**AN ELEGANT JOURNEY: JEWISH TEENS ENCOUNTER DIGNITY BEYOND DEATH**

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**ABSTRACT**

The Final Journey: How Judaism Dignifies the Passage" is a trailblazing curriculum to teach Jewish death rituals to high school seniors. For the students, it served as a transformative experience. They emerged more reflective, more spiritually engaged and with a greater sense of the importance of community involvement. The article describes in detail the six-session, ten-hour course that featured a field trip to a funeral home. Also included are the educational challenges, an overview of a each session, an in-depth discussion of the impact on students and a description of the 98-page study guide for teachers.

**INTRODUCTION** Tani, a handsome 18-year-old high-school senior at the Katz Yeshiva High School of South Florida, faced a course on Jewish death rituals with both apprehension and curiosity. At the completion of The Final Journey: How Judaism Dignifies the Passage, he said: "I really knew nothing. I assumed that when a person dies, he's dressed in his best suit, placed in a casket and then buried. And that's it! The Final Journey course really made me appreciate the dignity and respect that Jewish customs offer the deceased. Learning about this brought life to a full circle. At this point, we are just high school students, but when the time comes for us to encounter death in our own families or the families of friends, it's good to know that such beautiful customs, traditions and rituals accompany the end of life." This course was designed and, developed in an effort to fill the substantive gap in knowledge that exists about the Jewish preparation for burial.
 A basic tenet of Judaism is the obligation to value and serve the deceased—to extend dignity beyond death. Embalming and cremation are prohibited by Jewish law (Genesis 3:19). Preparation of the dead for burial is the responsibility of the entire community, undertaken by an organization called the *Chevra Kadisha,* the Sacred Society. The volunteers of the Sacred Society quietly and privately wash, purify and dress the deceased in shrouds. Lyrical prayers from Psalms and Prophets are recited, thereby bearing witness to death as the last of life's important passages.

**NEED**
 Numerous educators and religious leaders make clear the need for death education for adolescents. Rev. Terri Daniel (2016) wrote in "Death Education in Schools": "It's time for death to come out of the closet so that we can raise a generation of feeling, thinking young adults who can accept the ebb and flow of human experience, and allow loss and grief to become a healthy part of their life cycle." Ethel King-McKenzie (November, 2011) reflects on the chaos and confusion that has ensued as a result of school shootings in recent decades, 'During these times there has always been a sense of despair and uncertainty about how to react. Schools should be a place where they learn about death and dying as part of the curriculum." In *Jewish Reflections on Death,*  Rabbi Jack Riemer (1976, 11) states, "… we would be much wiser and much kinder to our children if we helped prepare them to face death before they need to know."

 Roger V. Bennett (1974) in "Death and the Curriculum" comments on the reluctance of educators to pursue end of life issues. He concludes that serious discussion of death is all but omitted from the school curriculum, not because of an oversight, but because it is a cultural taboo. Bennett showed that the greatest anxieties and inhibitions about death and dying rest with the adult faculty and not the students. Joel B. Wolowelsky (1980) pioneered death education in yeshiva high schools. In "Death Education" he suggests, "Showing students how a Torah education deals with death is an important part of teaching them to understand and identify with that which is our Tree of Life."

 Dr. Donna Schuurman (2003), the executive director of the Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families, addresses the significance of religious rituals. She says, "Religious ritual gives the mourner the opportunity to mark that something important has happened. Sometimes the power and effect of the ritual is not realized until long after the death of the family member."

 Schuurman's words point to one of the most important reasons underscoring the need for death education for teens, The rituals surrounding the Jewish preparation for burial are shrouded in mystery. In *Dignity Beyond Death; The Jewish Preparation for Burial*(Berman 2005),we learn that even among traditional Jews there is a culture of secrecy about this topic and most people have only sketchy knowledge of the laws and customs. Consequently, only about one in five Jewish deaths is accompanied by *tahara—*the ritual purification of the body prior to burial. Mostly this represents ignorance rather than rejection of the commandment. Additionally, there is little awareness of the importance of these rituals among Jewish educators. Many teachers cannot confront death for themselves, hence they are certainly not likely to address it with their students. As it is rarely, if ever, taught in high schools, there have been no materials available to teachers that would illuminate the humanity and ultimate dignity of the of the elegant path along which the Jewish deceased are taken in their final journey prior to burial.
 For students attending religious schools, high school often marks the end of their formal religious education. Therefore, in order to ensure the continuity and understanding of this time-honored deed, it should become part of the high school curriculum.

