

U.S. and Israeli Jews learn how to purify the dead

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May 11, 2015

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JERUSALEM (RNS) Thirty men and women formed a circle around the body of a woman laid out on a rectangular table.

They listened carefully as a speaker explained every step in the process of *tahara*, the Jewish purification ritual performed on a deceased person prior to burial.

While much of the lecture dealt with the logistics of tahara—how to remove the deceased’s clothing, how to dress the body in a shroud—it emphasized, too, that tahara can and should be a deeply spiritual experience for those performing it.

Out of respect for the deceased, people performing tahara “should speak only when necessary,” said the lecturer Richard Light, author of *To Midwife a Soul: Guidelines for Performing Tahara*.

“When you clean the body, do so gently,” he added. “Cover as much of the body as possible to ensure the deceased’s modesty.”

Although this tahara was merely a demonstration—the volunteer on the table sat up, rather stiffly, after the workshop at a small Jerusalem conference center—the participants were still moved by the ritual’s dignity and beauty.

The workshop on ritual purification of the body was part of an 18-day Israel-American study mission that concluded in Jerusalem Thursday (May 7). Participants included Reform and Conservative Jews from North America, but also some Orthodox Israelis who wanted to better understand Jewish burial practices and other aspects of death and dying.

The 18-day mission was the culmination of an online certificate program offered by the Gamliel Institute, the leadership training and education arm of Kavod v’Nichum,

a U.S.-based organization devoted to end-of-life practices from a Jewish perspective.

The 18 students on the mission spent much of their time in New York, Prague, and various points in Israel visiting cemeteries, funeral homes, hospices, hospitals, seminaries, and a facility where the Israeli army identifies and prepares the country's fallen soldiers for burial.

Along the way they studied why Jews don't cremate the dead and the importance of personalized end-of-life directives.

At its conclusion, mission graduates became qualified to assume a role in a Chevra Kadisha, or local Jewish burial society.

Rena Boroditsky, a Gamliel Institute student who runs the Jewish burial society in Winnipeg, Canada, said she was moved by her visit to New York's 9/11 Memorial Museum "because it showed the power of remembrance and a reminder that we are doing holy work."

Joseph Blair, also a Gamliel student and the rabbi of two congregations in Charlottesville, Virginia, said the visit to the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague challenged his traditional view of cemeteries.

"In the U.S. we bury one body per plot," he said. "In Prague, due to space limitations, the dead have been buried on 12 different levels."

At the Har Ha'menuhot cemetery in Jerusalem, Blair said, "we saw how some people are being buried in niches in the wall."

For Stuart Kelman, dean of the Gamliel Institute, touring the hall where Israeli Defense Forces soldiers' bodies are purified, and the adjoining chapel where families of the deceased gather for a private goodbye, "was overwhelmingly emotional.

"Collectively our group has performed 2,000 taharas and yet everyone had tears in their eyes," he said.

Kelman said local burial officials granted his group remarkable access. That was true even in Israel, where burial practices are under the government's auspices and carried out almost solely by ultra-Orthodox burial societies that follow the strictest interpretation of Jewish law.

The invitation to tour the Israeli facilities was a step forward for religious pluralism, said Seth Farber, director of ITIM, an Israeli advocacy organization that co-sponsored the workshop with the Gamliel Institute and Kavod v'Nichum.

Farber, a modern-Orthodox rabbi, helped connect the Gamliel group and the Israeli burial officials.

“There is a tendency among the ultra-Orthodox in Israel to paint American Judaism as something less knowledgeable and less connected to Jewish practice,” he said. “But the Israelis were very impressed that Jews from diverse backgrounds are interested in keeping and learning about Jewish burial practices.”

Shayna Elke Falk, a female member of an ultra-Orthodox burial society met the Gamliel Institute students when they visited members of the society in Safed, in northern Israel. (In Jewish burial traditions, women purify female bodies, while men purify the male bodies.)

Falk called the encounter “beautiful and memorable in a positive way.”

“I am looking at people so connected to their holy task regardless of where they hold on the religious spectrum,” Falk said. “I’m so proud to have met them.”