BELIEF

Making a Personal Commitment to Care for the Dead—by Singing to Them

Just as we sing lullabies to newborns, I now offer the same loving care as part of my work with a burial fellowship

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I serve many roles in my community's *chevra kadisha*, or sacred burial fellowship—from community organizer to silent witness. There are set tasks of washing, purification, dressing, and laying out the dead. Protection of the body against dishonor is the primary Jewish imperative, which is why *sh'mirah* (vigil-keeping around the clock) remains so vital to the process.

I am a rabbi, but my commitment to the burial fellowship is part of an ancient lay commitment that predates rabbinic leadership. And for me, the unique heart of this sacred undertaking is singing to those who have died.

The use of songs and chants during *sh'mirah* and *taharah* (ritual preparation of the dead) draws upon a little-known but established tradition, particularly among Sephardim. *Ma'avar Yabbok*, a 17th-century mystical text on death and burial, states that "the soul benefits from melody," although it doesn't specify which melody. Reflecting on the *chevra kadisha* decades before her own death, singer-songwriter Debbie Friedman observed: "The fear of death and the fear of life may

be one and the same." For many of us, the fear of singing is a potent but often unmentioned part of our "fear of life."

Overcoming my own fear of singing has been bound up with my quest to reclaim sacred fellowship. I discovered that just as we sing lullabies to newborns who are washed, swaddled, and watched-over around the clock, I could offer the same loving care to those who have died—and thereby tame my fears of both life and death.

I was afraid to sing in public when I was young. I was trained as a pianist and longed to be a singer, but my fear was stronger than my desire, and my voice would get caught in my throat during vocal auditions. I was turned down for fifth-grade chorus and for coveted singing roles in musicals. "You can play the piano," I was kindly told.

As my confidence waxed and waned, my singing voice came and went. My bat mitzvah chanting in 1972 prompted my childhood rabbi to joke about me becoming "the first female cantor." In our high-school production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, I received an opening-night break as the understudy for Fruma-Sarah and sang vengefully to reasonable acclaim as the butcher's ghostly first wife. But I always lapsed back into fear and shame, convinced that I wasn't good enough—a belief periodically reinforced by others.

It wasn't until I was in my mid-thirties and living in Israel that I lost my fear of singing. About a year after the first Gulf War, something nameless but vaguely defiant shifted inside me. Emerging from the life-and-death vulnerability of sirens and missile attacks, perhaps I realized that I could afford to risk the vulnerability of breathing more fully into song.

The American folk hymn "How Can I Keep From Singing?" became my theme song. In Anglo-Israeli folk-singing circles, I encouraged my listeners to join in and

dedicate the chorus to all of the teachers, family members, and others who ever discouraged us from singing. People invariably approached me afterward and shared stories that revealed the intimate wounds left from this discouragement. Ironically, my singing now seemed to be acceptable by external performance standards. Many of my listeners even assumed that I had been trained as a singer.

I had my first direct encounter with a dead human body years later, at a nursing home in New York City where I served as a rabbinic chaplain. While making my rounds of the dining halls with grape juice to offer *kiddush* one Friday evening, I was summoned to the room of one of the elderly residents who had just died, a woman I'll call Laura.

Laura was an elegant, articulate, and cultured woman with a background in the performing arts. Her physical condition had been deteriorating steadily for weeks, and her powers of speech had given way to piteous, wordless outcries. I had found myself avoiding her room more and more during my visiting rounds (after all, there were so many other residents to see), out of what I later recognized as my own sense of helplessness.

And now here she was, dead: eyes closed, mouth open, face pale and stiffened. I do not recall feeling any conscious fear as I stood beside her bed, but in retrospect I was certainly at a loss. My professional training and knowledge of Jewish mourning rituals up to that point had not provided any specific guidance for handling this situation. It simply wasn't part of the normative curriculum, which focused on the living. After several uncertain minutes at her bedside, I decided that I would continue to offer Friday night *kiddush* for the living residents and return to offer support to Laura's bereaved relatives when they arrived. And so I left Laura alone.

When I returned, I found three of Laura's surviving family members tearfully clustered around her bed. Her sister mentioned the wordless outcries of recent weeks and told me that she had asked Laura what they meant. Was she in physical pain? "No," Laura had answered. "I cry out to let people know that I'm still here."