**THE PARTNERSHIP** In the spring of 2014, the author partnered with Rabbi Jonathan Kroll, Head of School of the Katz Yeshiva High School of South Florida.[[1]](#footnote-1) Rabbi Kroll, like the author, has extensive *Chevra Kadisha* experience. As Jewish death rituals are generally not taught in schools, Rabbi Kroll felt that teaching about this topic would be a valuable component in a student's well-rounded education.
 The goals we set for "The Final Journey: How Judaism Dignifies the Passage" were three-fold: First, to develop a model curriculum that would provide high school students with knowledge, understanding, and an appreciation of the Jewish preparation for burial; second, to incorporate into the curriculum the core values of Judaism reflected in its death rituals through the use of sound educational principles; and third, to disseminate the curriculum, along with a teachers' study guide, to religious high schools in all streams of Judaism throughout the English-speaking world.

**EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES** Within Judaism there are public and private *mitzvot*—commandments. The ones that are public, such as fasting on Yom Kippur and having a Passover Seder, are maintained even when they are not accompanied by much knowledge and understanding. People are less aware of those commandments performed privately. This is certainly true in the area of death and *tahara—*the most intimate aspect of death.
 Myths and misconceptions about the work of the burial society are rampant. The prevailing cultural taboo about death inhibits discussion, especially in the presence of children. Yet, children know that people die and since the adult world provides no information, they are left to devise their own answers to a host of mysterious questions. A woman, now in her seventies, who grew up at a time when the *Chevra Kadisha* came to the home of the deceased to perform the *tahara,* recalled the death of the rabbi's wife who lived across the street: "When I was about six years old, I was playing outdoors with my little girl friends on the day of the death. We watched in wonderment as a group of ladies arrived carrying a large washbasin and went into the rabbi's house. We knew that his wife had died and we were compelled to make some association between the deceased and the washbasin. We decided that the basin, even though it was much too short , was where the dead body was going to be kept from then on." In the absence of any additional information over her lifetime, this image has remained in her mind into adulthood.
 Questions like what happens at death , where does the soul go, and how do we prepare the body, remain mysterious and unknown. Rabbi Efrem Goldberg, Senior Rabbi of the Boca Raton Synagogue, has suggested that education about the Jewish view of death not only brings people comfort and solace, it also inspires them to live more meaningful lives. The collective response of the *Chevra Kadisha* to a death brings dignity to the deceased and simultaneously strengthens a caring community.

**PLANNING** In the fall of 2014, in conjunction with Rabbi Kroll, the author spent several months defining the curriculum, recruiting and training faculty, determining who would be our initial target teaching audience, setting up a schedule, and developing tools for student evaluation. The curriculum we offered is consistent with the Orthodox tradition. In selecting faculty, we placed a priority on those who had knowledge and experience with the *Chevra Kadisha.* Early on, we decided that we should postpone writing the study guide until we had completed one cycle of the course. We offered the first demonstration course to the twenty-six senior girls in the spring of 2015. In the launch of the program, Rabbi Kroll told the group that the school decided to embark on this project because how we treat the dead is often overlooked, yet, it is a powerful statement of our respect and love for the living. He provided a brief description of the course content and underscored that they would be the first group of high school students in the country to be exposed to a course of this kind. Questions that followed indicated that the students were surprised, curious, and a little apprehensive.
 The demonstration course exceeded all expectations. It prompted students to examine life through the prism of their new-found knowledge. Brooke wrote: "The Final Journey changed the way I view my everyday life and actions. Although I will sometimes slip up and do things that do not nourish my soul, I will always strive to do better and continuously work on myself."
 Immediately following the course, several students went on the March of the Living, an educational program that brings students from around the world to Poland to explore the remnants of the Holocaust. Jessica reflected on her experience: "After travelling to the death camps and standing in the gas chambers and crematoria where so many Jews were murdered and their bodies treated like trash, I realized how unique and uplifting the *Chevra Kadisha's* practices are and how lucky I was to have learned about the rituals prior to this trip. A visit to the Lodz ghetto *tahara* house had more meaning for me than it did for others. Because I was the only member in our group of fifty who was familiar with the *tahara* ritual, I could share with others all the things I learned in the course."
 As a result of the inaugural success, we concluded that, going forward, the Final Journey would be offered to the entire co-ed class of seniors. Some modifications were made in the order in which material was presented and in the scheduling. For example, two periods were allowed for each class instead of one. The change in pace enabled the students to digest the material and to ask questions. As documented in the pages to follow, the entire format of the funeral home field trip was revamped to make it an interactive experience.

