

Dear Chavraya,

As a young rabbi, many cycles of Torah unfolding since, a dying woman asked me with her last breaths, "what will it be like?" I was terrified. I knew she needed an answer, but how could I possibly give one? Holding her hand, I heard my own words, really a single word, that seemed to come from beyond myself. "Shalom, Rose, it will be all shalom..., shalom, shalom...." We said the word together, a one word prayer for wholeness, for peace, coming from her as barely a whisper, and then not at all. I continued to say it softly until her last breath came as the gentle saying of Amen to all of her days, a continuum of life and death.

Of lessons learned from the dead, in the interplay between the two Torah portions that become one this week, *Acharei Mot* and *K'doshim*, is the interplay between life and death. The backdrop is set in the first verse, *acharei mot/after the death of the two sons of Aaron*. We are left to pause and to reflect, as after any death, on their lives and on our own. Following immediately, instructions are given as to how Aaron, the Kohen Gadol, is to enter the sanctuary, describing the garments that he is to wear. Set against a backdrop of death as encountered in the fullness of life, Aaron dresses in the four simple white vestments to be worn by the High Priest on Yom Kippur: "He shall clothe himself with the linen tunic / *k'tonet* of the Sanctuary, and linen breeches / *michnasayim* shall be upon his body, and he shall gird himself with his linen sash / *avnet*, and he shall bind his head with a linen turban / *mitz'nefet*; these are the garments of the Sanctuary" (Lev. 16:4).

For anyone who has been privileged to serve as part of a *Chevra Kaddisha*, the Holy Society that lovingly cares for the dead, these are familiar terms. Honoring a long and noble tradition in caring for the Jewish dead of Boston, for so many among us who come together as volunteers for the newer *Community Chevra Kadisha of Greater Boston*, these garments evoke real and immediate images. In the time-honored way of every *Chevra Kaddisha*, after tenderly washing the body that housed a precious soul and causing "waters of life" to flow upon each sacred human vessel, the dead of our people are then dressed in garments called by the very names of the "garments of the Sanctuary." The body itself is the Sanctuary in which a soul once served, as the Kohen Gadol served in the Sanctuary of our people long ago. Dressed in garments fashioned after those of the Kohen Gadol, each of the verses addressed to Aaron in our Torah portion is recited as the corresponding holy item is placed upon the dead. Treated with the same love and awe as shown to the one who guided the service in God's ancient House, each of the dead becomes as the Kohen Gadol. However old, or broken, or ravaged by illness, the dead before us still proclaim the miracle of the human body, each one still worthy of the deference shown to the Kohen Gadol.

Seeking peace for the living as for the dead, the continuum unfolds from *Acharei Mot* to *K'doshim*, from death to life. "*K'doshim ti'h'yu* / you shall be holy, for I, God, your God, am holy" (Lev. 19:2). Following the challenge, we are given the way. Imitating God, holiness is found in all the ways that we are called to meet the needs of people -- sustaining the poor and the landless, the most vulnerable among us, giving laborers their due, not oppressing or causing hurt in ways both

great and small, not to gossip, nor hate in your heart, the path to holiness rising to its crescendo, “and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). However broken in body, or ravaged by illness or circumstance, in all the varied reflections of God’s image, every human being proclaims with their life and being the miracle of the human body and the spirit within, each one worthy of the same deference shown to the Kohen Gadol.

Offering a way of love to emulate, the Holy One made for Adam and Eve “garments of skin,” *katnot or*. Rabbi Yishayahu Horowitz (the Holy Sh’lo, 1558-1628) teaches of a simple shift from the letter *ayin* to the letter *aleph*, still *katnot or*, but now meaning “garments of light,” which are the priestly garments. As the skin fades, garments of light surround and remind of the essence within. It is the light of life that is revealed at the beginning and still shines at the end, the light of every soul that is God’s candle in the world. Tending so carefully to each soul’s light in caring for the dead, so may we nurture God’s light among the living. Then there shall be for the living, too, from a dying whisper rising, a great song of life, shalom, shalom.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor