home and became part of more formal settings, creating an invisible barrier meant to buffer us from death. With it came a disconnect from carrying for our own. Mortuaries, funeral professionals, rules regarding care, costs involved—all of these have, at times, been contentious.

A movement for more family involvement in the secular world is spilling over into Jewish after-death care. I serve in both worlds and view this trend as the natural consequence of people wanting more input and say into what happens to their loved ones after death and the great re-remembering, revitalizing, and re-imagining of rituals and how religious rituals might support us.

An In-Home Tahara might be part of a home funeral, but that is not necessarily the case.

Home funerals

Home funerals are a family (origin/ chosen/ close friends) lead response to a death where family/friends wash, dress, and otherwise tend to their dead loved one. This might include a body staying at home for several days and transportation to a cemetery or crematorium.

For those interested in learning more about home funerals, please consider educating yourself.

The National Home Funeral Alliance website is a great starting point with a lot of information, including a guidebook, a directory of Home funeral guides, and education. I also recommend taking a course in home after death care.

I am a supporter of home funerals and a family's decision to choose after death care for their loved ones that best suits the way their loved one lived.

Depending on which state you live in, the legalities, added duties, and restrictions would require from a Chevrah require some real thought and training and might be beyond the scope of what a Chevrah might want to offer.

IN-HOME TAHARA CONSIDERATION & QUESTIONS

In-Home Tahara

The in-home tahara proposed here is not a home funeral but an In Home version of a Tahara, done at an alternative location from the funeral home but with the involvement of a funeral director.

This is important

- concern about the emotional wellbeing of the family
- general fear of death
- why would you want to involve family
- In-home Tahara considerations and questions
- minhag/custom, not law/halacha
- concern about the emotional wellbeing of the family
- general fear of death
- added stress and burden for the Tahara team
- the gifts

The responsibilities of offering family involvement.

The Rosha and the team will want to cultivate the ability to improvise and be creative. Unlike a funeral home setting, which provided a stable backdrop for Tahara, settings outside the funeral home are unstable. Examples: The Metah might be in a nursing home where space is limited. The staff might be unfamiliar with having a Tahara team serve in their space. The space might not allow for the usual amount of water or any water.

The family might want music to be played

The responsibilities of offering family involvement

Each death, each family is different. what works one time might not work the next time.

If your Chevrah decides to allow family involvement, how will you insure that no harm is done to the family or to the Met/ha in your care?

THE MOST JEWSIH THING

It is Kavanah that
makes our work holy



N

Just

04

T H E G I F T S ^A

Tahrah that fits how

Inclusion

With family centered and In Home Taharah you might be able to serve those who might be excluded in traditional settings among might be those identifying as trans, LGBTQ, those who did not officially convert, and perinatal babies.

someone lived.

If someone was not part of a Jewish religious community in life it might not feel in alignment with how they lived to have a traditional Taharah which might lead to not have one at all. The family might be better served with a family centered Tahara and/or an In-Home Tahara that can be adjusted to their needs and wishes.

Caring for our own

For some, handing over care to a Chevrah feels harsh. They want to care for their loved ones after death as they did in life and bestow the final kindness of tending to them after death with their own hands. This final kindness of being involved in after-death care can ease their grief, contrary to what we are traditionally taught.

THE GIFTS

A

Wrapped in love

Our beloveds leave the home if wrapped in love prepared for their journey. Instead of leaving the home in a bodybag, no one will touch them they are complete.

Caring

For

SACRED EXPRESSIONS OF LOVE

Families are encouraged to create meaning through creativity.

They might add essential oils and flower petals to the washing water.

Someone might play an instrument in an adjacent space and a beloved song or piece of music might be the soundtrack for the washing.

Alternatively people might join in song or humming.

A child might be encouraged to make a drawing to be added to the casket.

In another part of the house people might be holding space for the Tahara with prayers, reading poetry or by creating a communal nature mandala.

Items meaningful to the family or the Met/ah might be used to beautify or ritualize the space. Candles, treasured objects, photographs, the use of special



fabrics, flowers are examples of items used.