**CURRICULUM CONTENT—AN OVERVIEW[[2]](#footnote-2)**

Session I—*Placing Death in the Context of the Jewish Lifecycle—*Presenter, Rabbi Efrem Goldberg, Senior Rabbi, Boca Raton Synagogue.
 The presentation centered on the relationship between the body and the soul. Judaism teaches that we are a soul housed in a body. When our body dies, our soul, which has existed since creation, will be returned to the Almighty—as stated in *Ecclesiastes 12:7* (NIV)"and the dust returns to the ground it was and the spirit returns to God who gave it." Because the body is the vessel for the soul, it is incumbent upon us to care for our bodies during our lifetimes while at the same time nurturing and nourishing the soul.
 The primary responsibility of the *Chevra Kadisha* is to care for the body and to comfort the soul through its transition and journey. A *shomer,* a guard, stays with the soul until the body is buried, at which time the soul can begin its ascent. In reflecting upon this, Yona said: " I was flabbergasted when I learned that Jews maintain watch of the dead body until the time of burial. During the program, I learned that the body gains such sanctity because it is a receptacle for the soul. The concept of *shmira,* therefore, establishes a clear dichotomy between the body and soul, but nonetheless exposes their interconnectivity."
 Everything about the *tahara* is designed to allow the soul to observe the respectful treatment of its former body. We carefully wash the body from head to toe, we clean under the fingernails and toenails, and in the ears, and we remove all tubes, lines and catheters. Blood that flows after death is part of the body and is gathered in pieces of cloth for burial with the deceased. The body is then purified by immersing it in a *mikvah—*a ritual bath, or in the absence of a *mikvah,* pouring a cascade of twenty-four quarts of water over it. Finally, the body is dressed in *tachrichim*—shrouds that are simple yet majestic. During a *tahara* there is no talking, except about the tasks at hand. In keeping with *kavod ha'met* —respect for the dead body, we don't pass things over the deceased; instead we walk around the body. The *tahara* is complete when the body is placed in a plain pine casket and the *tahara* team asks forgiveness of the deceased for any errors of omission or commission prior to placing the lid on the casket.
 This session concludes with a short video of a simulated *tahara*  performed on a mannequin in the prep room of a funeral home by members of a *Chevra Kadisha*. It was produced by PBS and aired nationally on "Religion & Ethics Newsweekly."

Session II
Part A—*Sources and Significance of Laws and Customs for Tahara—*Presenter, Rabbi Ben Sugerman, Chairman, Oral Torah Department, Katz Yeshiva High School of South Florida.
 Although some variations of customs exist amongst *Chevra Kadisha* groupsaround the world, there are three components that remain consistent: Washing the body, purification, and dressing the deceased in *tachrichim* —shrouds. Sources for these can be found in *Mishna Shabbat,* written around the third century. There was a requirement to wash the body following which oil was rubbed into the skin, and the body was transferred onto sand so the remains were preserved until the time of burial. Additionally, the white of an egg was rubbed on the forehead causing it to shine. As the deceased was transported outside the city for burial, this served as identification that the body is that of a Jew. Several of these customs continue to this day.
 Prior to the first century C.E., there existed a tradition of ostentatious funeral practices that put an enormous burden on the poor. According to the Talmud, the second century sage Rabban Gamliel II insisted that despite his exalted position, he be buried in plain white shrouds. This marked the beginning of the universal custom of burying the dead in simple white garments, in recognition of the equality of all before God.

Part B —*The Chevra Kadisha and Jewish Values—*Presenter, Rabbi Jonathan Kroll, Head of School, Katz Yeshiva High School of South Florida.
 The ritual of *tahara* provides an important insight into the essential values of Judaism. Recognizing the godliness of each individual, the *Chevra Kadisha* treats the deceased with ultimate dignity. This treatment of the deceased's body reflects the respect that Judaism accords the body—the vehicle through which we perform commandments that improve the world. The egalitarian aspect of providing a *tahara* for all Jews is indicative of the moral imperative that teaches us to render unconditional care and dignity. This commitment to equality extends to members of the *Chevra*, all of whom participate on an equal level. The bonding among participants transcends age, socio-economic status and personal interests. Sarit wrote in her essay, " Through the Final Journey, I have gained a new perspective on how people should be treated. Every time I think to do something disrespectful to another person, I will think about how even the deceased receive more respect than I am about to give and will change my actions as a result."
 The Ethics of the Fathers (2:15) instructs us not to separate ourselves from the community. The *Chevra Kadisha,* whose members serve willingly and lovingly without monetary remuneration, is a paradigm for community involvement.

