5A The *Chevra Kadisha*

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Of all the ritual acts that are a part of the community life of a commanded faith tradition, none is as little known as the work of the *chevra kadisha*, or the Jewish ritual burial society. Operating in every Jewish community, the *chevra* is a selected group of women and men who prepare the body of the dead according to rabbinic tradition with a liturgy based in the Song of Songs and a practice that forces the abstract discourse of death and the afterlife into intimate, tangible detail of embodiment (Madsen 1998). The laws of ritual burial are straightforward: every Jewish person is to complete his or her life in the same way: washed clean, with a specified amount of running water poured from the hands of her *chevra*, gently patted dry, dressed in simple unbleached linen shrouds, sewn by hand, *tachrehin* (Lamm 2000). The same for all, the rich, poor, powerful, and powerless: unembalmed, unadorned. Each is wrapped in linen with small handfuls of dirt from Mt. Scopus in Jerusalem, placed at their heart, eyes, and womb, lifted into a pine box made without nails, the lid closed and a candle lit on the top, and watched until carried to the grave (Epstein 1995). Women prepare women, men prepare men, all in silence, never turning their backs to the body of the dead (Diamant 2001; Epstein 1995). The term *chevra kadisha* is an Ashkenazi one (Sephardic Jews refer to this as the *lavadores*, those who wash). The concept of a separate grouping that is assigned to this tradition is referred to in the Babylonian Talmud.

Participation in the *chevra kadisha* is a "hard mitzvah" that is "not for everyone," noted one participant from a small community (Zoloth 1998). Yet it this very secrecy and sense of utter responsibility that makes the act obligatory, and in the framing of the performance as chosen, ritualized and mandatory, a social contract is created in which role-specific duties emerge. It is a feature of the act itself that makes these role-specific duties an ethical gesture and not merely an act of faithfulness (Light 2013). The people who perform the act must not be related to the dead person, nor can they be *students* of the deceased. They must be strangers, yet they must enact the most primal of interactions: the primate bonding rituals that mark the beginning of the first human relationships at birth. These include skin-to-skin touch (or, since the AIDS epidemic, skin-to-glove), grooming, and the face-to-face gaze. It is precisely these behaviors that are initiated at birth by all of humanity, and it is these acts that are re-created by the strangers toward the *metah*, the dead one, at the moment of transition from death to burial, light to darkness, being to unbeing.

The act of the creation of the *chevra kadisha* represents a critical moment in how a community relates to the divine (Epstein 1995). Note that the mediation of the death process is simple, and in the hands of the laity (Abeles and Katz 2010). Unlike Egyptian religions, which in important respects centered around the ritual preparation and celebration of death, Jewish law ensures that all will be afforded a burial and that the act of burial is linked to the larger notion of a human order. Priests (*cohenim*) are forbidden to touch the dead, further ensuring the democratizing thrust of the practice. In most communities, members are secret, known only to one another. Yet it is clear that, at least in some historical periods, the society consisted of a rotational membership, affording each with the opportunity to confront death (Ochs 2017)

As one community participant noted: "It is true that is it is hard work. It means dealing with blood, lifting the body, twice, once onto special boards to be washed, once into a coffin. 'How can we go on?' I sometimes think, in the middle. But this is a task that we must complete, and when we are done, she is pure, the body of the dead one, transformed. After we close the lid, we take our gloves off, and we ask forgiveness, in silence, from her. We are sorry, our human selves, we are tired, we are clumsy, we drop things, we are sorry beloved stranger, please forgive us" (Greenhough 2002; Ochs 2017; Zoloth 1998).

The act of the *taharah* is the taking of the body of the dead and returning it ritually to a human and particular self (Mitntz 1999). Let us reflect on what precedes this. In many cases, death in modernity is a battle lost. Death is seen as the problem, the structural enemy that is engaged by the moral gesture of medicine itself. But medicine is both a moral gesture and an act in the marketplace economy. Hence, when the body is no longer a patient, with all that status entails, it is discarded by a certain prestigious sector, whose attention no longer is repaid. The body then is treated as though it has returned to an animal state. It is wrapped, refrigerated, and handled in this way.

It is at precisely this moment, the moment one would turn from in the secular word, the *chevra* are reminded that each person is made in the image of God—and then they recite verses of love and praise of the beautiful, sensual body: hair, eyes, breasts, thigh, verses from Shir haShirim (Madsen 1998). A stunning moment: the poem of desire at the moment of distance. These are the only words spoken aloud during the *taharah*.

