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For whatever reasons, as we get older, the intellectually provocative moments – when we truly encounter something off the mind’s radar – occur less and less. Rochel Bermans’s *Dignity Beyond Death: The Jewish Preparation for Burial* is a heuristic, practical introduction to *tahara*, (or as she explains, “the ritual purification of a body prior to burial”) that brings to light practices that most of us have never thought about, yet which move us to consider the fundamental question of existence, of life and death. Despite some repetitions within the text, Berman succeeds beautifully in her goal of enlightening Jews and non-Jews alike about these Jewish burial rituals in a thorough, but concise volume that combines spiritual reflections, theological rationales, and practical illustrations of practices that are either unknown or often misunderstood. In an appendix, Berman includes things like a sample procedure manual, a sample brochure that explains the process to families, a bibliography, and even a helpful glossary.

Berman finesses what might have been a dry book of explanations and procedures into a study that defines and instructs as it gives glimpses into real lives and real encounters. She includes a brief history of the importance *kavod hameit*, or respect for a dead body, that includes scriptural references, the *Mishna Shabbat*, and a 1626 compilation of Aaron Berekiah. And although practices have been revised through the years, much has stayed the same. We learn about the *Chevra Kadisha*, or the society that completes these preparations, which include cleansing the body, ritual purification with the nine *kavim* (or 24 quarts) of water, and dressing the body in shrouds. The accompanying prayers are also discussed. The spiritual basis behind each ritual is almost always presented and explained. For instance, there is an effort to retain every drop of blood, which represents the soul, at the time of death for burial. Berman includes numerous personal accounts, where people discuss their *Chevra* experiences in an affectingly honest manner, e.g. their fears before their first *tahara* or the trauma of...
preparing an accident victim or young child. The dignity of the deceased and the communal response to the death of an individual are integral to all of the experiences.

Berman’s study takes on even added depth when she considers the Holocaust and terrorism. She captures the crux here: “Identity is the key to dignity, in death as in life.” She tries to get at the difficulty of maintaining dignity even as the Holocaust and terrorist perpetrators seek to eradicate identity. Most readers have probably never heard of the ZAKA or Disaster Victims’ Identification organization in Israel that rushes to attack scenes to help identify the deceased. Personal accounts of these workers or the volunteers who read Psalms at the New York 9/11 site again reinforce the stark realities of just how to deal with a person who is dead.

Most of us have never thought about why we embalm or why Jewish custom says not to. Berman’s discussions help us stop and consider some larger questions. The book is meaningful in that regard to almost anyone: Jews and non-Jews, religious and non-religious, academics and non-academics.