

Confronting Mortality, Celebrating Life

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Since January, I have been following the practice of saying *kaddish* daily to honor my father's memory. This means that I make sure to join a *minyan*, a quorum of ten, either for morning or evening prayers (even when traveling, I do my best to find an egalitarian *minyan* where I can say *kaddish*). In the modern, busy lives that we live, this has not been an easy task. Managing all of my personal and professional commitments was hard even before adding one more thing to do. So, when asked, or when I asked myself, why am I doing this, I wonder: Is it because of my commitment to Jewish law that requires a mourner to say *kaddish* for eleven months after the death of a parent? Is it because this would have been important to my father, and I want to honor that? Is it a practice that gives me comfort? Is it helping me heal? Do I hope that saying *kaddish* will help my feelings around unresolved issues in my relationship with my father? Does this practice force me to confront the pain rather than avoid it and thus help facilitate the healing I need? The answer is yes to all of the above, at different times and on different days.

Our tradition, through ritual, forces us to face and acknowledge death and its reality in our lives. We will all die, and we will all experience the death of a loved one. During the High Holidays, we are confronted with our own mortality. At the center of the liturgy we recite the poem *Unetane Tokef*, crying out the words, *Mi Ychye u Mi Yamut*, who shall live and who shall die. Our liturgy challenges us to recognize the fragility of life, the brevity and unpredictability of our existence, not as a metaphor but as a reality.

This frank acknowledgment of death is not the approach western culture generally supports. Alexander Levy, who wrote the book "The Orphaned Adult: Understanding and coping with grief and change after the death of our parents" writes: "We in Western culture currently consider death formidable and avoidable. We avoid thinking about it. We avoid preparing for it. We almost never talk about it and when we do, we avoid saying its name (...) We avoid looking at death directly, as if trying to avoid eye contact with the playground bully, in the belief that if he doesn't notice us, he'll leave us alone. And yet the more we try to avoid facing the bully, the more menacing he becomes".¹

Our tradition, through its many mourning rituals – from *shiva*, to *shloshim*, to saying *kaddish* -- challenges us to approach death rather than distance ourselves from it. We don't try to evade death. We live with it. We live our lives with the mindfulness that death is part of life, challenging us to live to the fullest.

1 (page 10).

Perhaps what we gain from acknowledging death is to look at our lives differently, and in our vulnerability, open ourselves up to deeper experiences.

In today's Torah reading, we read the tragic story of the casting out of Hagar. In this story, Hagar faces the potential of her own death and the death of her child. At that poignant moment, the text tells us: "*Vayishmah Elohim et kol hana-ar*" And God heard the voice of the boy². That moment of fear, of closeness to the unspeakable, brings an encounter with the Divine presence. Perhaps like Hagar and Ishmael, facing the fear of death, can allow us to encounter the Divine.

This past year I became involved with the newly formed ***Community Hevrah Kadisha***. From the first moment I heard that a new *Hevrah Kadisha*, usually translated as burial society or holy society, was forming in the Boston area, I knew I wanted to be part of it. In contrast to the only *Hevra Kadisha* in Boston until this point, the *Community Hevra Kadisha* includes volunteers from all denominations and not only people from the orthodox community. The ritual that the *Hevrah Kadisha* performs is called *Taharah* – it is the ritual of washing and preparing the body of a person before burial. I participated in the trainings with several people from our community and then joined the teams to be called to perform *Taharah*.

My first *Taharah* was on a snowy night, last December. It was so icy outside that the members of the team decided to drive together to the funeral home. I didn't know many of the women in my team but from the first moment in the car, it was clear this would be a holy experience of coming together to fulfill a mitzvah. A mitzvah that our tradition calls *Hesed Shel Emet* – "The truest act of kindness". A mitzvah that has not intended payback.

Performing the *Taharah* was an incredibly moving experience. Every step of the ritual is filled with a sense of caring and modesty and holiness -- delicately washing the body, saying the verses of the ritual, and asking for forgiveness for any way we might have harmed this holy body. Doing the act of *Taharah*, the purification with flowing water and dressing this woman that I never met before with clothing that resembled the clothing of the *kohen hagadol*, the holy priest. I knew nothing about this woman, but suddenly I knew everything. I knew that she had lived her life and she had left the world, that her soul was departing and that we were helping the soul to depart and the body to rest. The most powerful moments for me were the recitation of the verses from The Song of Songs: "*Hinech Yafa Reayati*" – You are beautiful, my friend. You are beautiful. Your body might be old, worn and broken, but your beauty shines at this moment of end of life. And we celebrate the beauty of this moment.

Despite that author Catherine Madsen has called the disorienting nature of singing a love song to a dead person³ in every *Taharah* that I have performed, the recitation of *Shir Hashirim* has been for me a moment of deep encounter with life in the situation of death, with beauty rather than ugliness and with hope

2 (Genesis 21:17)

3 (<http://www.crosscurrents.org/madsen.htm>)

not despair. I have recited the words to young and older women, to women that died in suffering and peacefully, to women that I have know, and to those I have not known.

Standing next to the body of a person who has just left this world, surrounded by wonderful volunteers engaged in an ancient ritual of honoring the dead is an experience of facing death directly, and within it I have felt deeply connected to life.

I took a break from volunteering for the *Hevra Kadisha* when my father died. The experience felt close and raw, but it didn't take long before I felt ready to return to the practice. Truthfully the experience of fulfilling this mitzvah has been helpful for me in my own journey of healing.

Another aspect of the power of *Taharah* resides in that act of showing up. Our tradition invites us to witness a journey that each of us ultimately makes alone, and yet still, we do what we can, to lovingly and gently accompany each other – even after the soul as departed from the body. We are left with the mystery of our deep apartness and our deep togetherness.

Not long ago I heard a piece from the NPR series “This I believe”, called “Always go to the funeral”. In this essay from 2005, Deirdre Sullivan speaks about how her father taught her the importance of always showing up for a funeral. She tells the story of her first time going to calling hours, what we would call *shiva*, by herself at age sixteen. At the end of the piece she says: “Sounds simple — when someone dies, get in your car and go to calling hours or the funeral. That, I can do. But I think a personal philosophy of going to funerals means more than that.” “Always go to the funeral”, she continues, “means that I have to do the right thing when I really, really don't feel like it. I have to remind myself of it when I could make some small gesture, but I don't really have to and I definitely don't want to. I'm talking about those things that represent only inconvenience to me, but the world to the other guy. You know, the painfully under-attended birthday party. The hospital visit during happy hour. The Shiva call for one of my ex's uncles. In my humdrum life, the daily battle hasn't been good versus evil. It's hardly so epic. Most days, my real battle” – says Sullivan -- “is doing good versus doing nothing.”

Grief, illness, loss, and hardship can leave one feeling painfully isolated even when surrounded by good, well-meaning friends, partners, and community. Being part of a community, being present for each other, means allowing room for loneliness and pain – and understanding that our presence will not always take away a person's pain or isolation but that we still have to show up, reach out, and ask for help.

Some of you have heard me, when leading a *shiva minyan* or a funeral, share one of the explanations to the question of why we say *kaddish* for someone that has died. The verses of *kaddish* make no reference to death. The words of *kaddish* exalt the name of God, so why at this moment of grieving and pain, what we do, is exalt and glorify the Divine Presence? This teaching, which I cherish, says that when someone leaves this world, a bit of the presence of the Divine leaves the world too. So we exalt the name of the Divine and share

stories and memories of the person we have lost, and that is how the presence of God is brought back to our world.

Israeli singer and composer Chava Alberstein wrote a beautiful and sad song called *Rikma Enoshit achat* – One Human Tissue

Kshe'amut, mashehu mimeni, yamut becha.

Kshetamut, mashehu mimcha bi, yamut itcha.

Ki kulanu, rikmah enoshit achat chayah

ve'im echad me'itanu holech me'imanu

mashehu met banu - umashehu, nish'ar ito

When I shall die, something of mine, will die in you.

When you die, something of yours in me, will die with you.

Because all of us, are all one living human tissue

and if one of us leaves, something dies in us - and something, stays with her.

Confronting the fragility and uncertainty of life during the High Holidays is designed to shake us up and unsettle us from our routines so we can ask the deepest questions about our lives. Are we showing up? Are we doing good? Are we facing life head on, or are we avoiding it?

By making us confront the mysteries of death, the rituals of our tradition encourage us to look at our lives differently, to shift our perspective. These rituals may help us consider how we want to live our lives. They may help us to stay humble, knowing that we are here just for a short time. **They may push us to not take for granted what we have and to be grateful for the blessings in our lives.**

Shana Tova.