

From *Genizah* to Burial Site: A Ritual and Ceremonial Journey

Sunday, May 1st was supposed to be warm and spring like, but in gritty Detroit, the morning proved bone chilling and dreary. It was the type of morning when you long to sleep in and remain warm under the covers. Nevertheless, my husband and I arose early, pulled on winter clothing, and ate a hurried breakfast. We had volunteered to be at B'nai David Cemetery at 9:30 a.m., a cemetery located in Detroit, on the west side of Van Dyke Avenue, between I-94 and McNichols Road. We wanted to participate in a ritual burial of religious books and sacred objects deemed by our synagogue—the Downtown Synagogue as no longer viable because they were so worn or outdated.

We drove past burned out, graffiti-tagged structures—the detritus of a city on life support. It was too early for the ubiquitous storefront churches to be open for worship. As we approached the cemetery, a green hill studded with tombstones broke the expanse of flat vacant lots. A man in baggy yellow pants and an unraveling green sweater waved us toward the parking area. He introduced himself as Mr. Carter, the cemetery caretaker. As he ushered us through the wrought-iron gates, we could hear the pride in his voice as he informed us that he had overseen and cared for this old Jewish cemetery for 37 years. He explained that it was open only twice a year—to provide opportunities for families with loved ones buried here to visit their graves during Passover in the spring and the High Holidays in the fall. Young people, he said, came each spring to clear the graves of debris and plant flowers.

Our friend, Dr. Martin Herman, was waiting for us on the lush front lawn. Marty, as we fondly call him, is the Ritual Director of the Downtown Synagogue. This gracious

and dignified gentleman leads lay Sabbath services every Saturday morning while my husband, the cantor, chants the liturgy. Usually about 20 people attend.

Marty indicated a freshly dug grave with boxes and crates stacked alongside. We had come to bury the Downtown Synagogue's old and tattered *Siddurim* and *Machzorim* (prayer books), *Chumashim* (Bibles), and papers at the cemetery. Marty told us that young volunteers had transported the heavy load from the synagogue to the cemetery earlier that morning.

It is a Jewish custom—for some, a mandate—to bury “holy” books and sacred objects that are in a state of disrepair. Any paper with one of G-d's several names written on it must be ritually buried out of respect and reverence. In our synagogue, there is a box labeled *Genizah*, a storage area where unusable books and loose papers are discarded. In large synagogues, an entire room may serve as a *Genizah*. We even have a “*Genizah* drawer” at home that serves the same purpose. Our papers were also contained in a box beside the grave.

In the early 20th century, a trove of forgotten treasure was uncovered in a *genizah* in Egypt's old Cairo Synagogue. Everyday documents, letters, manuscripts and music, as well as such holy objects as Torah scrolls, Bibles, prayer books and phylacteries* were discovered in a large attic room. It was akin to an archeological find. Painstaking study and research still continues on this priceless archive.

*Phylacteries (Tefillin) are small leather boxes containing passages from scripture that observant Jews strap on their arms and foreheads as they say or chant their morning prayers.

Though the synagogue had publicized our ritual burial, it was by now 10:00 a.m., and only a handful of people had arrived. It was damp and chilly. Since ten Jews are needed to make a *Minyan*, the quorum required for public prayer to take place, and since Mr. Carter was not Jewish, seven more Jews were needed if the books were to be buried with appropriate ceremony.

It was frustrating to wait, so I chose to pass the time by climbing the gentle rise that led to the gravesites. According to Mr. Carter, the B'nai David Synagogue was founded downtown in 1892 and was originally known as "the Russian Shul". Subsequently, it had relocated a number of times, but was currently inactive. In view of its history and since Russian—its language and culture—is of special interest to me, I hoped to find old gravestones engraved with Russian names.

The monuments stood straight and tall, resembling sentinels in close ranks at attention. Weathered limestone tombstones, whose inscriptions had become indecipherable with the passing of time, marched shoulder to shoulder with massive grave markers of polished granite. Dates and names, in both Hebrew and English, together with Jewish symbols and Hebrew inscriptions appeared on all of them. I noticed that people died much younger than they do nowadays. To my surprise and disappointment, I found only a few Russian names.

After reconnoitering the cemetery, I returned to find a fourth member of our Congregation had arrived. It was Fred Siglar. Fred always makes me smile. He is a man of about 50, with a sweet, open and honest face. He seems like a solitary person who finds companionship in books. He is a pure soul who davens ardently. He, along with

Marty, had spent a considerable amount of time sorting, stacking and “schlepping” the old prayer books and Bibles, gathering and preparing them for burial.

Fred told me that some members of his family had come from the town in Poland where Auschwitz had been built. For some unknown reason, the Nazis had never desecrated the town’s Jewish Cemetery as they customarily did elsewhere. We whispered about small towns in Belorussia and Ukraine where thousand of Jews had been forced to dig their own mass graves, then shot, thrown into the pit, and their bodies covered with lime.

Now, four Jews were present, but we needed six more to make a *Minyan* necessary to say *Kaddish*—the memorial prayer chanted for the deceased. (For a book-burial ceremony, the *Kaddish da Rabanan*, a special version of the *Kaddish*, dedicated to the memory of scholars and martyrs is chanted.) Incidentally, the *Kaddish* was written in Aramaic, the every-day language of Jews who lived during the time of Jesus. By now we had been at the cemetery for over an hour, and my feet felt like chunks of ice.

All of a sudden, Mr. Carter sounded a loud whistle and waved sundry vehicles into the parking area. A group of young men and women bounded out of them, pulling gardening tools and potted plants from the trunks of their cars. They hugged, laughed and joked like old friends. Miraculously, we now had our *Minyan*!

The leader of the group, a handsome young man dressed in a bright orange parka, took charge. He jumped into the open grave while the others passed him the books which he carefully stacked. Our personal papers were laid on top. We all stood in silence around the now well-filled grave as Marty chanted the special *Kaddish* prayer. I wanted

to join Marty, Fred, my husband and the bright eager young people in reciting the *Kaddish*, but my throat tightened, and I found myself on the verge of crying.

The tattered books of our 95 year old synagogue made me think of the many hands that had held them and turned their pages, and I heard the echoes of the ancient Hebrew and Aramaic words that bind our people. Even those sleeping in the dust under the nearby tombstones shared our ancient heritage.

With the fading *Kaddish* still reverberating, our young men and women, shovels in hand, scrambled to the top of the large pile of earth created when the grave had been dug. In a few minutes, they had covered the books and filled in the grave. (Two more young people from the Downtown Synagogue turned up.)

We thanked the young people for helping us make a *Minyan*, thus allowing the ritual burial to take place. In a festive mood, they disappeared over the hill, their gardening equipment in tow.

Mr. Carter graciously escorted us to our cars. My husband and I drove home in silence. As we sped past the storefront churches, now with cars parked in front, I thought of Mr. Carter. Did he have a family? Did they attend one of these churches? Not having any family, I wondered who would remember to visit my grave every year and chant the mourner's *Kaddish* on my *Yahrzeit*, the anniversary of my death.

While stuck in a line of cars waiting to park at a big old brownstone Baptist church on Van Dyke, I tried to visualize how other religions and cultures have chosen to dispose of their ritual artifacts after they have become worn and were no longer functional.