Session III—*Funeral Home Field Trip* The trip to the funeral home is the centerpiece of the entire educational endeavor. Shoshana, who was part of the first demonstration course, said: " At the beginning, I viewed death as something farfetched and really hard to grasp, but going to the funeral home radically changed all that. Touring the *tahara* room and seeing the *tachrichim* all laid out next to the plain pine casket suddenly placed death in the realm of reality. Everything we had learned to that point seemed theoretical. Now, quite unexpectedly, it became meaningful."
 When the students arrive at the funeral home, they assemble in the chapel for a short talk on the role of the rabbi and the role of the funeral director when someone dies. They are then divided into three separate groups to participate on a round-robin basis in three *tahara* teaching stations, each under the direction of an experienced member of the *Chevra Kadisha.*

1. *Tahara* Preparation Room: Students put on medical gowns and gloves and participate in a simulated *tahara,* washing and placing boards on the *tahara* table and pouring cascades of water over the table, as is done in the actual procedure.
2. Significance of the Shrouds and the Casket: Each of the eight garments in a set of shrouds is reviewed followed by a discussion of what constitutes a kosher casket. Students have the opportunity to examine both the shrouds and the casket. The session concludes with students learning how to tie a *shin* knot, the signature knot in fastening the shrouds. Its three loops form the Hebrew letter *shin,* referring to the initial letter of *Shaddai,* a Hebrew name for the Almighty.
3. The Role of the Prayers Recited During the *Tahara*:  Each *tahara*  task is accompanied by a prayer that sanctifies and elevates the procedure. For example, the following passage from Isaiah 61:10 is recited before dressing the deceased in the shrouds: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord , my soul shall be joyful in my God, for He clothed me with the garments of salvation. He has covered me with the robe of righteousness as a bridegroom puts on priestly glory and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."
 At the completion of a *tahara,* it is customary to wash one's hands outdoors as a sign of separation from the dead. Joining in a unity of purpose, students wash each others' hands as a demonstration that they care for the living as well as the dead, and proclaim to one another, "*tizku l'mitzvot—*may you merit the performance of more good deeds."
 Prior to leaving the funeral home, students once again gather in the chapel to hear from three members of the *Chevra Kadisha* about the impact on their lives of performing this obligation. Following the field trip, one student wrote in the school newspaper: "I think all the seniors were significantly moved by the program. It was a unique and interactive educational experience. This trip was definitely an unforgettable senior-year moment.”

Session IV—*The History of the Chevra Kadisha,*  Presenter, Rabbi Leibel Miller, Director, Chabad Chervra Kadisha of Florida.

 The Book of Deuteronomy (34:5) records that Moses died alone on *Zayin Adar,* the seventh day of the Hebrew month of *Adar*,and that God buried him. It is traditionally believed that this was the first *tahara,*  performed by God for Moses. *Zayin Adar* is also the day of his birth. This date has since become a time for reflection and appreciation for the work of the *Chevra Kadisha.* Today, it is marked by an annual dinner that is attended by all the members of the *Chevra Kadisha,* their spouses and community members, such as rabbis and funeral directors, who have assisted with burials.
 The model for all modern burial societies is the one organized by Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi in Prague in 1564. While the initial *Chevra Kadisha*  groups assumed responsibility for an array of social and economic services for those in need, the ones we know today are exclusively concerned with the rites and rituals surrounding death and burial The first *Chevra Kadisha*  in America was established in 1785 by the Shearith Israel Congregation in New York City.