06

medical,
the family's well-being,
the team is not
prepared, conflict within
the family,
WHEN TO SAY NO

no support from a funeral director or home-funeral guide. **06**

IN-HOME TAHARA KIT

The following is an itemized list of items and commentary on some items

explaining why they are included.

It is a great starting point for Chevrah's who want to be mobile. Each Chevrah, Rosha, Team should make adjustments to best suit who and where they will serve.

At home we want things to be as natural as possible.

Consider the family -

We Don't want to look like a HazMat team!

If you feel

When not to do it?

Home Tahara Kit

Pack everything in rolling luggage or duffel bag

I have a basket with some of the items for easy access

Plastic Tupperware containers - to pack small items

Tahara specific

Tachrechim - Burial clothing

Sovev - Shroud - 1 full or queen size 100% cotton - unbleached cotton material

Pretty lace or white sheet - to hold above Metah - optional

Pottery shards - small ziplock bag

Afar- Israeli soil

Kippot

Yahrzeit candle & matches or lighter.

Liturgy binder - including a collection of poetry

Tahara manual

3 water pouring vessels - they might be 2 handled hand washing cups/ carafes/ bowls

Hair nets - or scarfs / no plastic caps

Gowns disposable - sturdy apron or other clothing covering. Gloves - nitrile, M/L, and S/M - put a bunch of each size in a ziplock and label the bag

Face masks - cloth and paper

Face shields - I don't use Shoe covers **06**

- I rarely use

IN-HOME TAHARA KIT

Fractionated coconut oil - For cleaning the skin
Essential oils for masking smells: If needed, I use a few drops of peppermint or orange essential oil on my mask. You could also use Vicks vapor rub or a lip balm with menthol.
Essential oils to add to water (biblical oils include Frankincense, Myrrh, Spikenard, ???) -
Add to a diffuser - to support for self and team
Dried rose petals - to add to water

Garbage bags
Buckets (collapsable) - I use pretty copper bowls
4 twin sheets of 100% cotton - for covering Metah, drying, if needed ripping, cleaning,
Cleaning wipes
Towels
Washcloths - I like to buy soft baby washcloths
White plastic shower curtain - waterproof plastic
Disposable waterproof pads for bed - Chux pads
Twin waterproof sheet or washable/reusable incontinence bed pad

Diapers - adult
Cotton batting

Bags - biodegradable - small cotton bag
Scissors
Tweezers
Super glue
Liquid bandage or Derma bond
Antiseptic Cleansing Liquid
Band-aids
Gauze pads, non-stick
Cloth tape
Adhesive wound dressing - Medium

IN-HOME TAHARA KIT

Emery boards
Small nail clippers

Big nail clippers for toenails - get the ones that open wide
Nail Polish Remover
Wooden Nail sticks
Hairbrush
Qtips
Cotton balls
Disposable Oral swabs

All natural - delicate body/hair wash - No or little fragrance

First aid kit

Cooling for longer homestays

Flexi ice packs - I use Cryopak 4 Large Multi Purpose Reusable 12x17
Non-Toxic Ice Blanket -

Fractionated coconut oil - For cleaning the skin

Essential oils for masking smells: If needed, I use a few drops of
peppermint or orange essential oil on my mask. You could also use
Vicks vapor rub or a lip balm with menthol.

Essential oils to add to water (biblical oils include Frankincense, Myrrh,
Spikenard, ???) -

Add to a diffuser - to support for self and team

Dried rose petals - to add to water

Garbage bags

Buckets (collapsible) - I use pretty copper bowls

4 twin sheets of 100% cotton - for covering Metah, drying, if needed
ripping, cleaning,

Cleaning wipes

Towels

Washcloths - I like to buy soft baby washcloths

White plastic shower curtain - waterproof plastic

Disposable waterproof pads for bed - Chux pads

Twin waterproof sheet or washable/reusable incontinence bed pad **06**

IN-HOME TAHARA KIT

Diapers - adult

Cotton batting

Bags - biodegradable - small cotton bag

Scissors

Tweezers

Super glue

Liquid bandage or Derma bond

Antiseptic Cleansing Liquid

Band-aids

Gauze pads, non-stick

Cloth tape

Adhesive wound dressing - Medium

4 Pillowcases

Dry Ice - purchase blocks at some supermarkets / big box stores / or fishing/boating/ outdoor stores - Warning: toxic fumes/ burns skin Work gloves - for handling ice

Paper bags - for wrapping ice - 1st layer

Towels - for wrapping ice - 2nd layer

Lighter

Regular pillar candle

Battery candles

Selection fabrics -

Community items that you can access.

