



## WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

### The Eikhah Project 5777

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#### 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.