Session V—*The Chevra Kadisha During the Holocaust and Acts of Terrorism,* Presenter, Rochel Berman, The Final Journey Project Director.
Part A—*The Holocaust* Despite the unimaginable restrictions and danger, many Jews who experienced the Holocaust were determined to offer whatever dignity they could to those who perished. Arnold Shay, a survivor, recalls the death and burial of his father in the ghetto in 1942: "My father was mercilessly beaten by the Germans and died in his bed shortly thereafter at the age of forty-six. My mother softly uttered, "*Baruch dayan emes,"* blessed be the True Judge. Performing *taharas* was forbidden, but because my father had been a member of the *Chevra,*  two of the men risked their lives and performed the ritual on the table of our one-room basement home in the ghetto. As the person who sewed the *tachrichim*  had been ordered to stop working by the Germans, I hand-sewed a sack-like garment out of a sheet. My mother and I dressed my father and made preparations to bury him. We obtained a casket from the gravedigger and with the help of the *Chevra* carried him three miles to the cemetery. I could only get a permit for six people to go with us so there was no quorum of ten men to recite *kaddish -*the mourners' prayer. I recited the prayer nevertheless."
 Stories such as the one told by Arnold Shay convey to students that adherence to Judaism is possible in the face of horror and adversity. It also calls upon them to explore issues of personal risk and raises such questions as, "What might inspire me to take a risk?"; "What would cause me to reject risk?" Ultimately, hearing first-hand accounts about courage and commitment inspires confidence in the students' ability to act in a righteous manner.

Part B—*Terrorist Attacks in Israel* Among the first line responders to terrorist attacks in Israel are members of ZAKA— a Hebrew acronym for Disaster Victims' Identification. Matis, an Israeli who travels between Israel and the United States, explained how he became involved with ZAKA when he witnessed a terrorist attack on a public bus in Jerusalem. Even though he wasn't trained, he got out of his car and began removing the injured from the bus: "I took out a girl who was about twelve-years old, who died in my arms. At the instruction of a ZAKA volunteer I retrieved as much blood as I could that flowed from her body and had dropped to the pavement. The girl was taken to the identification center and then to the funeral home for burial. Since my clothes were full of blood, I had to go home to change and surrender the blood stained garments to the funeral home for burial with the child. The funeral took place the same day. I was supposed to leave Israel that night, but changed my flight to be present as she was laid to rest." This was a life-altering experience for Matis. Following this incident he said, "I feel that there is nothing more important than helping ZAKA in whatever way I can." Matis's response to the terrorist attack telegraphs to students that ordinary people can do extraordinary things, especially when religious rituals provide the roadmap to help them navigate the difficult terrain.

Part C - *Bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City* Following the bombing of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, rescue workers combed the tons of rubble for the smallest shreds of identity. Since most of the bodies were reduced to ash there were very few proper burials, and of course very few *taharas.* The remains were brought in refrigerated containers to the New York Medical Examiner's office for possible identification.
 Congregation Ohab Tzedek in Manhattan undertook the obligation of providing *shmira*, guarding the remains. In the Jewish faith, the practice is performed by individuals who read passages from the Book of Psalms as they sit with the deceased. Overwhelmed by the enormity of the tragedy, people were desperate to be of help. Before long, more than 200 volunteers had been recruited who provided this service around the clock every day in four-hour shifts for almost a year. It fell to the Yeshiva University Stern College for Women to provide *shmira* on the Sabbath because their dormitories were just a short walk from the Medical Examiner's office. Since the religion of the deceased whose remains were retrieved was unknown, the Psalms were recited for the consolation and redemption of all souls, regardless of religion.
 The concern expressed during the period of *shmira* crossed intergenerational lines and had interdenominational impact. In the words of Armin Osgood, the coordinator of this endeavor, "It's incredible that this tragedy should bring forth such a unity of spirit and of caring."
 In Judaism, personal identity is the key to dignity in life as it is in death. Repeated acts of terror are an attempt to rob people of their identity. The randomness of the victims, in fact, sends the message that identity is unimportant. Students learned that by providing *shmira,* one can restore dignity to the souls of those whose bodies were reduced to ash and rubble.

Session VI - *Issues of Jewish Law and Organ Donation* -Presenter, Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander, President and Rosh Yeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone
 When teenagers receive their driver's licenses they are often at a loss when asked if they would like to be an organ donor. Jewish law tells us that we have a responsibility for *tikkun olam*,healing a fractured world. Organ donation is something that speaks to the basic Jewish value of helping others.
 Posthumous organ donation is permitted, even mandated, but the organs that can be donated is dependent on how one defines death (Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, Yechveh Daat 2:84). One group of rabbis rules that once the brainstem is no longer functioning, any organ can be donated. Another group rules that if the heart is beating the person is still alive; since the heart can still beat after brainstem death, this limits the type of organs that can be donated.
 This session helps students recognize their role in the sacred task of saving a life; it dispels myths about the view of organ donation in Jewish law; it provides understanding of the methodology employed by modern day rabbinic authorities to tackle issues that did not exist in previous generations; it underscores that Jews cannot only be recipients of organs, they must also be donors; and it enables them to engage their friends and family in a conversation about becoming an organ donor in accordance with Jewish law.

