



WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

The Eikhah Project 5777

Shmira

Caring Through Guarding

How do we honor and take care of those people who have passed away, prior to their burial? Through the ritual of *shmira*, which literally means guarding.

The *chevra kadisha* (literally *holy group/community*) attends to the preparation and protection of the body-- a time when it is believed the soul hovers in a kind of space. Someone must clean and dress the body, and someone must sit with the soul until the burial. Usually the person who is performing *shmira* can be found reading Psalms and other selections quietly as a way of performing this ritual.

In the following article, Elizabeth Savage recounts her first time performing *shmira*. As you read this excerpt from Tablet Magazine (April 27, 2015), notice how reading Eikhah is like a kind of *shmira* for the city of Jerusalem and the Temple.

Reading

Guarding the Dead

A young woman who belonged to my synagogue took her own life in December at age 26. She had served on the *chesed* committee -- welcoming new members, visiting the sick, and comforting the bereaved -- and now a call went out to the congregation to volunteer their time on her behalf, to sit *shmira*...

I had learned all about *shmira* eight years before when I had converted to Judaism. At the time it had brought a strange solace to me, knowing that a body never lies alone and must be handled with the utmost respect and care. But in the years since I had become a Jew, I had not had the chance to sit *shmira* myself.

I decided now was the time...

This woman whom I would be guarding was younger than me. I could picture her face. I didn't know if I'd ever spoken with her. A tragic death. I was severely anorexic for a period in my 20's and had perhaps my own near miss at the age at which she had killed herself...I felt consciously grateful that I 'd survived. It was, in large part, the kindness of strangers who had saved me from myself.

And with this gratitude, I also felt regret, sadness, and a little guilt. Maybe I could have been there for her...

I sat where the previous shomrim had sat, noticing the giant clock staring me directly in the face. It was so quiet. I couldn't hear any noise... I'm freaking myself out. I'm going to read psalms, I decided. I read in English rather than Hebrew, and hoped that would be okay.

The elevator doors opened, startling me. It was the funeral director again, now with a middle-aged couple who I realized were her parents...I tried to refocus on the poetry before me.

"But what is she doing?" the mother asked.

"She's a very religious lady and she's one of the people who comes here to sit and attend. They read Torah."

It took a moment to realize I was the "religious lady." The "me" of a decade ago, that reckless 26 year old wouldn't have believed it. But here I was now, immersed in ancient verses, praying for the hovering soul of a twenty-six-year old who hadn't escaped death as I had. I had a moment of real intensity. I wept for her, for the beauty of the psalms, and for the strangers who do mitzvot. How lucky I was to be alive, what a gift it is in this messy, painful, beautiful, brutal, chaotic, perfectly ordered world.

Just after 9 p.m., I emerged at street level, pulling my jacket tight against the wind. Another mitzvah had found me. I was grateful to be alive, grateful to be part of the Jewish tradition. The crowd slowly made its way up the avenue. I joined the throng and walked home.