> Oh, your hair is like the most fine gold, black and curling, oh heaps of dark curls are as black as a raven.
> Eyes like doves beside the waterbrook, bathing in milk and fitly set.
> Cheeks like a bed of spices, towers of sweet herbs
> Lips are roses dripping flowing myrrh.
> Arms are golden cylinders set with beryl

Figure 5.4. ***Chevra kadisha*** **silver ritual ewer, for water to clean the body of the deceased (TJM-f3589_1).**

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Body as polished ivory overlaid with sapphires
Legs are pillars of marble, set upon foundations of fine gold
You are like Lebanon, as rare as her cedars
Your mouth is most sweet, and you are altogether precious
This is my beloved, and this is my friend, daughters of Jerusalem.

The first gesture of the *taharah* ritual is the creation of a different tangible relationship, a ritual and temporal space in which the body is named, with the Hebrew name of her child-self, and invited to the act of care by the community (Figures 5.4–5.5). Her utter inability to respond means that the act will have no direct benefit to the participants. In fact, it is given as an example of working beyond the line of the law. She will be washed of all the last indignities of dying, and she will be re-dressed in the stylized garments unchanged in shape or construction since the first century: a tunic and a shirt, a bonnet for her hair. The *metah* is turned gently to dry her back, her belly, her legs, the childbirth marks, her scarred knee. She is dressed in the simple clothes, twisted bows and knots of cloth shaped so they will look like the letters of God's name *shin*, four turns of the knot, *dalet*. And the still body stands as the *yod*. She is lifted in the arms, placed in the coffin, her blue hands in the plain white muslin.

The body of the dead one, the *metah* is a body that is as much as can be possible, pure, irreducible body. Because we only know the Hebrew name of the *metah*, and because she is a total stranger to us, naked, without title, clothes, or history, we receive her without the trappings or illusions of power, or linkages to politics, rationality of history. Hence, she will be reconstituted by the ritual itself. Because this act is done in silence, and its perimeters are not subject to negotiation, it is an example of what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) describes as "a dialectic of objectification and embodiment" that make it the locus for the coordination of all levels of bodily, social, and cosmological experience. She may have died as a body, ravaged by the travails at the nexus of modernity, medicine, and illness, but she will be buried as a Jew, in exactly the ritualized body of the Jew thousands of years previous to her particular story, thus relinking her, and the ones who prepare her, with the mirrored, replicated selves.

But the body of the *metah* is not the only ritualized body—the bodies of the *chevra* become ritualized by the process of *taharah* as well. It is the series of physical movements, ritual practices that spatially and temporally construct an environment organized according to schemes of privileged opposition. The construction of this environment and the activities within it simultaneously work to impress these schemes upon the participants. For example, there is tension between pollution and purity, death and love, blood and water, nakedness and clothing, the poetry of the liturgy and the starkness of the directions (place the feet toward the door); all of which potentiates the essential contradiction: the *chevra*, alive and the *metah*, dead (Friedman 2013). In asking the question about whose obligation it is to care for the bodies of the dead, we begin to understand why the act of caring for the dead one transforms us. Rather than reifying the horror of death, the work ritually prepares us to face death nobly—one of the key tasks of a human life. It is one of the tragedies of modernity, that in our eagerness for the triumphs of medical science, we no longer witness birth and death first hand, so live as if the great mess and tumult of endings and beginnings of life are subjects best handled in a separate, clinical arena. But the concept of the *chevra* as one in which each is obligated to participate deconstructs such a distance. The vulnerable nakedness of the *metah* imposes a great lesson of death—that possessions are, in the deepest sense, pointless, and that what is left to you is literally the company of community, the last hand that will touch you will be empty of all but the moral gesture of *chesed*.

The *taharah* offers an extreme and final comment on the oddity of the American culture of the body. The members recite the Song of Songs over their work, a passionate liturgy of love as they clean a dead, often aged, broken body, and come to see it as beautiful and pure by virtue of their account and attention. Every beautiful body will lie at some point as this body lies, naked, dependent on our love. The *chevra* are the last ones to see the vulnerability of the breasts, the belly-house of the children. Their task is to remake this body one last time, to one last time create human order over the chaos of death, without obscuring it. This is what love does, allows for the essential core self to be intimately and nakedly gazed upon, and seen in all of its vulnerability, and found utterly and completely beautiful (Ochs 2017). The *chevra* see, when they see the *metah*, a double visage, themselves in the darkest mirror, their own death.