**IMPACT** From student class participation, evaluations, essays, and interviews with *Chevra Kadisha* members, we learned that the course had educational, spiritual and practical implications. The receptivity of students to this course was magnified by the fact that it was offered during their final semester of their senior year. It is a time when they have completed most of their course work and are on the cusp of a major life change—leaving home for college or participating in a gap year abroad. The following is a snapshot of the broad spectrum of responses.
 *Death in the Context of the Jewish Lifecycle—*Rabbi Goldberg's presentation set the stage for the entire course. His discussion of the juxtaposition of the body and the soul was revelatory and profoundly resonated with the students. He provided a framework for students to view death without fear and enabled them to personally reflect on their own lives. Tamar wrote: "I learned that a body is the vehicle that allows us to perform God's commandments. Without it, the soul would have no way of being able to function in this world. I have begun to appreciate my body in a different and more holy light. It is to take advantage of the many opportunities it gives us to serve God. I believe this understanding will last for my lifetime and will hopefully continue to enhance my service to the Almighty."
 *Funeral Home Field Trip—*Students viewed the trip to the funeral home as a distinct highlight of the course—informative, interactive and inspiring. It helped to allay underlying fears and skepticism. Adam commented: "The most transformative part of the Journey was our trip to the funeral home. It helped me fully understand everything we had discussed in our previous meetings. I find it amazing that every Jew is buried the same way with the same respect and honor regardless of who they were in life. I also found it surreal to see the garments and the casket that I will be buried in."
 Talia wrote: "Seeing exactly what goes on in a funeral home was an experience I never thought I would have. I was intimidated at first, but once I realized how great this commandment is, the fear and intimidation suddenly went away. Although the ritual of the *tahara* is very somber, the commandment is bigger than any other, as there is no way the deceased can acknowledge your service. The funeral home visit opened my eyes to the possibility of doing this *mitzvah* in the future, as it is a *mitzvah* too great to pass up."
 *Enhancing Judaism—*Students who took this course have been enrolled in Jewish day school from the time they were in kindergarten without knowing anything about Jewish death rituals. The Final Journey course filled an important gap in their knowledge. Lana said: "I like the idea that our souls are our true selves. It makes each person seem even more unique and connected to God. This fits with our mission as Jews—to elevate the physical body to a spiritual realm."
 Aaron, an ardent fan of the TV series *Law and Order,* commented: "In numerous episodes I have watched detectives and medical examiners engage in trivial conversations as they worked on a corpse in the morgue. Prior to taking this course, this seemed totally normal until I learned that even though a person may be dead, his/her soul still hovers about the body until burial. This impressed upon me that death is not the total end and that all corpses deserve the utmost respect."
 Jamie reflected on core values: "I found that standing guard and praying for the deceased signifies such respect for the individual. The uniform ceremony for everybody, no matter who the person was or the life they led, also dignifies the deceased. Inherent in this ritual are so many of the core values of Judaism— selflessness, care for the helpless and withholding of judgment."

*Deepening Family Ties* Baily wrote about learning for the first time what her father does as a member of the *Chevra:* "I've always been aware that my father frequently went out in the evening to participate in the *Chevra Kadisha,* but prior to this course, I had no idea what this meant. During one of the classes we watched a video of a simulated *tahara.* I began to cry because it made me realize what important work he was doing and how amazing he is for doing it. When he got home, I gave him a big hug to show him my appreciation for his service to the *Chevra Kadisha.* "
 Ethan describes an important interview: "This project is especially meaningful to me because I was able to interview the most special person in my life to do it—My Dad. I had always seen him leave the house very late at night but he would never tell us where he was going. When I was discussing this project with him he sat me down and explained confidentially that he was a member of the *Chevra Kadisha* and was willing to be interviewed for the purposes of teaching me about it through his experiences. Due to my relationship with the interviewee, the experiences he shared with me were even more special."
 The father of a recent graduate reflected on his son's demeanor at his grandfather's funeral: "Aaron was exceptional today, due in large part to the Final Journey course. He handled the funeral with such maturity and respect. He actually volunteered to ride in the hearse from the funeral chapel to the cemetery to serve as his grandfather's *shomer* while reciting Psalms. I cannot thank you enough for providing this curriculum." This encounter is an example of how the course became a vehicle for learning about long-held Jewish traditions while enhancing intergenerational bonds. By engaging in a religious practice of which the student was previously unaware, it empowered him to honor his grandfather's memory. It simultaneously served to enhance the father/son relationship.
 As an innovative endeavor, the Final Journey course attracted coverage from local, regional and national media outlets. *The New York Times* article (Freedman, 2015) became a source of school pride for students, faculty and families. Students who were quoted or whose photos appeared in the paper, took copies to share with their college interviewers. The local coverage led to an adult mini-series of the course offered to the community at the Boca Raton Synagogue.