Still weeping, her relatives began bustling around the room, packing up the few remaining personal artifacts of her life. One was a large black-and-white photograph of Laura in her younger years as a performer, which had provided a striking contrast to her appearance before she died. Then her family members left to begin making funeral arrangements and notifications.

This time, I stayed in the room. Before I began avoiding her, I had sung to Laura when she was alive, as I often did in my chaplaincy with residents. Now I chose a Yiddish lullaby for the end of life and began softly singing again:

> The sun will set beneath the hill,
> And Love will come silently
> To Loneliness sitting upon a golden stone,
> Weeping for itself alone …
>
> The sun will set beneath the hill,
> And the night will come and sing a lullaby
> Over the eyes that already close
> To sleep in eternal rest.

Soon afterward, two female nursing assistants entered the room in surgical gowns, pulling on rubber gloves. I watched silently as they moved through what was—of necessity for them—a routine process of wrapping and maneuvering Laura's lifeless body into a zippered bag and onto a gurney. Then they called for a male colleague, who came and wheeled Laura's body off to what I assumed was the morgue.

I followed the gurney out of the room and stood watching as Laura's body was taken down the hallway and out of sight. I then returned slowly to my own routines, still wondering about the relationships between the living and the dead, the individual and the community.

I continued to turn to the synagogue of which I am a congregant and through which my own first experience of *sh'mirah* actually predated my encounter with Laura. Building on a few spontaneous vigil-keeping mobilizations there, I worked with our pulpit rabbi over nearly a decade to organize the only egalitarian volunteer *chevra kadisha* in Brooklyn—and one of only four in New York City.

During the 18 years since I first showed up for *sh'mirah*, I have kept the vigil over the dead in hospital rooms and morgues, funeral home parlors and basements, and private homes. I have accompanied the body of someone I knew in life down a freight elevator marked "TRASH," and was grateful that my presence could mitigate the indignities of the moment. Each of these experiences has opened my eyes and brought me closer to understanding the essential imperative of sitting with someone who has died: to be as fully present as possible; to bear witness to the human being who is "gone" yet still here in the physical form that is to be honored for the soul it once bore.

I don't always sing. I may sit silently for a while, in the front of the industrial refrigerator. There will be books of Psalms available, which I may pick up to recite my particular favorites. Or I may turn to my accumulated personal store of melodies, chants, and songs in various Jewish languages. It's an intuitive process, depending on how I find myself connecting with the dead, what I know or don't know about him or her, and how I am feeling at the time I am called to sit.

Singing also helps to center, calm, and reassure us as living volunteers. In our women's *taharah* team, a designated team member who recites the liturgy during

taharah also chooses the songs and chants. I'm usually designated, but I try to empower others to take on this role as well. Our men's team has adopted the tradition of a designated team member reciting Psalms throughout the *taharah* process, just as many vigil-keepers do.

Especially when struggling to prepare a body in difficult physical condition after death, I turn to the Song of Songs—which praises the physical beauty of the beloved—to help shift the energy and refocus the intention. Other team members are encouraged to sing along, hum along, or simply listen to the various melodies, according to each member's personal comfort level and what helps each one to perform the tasks at hand.

I believe that this kind of singing, like the singing of lullabies, is our human birthright—beyond the considerations of performance art or externally imposed aesthetic standards. Long before professional performances or recording technologies, people sang to and with each other in families and communities. I mourn the loss of this birthright, even as I seek to reclaim it.

The more I've accepted my own voice over the decades, the more consistent the quality of my singing has become. I'm periodically asked, "Are you a professional singer?" In a way, I am: I've served as a cantorial soloist for High Holy Day services, and from time to time others have paid me as well: to sing for a living, for the living. But my singing for the dead as a volunteer is priceless: *hesed shel emet*, ultimate kindness that cannot be repaid.

Old wounds linger from being silenced years ago. My "professional"-sounding voice remains a source of ambivalence for me, especially when I try to encourage others to sing and am told "I'd rather listen to you." I continue to waver and grow in the call-and-response of my singing life.

I still carry inside me the young girl whose voice was judged not good enough for fifth grade chorus. But somehow I never feel judged by the dead.

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