It is at the *taharah* that the sense of the utter otherness of the stranger is most strongly felt. The gaze toward the beloved stranger cannot be returned (Lamm 2000). Silence surrounds her narrative, and it is at that moment, in the fictive, imagined, and internalized conversation that one is unable to remain entirely discreet. For the power of the work of the *taharah* is that the participants must touch the person and make her the center of intense and highly detailed activity. The act is not over when one is bored, or tired, it is only over when all details are perfectly complete (Marwell 2001). And this intense focus on the utterly other reveals in the encounter that a moment of radical recognition—this one will be you. Otherness is both total, and as vanished, because while I may never really be the other that I meet, the powerful one or the vulnerable one, except in my moral imagination, I will in fact be exactly this other at some point. And the one who is other-than-self is not faceless. Each by each by each, the dead will be carefully dressed, and the encounter will underscore the uniqueness of each. The other is irreversibly herself and irretrievably gone, but is incontestably you, as well, because you, too, will be certainly dead as she is (Friedman 2013). What the actions of the *chevra kadisha* offers is the inescapability of the recognition that this is the road for all of us.

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The quiet act interrupts the social order. It is the unchosen nature of the event, the torn fabric in the middle of our lives, that is then repaired by faith and by solidarity alone, stitched together by hand like the shrouds of the burial *tachrehin*, that makes a human life possible again (Bar-Levav 2003). The *chevra kadisha* leave the stranger and go back into the night and their lives knowing the *metah* is accompanied by their mundane, commanded, moral gestures, a small good act, knowing she is illuminated by a small candle and that a witnessing member of the community will stay by her side all until the morning, and her burial. Death is transformed by the smallest acts, and by the lifting of the body into the air, the tying of her bonnet just so, the buckets, and the wood.

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While there are some differences between Orthodox Christians and Western forms of Christianity, the point is that life is to be lived within the embrace of these communal forms of grace; that is, divine forgiveness and empowerment through the Holy Spirit. This is why all Christians celebrate the two "dominical sacraments," baptism and *eucharist*. Just like baptism, Christians differ on how to understand Christ's presences in the *eucharist*. Some hold that it is a commemorative meal, while others, like Catholics, believe in the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the elements of the sacrament (bread and wine). But, again, all Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper or *eucharist* because it was instituted by Christ in his last meal with his first disciples before his crucifixion. In fact, many Christians hold that the sacrament is a "foretaste" of the heavenly banquet that will be enjoyed in the afterlife (Heaven).

Christianity has been known, but has not always been lived, as a religion of love. One is to love God and one's neighbor as oneself. Jesus even taught to love one's enemy, and so, *in extremis*, to love the threat of death itself (see, Matt. 5:43–48). As Martin Luther taught, in his treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian*, one is caught up in union with Christ through faith and poured out in love for the neighbor. Rightly conceived, the Christian has their life in Christ, who conquers death, and the neighbor who lives while dying. To love thy neighbor as oneself (see Mark 12:30–31 and Matt. 7:12) means to love and do for others in their living as you would want to be loved and treated, a principle taught in some form by virtually every world religion. Salvation, or overcoming the breech with God and thus hope for eternal life, is keyed, in different ways, to the life of faith, hope, and love (I Cor. 13:13). Differences arise among Christians on two points. First, Protestants believe that one is justified, made right by God, through faith in Christ, while one is still a sinner (Rom. 5:8) in this life. This faith is then to flow forth in love and the hope and trust of eternal life. One can grow in holiness, sanctification, but one is nevertheless justified as a sinner. In Catholicism and

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Figure 5.5. ***Chevra kadisha*** **silver ritual comb and nail pick, used to groom the deceased individual (TJM 2012-91_1-2).**

Orthodoxy, the process of salvation includes doing good works, taking the sacraments, and through God's grace eventually being given the Vision of God, the Beatific Vision in Catholicism or divinization (*Theosis*) among Orthodox Christians. Despite these differences, and others, all Christians believe that divine forgiveness and empowerment for life is a gift from God; it is grace through Jesus Christ.

Jewish practices take place within the community, its rites, laws, traditions, and holy days. The Jews are called by God to help mend the world and be a light to the world about the Lordship of God. In this way, *Torah* and its laws are a gracious teaching of how to live up to dying and to do so in freedom amid an often hostile world. For the practicing Jew, this means following the 613 commandments of the Law (*Torah*). *Mitzvah* refers to these commands to be performed as a religious duty. They too include alms giving, aiding the poor, the outcast, and the widow, and following the Ten Words or Ten Commandments. In this way, the moral life of a Jew is seamed into the religious practice of the community. Following the Law is to choose life and not death. As it is put in Deuteronomy 30:19–20:

> I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, [20] loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

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5B The Guna, *Molas*, and Religious Syncretism