**DISSEMINATING THE CURRICULUM** The materials developed for dissemination were designed for two audiences: Schools that choose to utilize their own faculty or community rabbis and scholars to teach various sessions; and for schools that might not have these resources available. The latter can access videos of each session on the Katz Yeshiva High School website by clicking "Academics" and then navigating to The Final Journey.
 The 98-page Final Journey Study Guide includes tips for teachers on how to implement the curriculum in their schools, and detailed lesson plan and suggested topics for discussion for each session. The Appendix offers suggested student homework assignment topics, evaluation forms and a sample *Tahara* Manual. All materials are available at no cost from rochelberman@bellsouth.net.
 Rabbi Shalom Berger of The Bar Ilan University Lookstein Center for Jewish Education[[3]](#footnote-3) selected this project for distribution as a sample of a creative approach to an educational challenge. To date, thirty high schools worldwide have requested materials. Several of the schools that responded have implemented the program. However, additional research is needed to determine potential impediments to implementation.

**THE JOURNEY CONTINUES**

As exploratory research, the Final Journey fulfilled its initial goals. We developed a curriculum and teaching materials, demonstrated it with four different groups of students and disseminated the information to Jewish educators worldwide. As a result of learning about death rituals, students were inspired to want to live more meaningful lives. This finding led the author to explore whether other faith-based groups have similar programs.
 The burial rituals that most closely resemble those practiced in Judaism are those performed in the Islamic faith. A visit by the author with the Imam of the Islamic Center of Boca Raton to become more acquainted with the Islamic rituals led to a discussion of The Final Journey course offered at the Katz Yeshiva High School. This idea ignited enormous interest in the Imam. Armed with The Final Journey Study Guide and other educational materials, he is developing an Islamic version of the basic curriculum for his high school students.
 Among the few curricula that explore death rituals in the Christian faith is one described by Kate Ristow (February, 2014), titled, "Helping Children Understand Our Catholic Funeral Rites." In this course students learn about Church funeral rites which include the Vigil or wake, the Funeral Liturgy, and the Rite of Committal/Burial. Ristow also suggests a number of activities such as a field trip to a church to examine some of the sacramental objects used in Catholic funerals. These examples speak to the untapped opportunities for all faith-based institutions to educate their constituencies, especially their young people, about the significance of their death rituals.
 The Katz Yeshiva High School seniors emerged from the Final Journey experience, more reflective, more spiritually engaged, with a greater sense of the importance of community involvement. Aware of the fact that most people have little knowledge about this ritual, many became self-appointed ambassadors in educating friends and family about the beauty of *tahara.* Ayala, a recent graduate, concluded her essay with these words: "Thank you for giving us this opportunity that we will surely never forget. Although the course is called the 'Final Journey', it is only the beginning of our journey, of *my* journey in learning how to lead a more soul-based life just like the members of the *Chevra Kadisha* —the holy society".

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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1. The Katz Yeshiva High School of South Florida is a modern Orthodox institution serving 350 students.  It provides a comprehensive Judaic and General Studies program.  Its mission is to engage the hearts and minds of the students and  to develop knowledgeable and thoughtful young men and women who respect all human beings and are committed to the Jewish community and to the world at large.  The author gratefully acknowledges Rabbi Jonathan Kroll for his vision and support. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Material in the Overview is culled and edited from the lesson plans submitted by the presenters that appear in the Final Journey Study Guide. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Lookstein Center, located on the Bar Ilan University campus in Israel, specializes in teaching and curriculum development, interactive communication and networking for Jewish educators worldwide. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)