6 ft Folding table

Pop-up 10x10 tent

Wooden boards

Headrest - plastic, styrofoam or wood. Your current funeral home might have one for you.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We are at the end of this booklet. I hope you have found questions and insights that will support you in creating answers that are right for you and your Chevrah.

FINAL QUESTION

I started this booklet with this dedication:

I dedicate this booklet to all those denied access to Tahara's loving kindness in the past, present, and future.

The origins of my after-death work are partly from a place of tears. Bestowing loving kindness, dignity, and honor upon the dead finds its roots in my Shoah family history.

With each Tahara, I say a silent prayer and imagine including the many who never received this final kindness.

What if we collectively make it our Minhag to include all those denied access as an added Tahara prayer so that the beauty, healing, and transformative power of our Tahara rituals reach and heal all who need this healing?

How full of devotional love would our Tahara spaces be?

If this question speaks to you, consider being creative and writing an informal prayer on your own or collectively as a Chevrah. I would love to hear what you create.

May all be included

In life

May we live lives of service.

Accepting our differences and celebrating our common threads. May we include those often left out of our prayers.

May we open our hearts and hands to recognize that we are all God's children in all colors and all forms.

In death,

May we be held by hands that are gentle,

Hearts that are open and tender,

And souls that recognize themselves in us.

May we gaze upon the face of the dead and see god;

May we see ourselves in the face of the dead.

May it give us pause.

May we bestow honor, dignity, and lovingkindness to all in our

care. In life and in death, we are one.

Resources

Exploring the Soul Of Taharah

by Rabbi Aviva W. Erlick, BCC, and Richard A. Light

[Exploring the Soul of Taharah](#)

To Midwife A Soul, Guidelines For Performing Taharah

This manual includes chanting, taharah ruchanit, and nonbinary liturgy.

<https://richardalight.com/taharah-manuals-1>

Kavod v Nichum

Empowering, educating, and training Chevra Kadisha
Honoring Death in Life.

Jewish end-of-life rituals and practices.

<https://kavodvnichum.org/>

National Home Funeral Alliance - NHFA

<https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>

Educating individuals, families, and communities
about caring for their dead.

Jewish Association For Death Education -JADE

Serving the Jewish community with Jewish wisdom
along the end-of-life continuum.

Home of the Hineni Learning Tool

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Birgitta believes wholeness and wellness come from re-weaving ourselves back into the folds of Nature and the Sacred, and that art, ritual, story, and community are essential parts of this healing.

She is an End-of-Life Doula, Death Midwife, Home funeral guide, Transition Life Coach, Ritualist, Chevrah member, and a Morning Altars teacher passionate about reimagining and embracing new paradigms for living, dying, death, and grief, rich in wonder, love, and awe.

As a community educator, lay leader, and NEDA-recognized doula trainer, she offers rituals and grief circles, online and in-person workshops, Death doula training, mentorship, and free monthly Zoom conversations open to the public called “End-of-Life Midwives In Conversation.”

Birgitta provides transition coaching, holistic end-of-life and after-death care, education, grief support, and rituals. Her company, Bridging Transitions, is based in Los Angeles, She serves in person and remotely.

As a community educator and lay leader, Birgitta offers rituals, grief circles, online and in-person training, and free monthly Zoom

conversations. She is a NEDA-recognized doula trainer.

Birgitta is grateful to be part of Valley Chevrak Kadisha (VCK). She serves on the Tahara and leadership teams, co-chairs the VCK outreach and education committees and hosts VCK's monthly Women's Circle.

Her guiding question is: What would Love do?



Want to know more about Birgitta?

Interested in learning more about her services and educational offerings?

Reach out to chat or visit her website <https://bridgingtransitions.net/>

Are you in Los Angeles and looking for a community-based, inclusive Chevrah?

Visit <https://www.valleychevrakadisha.org/>

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