Alaka Wali
Field Museum

The Guna people of Panama are renowned for their determination to remain autonomous in the governance of their homeland, for their art as manifest in the *mola* textiles used to make women's blouses, and for their creative blend of spiritual practices meshing their preconquest beliefs with Christianity. The Guna (a population of over 50,000) live principally on islands off Panama's Caribbean Coast and on the mainland in the Darién region. These regions are demarcated as *comarcas*—territories governed by the Guna under their own system of political leadership. The largest *comarca* is today called GunaYala, and comprises the San Blas Islands and a strip of land on the Caribbean coast. Many Guna also live in Panama's cities, but often travel back to home villages. A smaller group lives on two different *comarcas* in the interior of Darién province (cf. Wali 1989 for details on these communities). Their economic system is a mix of self-subsistence through cultivation of small plots on the mainland strip and fishing, and income generation through the sale of handcrafts and coconuts, tourism, and wage labor. The system of government has been well documented in the ethnographic literature (Howe 1986; 1998). Each village has hereditary chiefs and attendant officials who enforce decisions and norms developed in consensus at nightly gatherings of all the villagers in a special lodge. Guna Yala is governed by an overarching body—the Guna General Congress—comprised of all the leaders of the villages, who elect three chiefs to represent the whole *comarca*. Although Panama's government imposes some laws on the *comarca*, most of the laws and norms are determined at the local level and by the Guna General Congress.

Women are not usually in positions of political power, but exert influence in both daily life and in village-level decision-making through their economic contributions and participation in the village gatherings. Guna women's commercialization of the *mola* textile has been a significant aspect of Guna Yala's economy since at least the mid-twentieth century. In 1964, women across several island villages formed a cooperative to sell their textiles and, at its peak, about 2000 women were members (Tice 1995). The trade in *molas* spread into the international market, and the *mola* became iconic of Guna artisanry.

The *mola* is a component of the traditional women's blouse. Typically, two *mola* panels are sewn together and attached to a yoke at the top and a ruff at the bottom. For commercial purposes, many *mola* textiles are sold as individual panels. The technique of making *molas* is sometimes referred to as "reverse appliqué" and involves layering cloth, cutting out patterns, and embroidery. The earliest designs were geometric patterns, probably reflecting body-art designs that preceded access to cloth in the nineteenth century. Women then started to innovate, making patterns that reflect local flora and fauna (Ventocilla, Herrera, and Nuñez 1995), local events, and noted figures. Eventually, as Guna gained access to magazines and other visual media, women drew inspiration from pictures, copying images or improvising to meld together older designs with new themes and motifs. The textiles are recognized for their brilliant use of color combinations, their often symmetrical designs, and for elements of whimsy and humor that are infused into the clothes. Guna women are proud of their craftsmanship, and critique each other frequently on the quality of the embroidery and the freshness of the design. Although there are no rigid rules for the creation of patterns, *molas* often have a symmetrical design, reflecting an aesthetic that strives for balance as well as expressions of the relation between person, nature, and the cosmos (Fortis 2010; Salvador 1997).

Museums in Europe and the Americas started collecting *molas* in the late nineteenth century. An early collection was made for the Göteborgs Etnografiska Museum in Sweden by Erland Nordenskiold, one of the first ethnographers of the Guna. Other collections can be found at the National Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian and the National Museum of the American Indian. The Field Museum's collection ranks among the most significant both because of its time depth (from 1919 to 2017) and because of its size and variety. The collection has both full blouses and separated *mola* panels. It also contains patches and other objects that have *mola* designs. In total the Field Museum's collection contains 513 *mola* textiles—81 full garments and 437 blouse panels. *Molas* comprise about half of the total collections from Panama (ethnographic and archeological). The earliest materials were collected by Mr. G. L. Fitz-William, a chemical and mining engineer from Hammond, Indiana, sometime in the early 1900s and accessioned into the museum collection in 1919. The next large accession came from the purchase at a railway auction and was accessioned in 1965. In the late 2000s Field Museum staff brought in another substantial number of contemporary *molas*. Thus, the collection represents an opportunity to understand how design motifs and styles have changed over time.

The diversity of designs and motifs in *molas* makes it difficult to discern any overarching themes (Marks 2014). However, religious motifs are popular subjects for Guna women. *Molas* with churches, religious figures, and scenes can be found in museum collections. As with other Indigenous people who have been subject to missionization in the aftermath of the Spanish conquest, the Guna accepted Christianity but retained their own cosmology and belief systems. Christianity took hold systemically among the Guna in the early twentieth century when one of the chiefs on the island of Nargana invited a Jesuit priest to start a school for boys. Later, a Protestant missionary also came to the

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