

School Daze

Family planning in Israel, it has been suggested, is much influenced by how many Hanukkah parties, class trips and final ceremonies prospective parents believe they can survive. So an invitation from our 9-year-old third-grader to a different kind of end-of-the-year activity — at the Temple Institute in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City — was greeted with some relief.

The children were taken for a tour of the premises and a short movie, and the parents were shown around by a charming and enthusiastic young guide. The aim of the Institute, to quote its website, is: "To rekindle the flame of the Holy Temple in the hearts of mankind. Our long-term goal is to do as much as possible to bring about the building of the Holy Temple in our time..."

Even before the explanations commenced in the cramped lecture cum exhibition hall, I was feeling distinctly uncomfortable. The walls are covered with vividly colored paintings of Levite priests performing the sacrifices in the Temple. As our guide was quick to point out, the beautiful, life-size gold and copper vessels exhibited behind glass are far from your regular museum fare, being neither old originals nor didactic replicas but implements newly made from the very materials specified in the Scriptures, ready for use.

The Efrata State Religious School takes pride in being a truly integrative institution, with parents from all walks of life. The visit worked as a litmus test, separating parents into different categories: Those who were interested, those who were bored, and those like myself who felt themselves transported into the twilight zone.

At first, I was embarrassed — by the presumptuousness of the undertaking, rather than the political/Messianic message, although that was also not exactly to my liking. And then I was embarrassed at my embarrassment. After all, we are Orthodox. We pray three times a day for the rebuilding of the Temple "soon and in our time."

But, I asked myself, are these gold and silver trappings all we are missing to be able to rebuild the Temple? What about the small matter of brotherly love, the absence of which led to the destruction? And would the revival of animal sacrifices bring the Jewish people closer together, or to God?

I remembered a Talmudic description of the High Priest wading ankle-high in



blood. Or should I have been thinking of the Golden Calf, a sin for which our forefathers were severely punished? It was a relief to hear another parent mumble, "I don't know what I dislike more, the infantilization or the paganization of Judaism."

Next year, I'll welcome the mainstream ennui of a barely audible and endless kids' show over the excitement of a megalomaniacal fringe performance.

Noomi Stahl

Death in Vegas

A woman lies on a table in Las Vegas, eyes closed, hands folded. A crowd of 75 onlookers stare as four people carefully wrap her in what looks like a shroud. But she isn't dead, and neither is this David Copperfield's magic show. It is the second annual conference of the North American Hevrah Kadishah (Jewish burial societies), and we are witnessing the proper uses of burial garments as demonstrated on a live person feigning death.

As much as this conference, known as *Kavod v'Nichum* (honor and condolence), is out of place in Vegas, so am I at the conference: I am a *cohen*, a member of the priestly caste, Biblically forbidden to come into contact with a human corpse, at pain of becoming impure. And although the vicissitudes of life have already defiled me in this way a number of times, a rabbinic prohibition proscribes further contamination. I am, for one thing, destined never to serve on a burial society. But I was here as director of the Halachic Organ Donor Society, and decided to attend a number of sessions.

"*Takhrikhim* are not shrouds," announces a tall, bearded man who towers over the supine volunteer wrapped literally from head to toe in 100-percent muslin cotton. "People mistakenly think we are making mummies out of their loved ones. As you can see *takhrikhim* are burial clothes. Only after we dress the deceased in burial pants and a burial shirt do we wrap them in a sheet," says the Orthodox man.

This session shows how to dress a corpse, overcoming problems such as an overweight cadaver or rigor mortis. "It's difficult, like dressing an infant," offers a Conservative female rabbi. Much burial rit-

ual is based on custom rather than law, so the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform participants have no inhibitions exchanging ideas, customs and techniques. In death, it seems, there is no inter-denominational tension.

Demonstrating the Jewish custom of moving a recently deceased person from the bed to the floor, one participant attempts to show how a single individual can do so. His movements are graceful, yet his execution is not. The crowd gasps as the volunteer lands roughly on the ground.

I learn many customs, some of which I could have done without. Many regions have the custom of placing a miasmic mixture of egg-white and vinegar in the cadaver's hair. "We put it on the face as well," says a Virginian. "We put it all over the body and therefore we need more than one egg," interjects a British Columbian. The origin of this practice, they say, came from the need to make Jewish bodies easily identifiable — by way of a rancid smell — so that they would not be mistakenly buried in a non-Jewish cemetery. Some areas use

wine instead of vinegar, while others skip this custom altogether. May my loved ones note that I prefer the latter.

Throughout each session, customs are offered fast and furious representing the burial society traditions from across the continent. Some leave the deceased's hands visible, others tie the long shirtsleeves in-

to a knot or simply order *takhrikhim* with sleeves stitched closed. The pants have fabric boots sewn on; 'booty pajamas' as I called them as a kid. There is a full session on how to tie special knots for the ritual belt that will form the Hebrew letter *shin*, the first letter of *Shadai*, one of God's names.

I pick up some helpful cost-saving tips. Where does one get broken potsherds to place over the deceased's eyes and mouth? Walmart, we are told. They have plenty of broken pottery that they will give you for free. A participant hits himself on the head: "I was buying and breaking them."

While everyone is sharing and comparing conflicting customs, they realize there is no uniform, "correct" way to bury someone. Customs among burial societies have differed since they were first formed in the 14th century, before which family preferences prevailed. A Las Vegas woman sums it up best: "As long as you do your job with love, reverence and respect, you should not be so critical of your work. God won't be."

Robby Berman

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TINA SILVERMAN

