

Kaddish and Shiva: What I Learned from Being a Mourner

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This past November when sitting shiva for my father I was asked, "So Rabbi, who comforts the comforter?" The answer was very clear to me, and I responded without hesitation, "The congregation comforts the comforter."

If I ever had any doubts about the power of shiva, and I have not, they were dispelled when I saw how moving it was to have so many friends and congregants, and congregants who are friends come to express condolences after my father died this past year. At one of the shiva minyanim I looked out and saw our home filled with so many people with whom I had shared special moments. I saw individuals with whom I had shared joys and happy times, and others who had let me into their lives to offer them comfort. There were those with whom I had shed tears. I saw members who had turned to me in a time of need, some who have confided in me or turned to me seeking counsel and advice and who now had come to offer me support and comfort. Seeing so many diverse connections, it was overwhelming and touching and gave me a true sense of how far and in how many directions our community reaches.

Receiving the good wishes of our congregation brought to mind the joke about the rabbi who had taken ill. The shul president came to pay a visit and express wishes on behalf of the Board for a *refuah shlemah*. "Rabbi," he said, "At the Board meeting last night we discussed your illness, and I was asked to come to visit you personally to express the resolution of the board that we hope you will have a speedy recovery. And I want you to know that the motion passed by a vote of 12 - 7, with only two abstentions."

The Jewish tradition and the laws for a mourner offer an unbelievable structure and outlet for grieving. It channels our emotions, so they do not become excessive. By the same token, our mourning is reverent and not allowed to be too short or casual. I cannot understand how professional baseball or football players go out and play right after a parent has died. I am not being critical of them, for since they are not Jewish our laws of mourning and of staying at home do not pertain to them.

It is like the story about a guy who goes to the Super Bowl in the main concourse searching for an open seat. To his surprise he spots an open seat right at the 50 yard line. He asks if anyone is sitting there, and the guy says, "No, that was my wife's seat and she died." The other man says, "I'm sorry to hear that. Couldn't you find anyone else to take her seat?" The man says, "No, everyone else is at the funeral."

I find it sad that so many Jews do not observe the laws and customs of shiva and mourning. It is sad because when you don't, you deny yourself the opportunity to pause, to reflect, and to remember, to take one week out of your life and routine and to mourn. It is unfortunate how many of our members do not make the effort to come to services, even if only once a week, on Shabbat to say kaddish in the year after a parent dies. I remember what an impression it made on me when I was nine years old, and my

father went to services every Friday night and Saturday morning the year after his mother died.

Listen to the description by Leah Nadich Meir who wrote in the recent magazine of the Conservative movement about the impact shiva had on her and her sister when their father, Rabbi Judah Nadich and then seven months later their mother passed away. "We were carried back to our own past by visits and calls from our childhood friends...All of these glimpses and memories were intermingled with the blessings of the present: the devotion of close friends who glided in and out throughout the week, organizing and providing for every meal and bringing comfort with their very presence."

She wrote of how moved she was to receive a phone call from a high school classmate she had not spoken with in over 40 years. By renewing the connection, and becoming a presence in her life once again, the death of her parent truly linked her with her past.

Indeed the memories of the past come to the fore at a shiva home. Old photo albums are shlepped out, and stories are told. Sometimes people discover things about their family, their past, and their loved ones they never knew. Sometimes they hear stories they had never heard and may even learn about family members they never knew they had. An article in The Wall Street Journal several years ago reported on research conducted by psychologists at Emory University which confirmed that when children have an awareness of family history they have greater self-esteem, are less likely to suffer from depression and have more resiliency. Stories of relatives grappling with sad or difficult times give children a sense of grounding and appreciation of where they came from, all of which happens when we observe the ritual of shiva.

The blessings of the present are also felt, as friends fill the home. Even the future is sensed and touched, which is why children are such a welcome and life affirming presence at a shiva house. Even their laughter brings a message of comfort and continuity.

Nadich wrote, "Shiva can bring the past, present, and future together with an intensity rarely matched in life. It resembles a powerful dream, a wellspring of comfort from which to draw during the painful weeks and months that follow."

Perhaps this is why Ecclesiastes says "it is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting, for that is the end of all people, and the living will take it to heart." In other words, we benefit from the visit, for our encounter with loss helps to give us a perspective on life and living. Remembering allows us to hold on to something and then be able to move forward as well. That is why we conclude shiva by walking out of one door, and then back in through another.

Shiva is such a powerful time. During shiva the mourner is relieved of all obligations and responsibilities to care for others. The community steps and takes care of those who have experienced the loss, preparing and bringing food and meals, so that the mourner becomes a guest in his own home. Mixed with the tears and sadness comes reminiscence of happy times accompanied by laughter, which can be therapeutic as well. One of my

favorite jokes has to do with shiva. It's about a man who knows he is dying. As he lay in his bed, contemplating his impending death he smells the aroma of his wife's kugel, which he loves. Gathering all his strength he lifts himself out of bed, slowly makes his way to the kitchen and starts to cut himself a piece of kugel. Just then, Bessie, his devoted wife of 65 years comes into the kitchen and grabs it out of his hand, shouting at him, "Sam, don't even think of touching that kugel. I made it for the shivah!"

So the first lesson I learned from sitting shiva is how important, powerful, and therapeutic the experience can be. It provides an outlet, framework and means to cope with the myriad of emotions we feel at a time of loss. My message to those who lose a loved one is not to shortchange yourself of this rare opportunity to pause, to mourn and to be surrounded by the embrace of loved ones. And my message to anyone who ever hears about the death of a friend, even if it is merely a casual acquaintance, or a congregant you may not even know too well, go and pay a visit to the shiva house. If you can share a memory, do so, but even if you did not know the person who died, or do not know well the person who experienced the loss, know that your presence means a great deal and is always appreciated.

If there is anything else I have learned it is that no two deaths are ever the same. The loss of an aged parent who has lived a full life is radically different than the emotions felt when there is the sudden loss of a child. A person cut down in his or her prime is mourned differently than one who dies a natural death. Further complicating the grieving is the nature of the relationship a mourner had with the one who passed away.

Yet wisely or not, the halakha does not take these factors into consideration. The kaddish is still recited, we still are enjoined to sit shiva, and to honor the dead, regardless of the nature and quality of the relationship and the cause and circumstances of the death.

I remember one time I called my dad to leave a message for him on his home answering machine sometime after my mom had died, about fourteen years ago. For about a year or two after she had passed away, my dad's recorded voice said, "We're not home now, and so on." And then one time I called and without any warning or preparation, instead I found it jarring to hear, "I am sorry I am not home to take your call..." In certain respects, that was when my mother's loss became real to me. It hit me then, and when we were preparing for my son Micha's bar mitzvah a year or two later. It was the first simcha we were planning, knowing she would not be with us. I desperately wanted her relatives and friends to be there, and when some of them did not or could not come, I felt I had lost a part of my connection to that world, to my past, to her.

It was a different kind of sadness when my dad died. In many respects, by the time he died, his world had shrunk considerably. Most of his friends were already gone. People who lose a parent comment that even after they have died, they find themselves reaching to call them on the phone. That wasn't the case with my father. He had given up his phone number, the number I had grown up with a few years earlier. When he was in his prime, he serviced his clients throughout the Baltimore area, and beyond. Whenever a Chinese person moved to another city, my father was invited to sell insurance there, and so he became a part of the Chinese communities in Richmond,

Atlanta, and even had a couple of clients in Hong Kong. He remained active until his late 80's. A little before he turned 90, he gave up his car and stopped driving. Then he moved into an assisted living residence. He lost some of his independence, but still went out when the activity bus was going somewhere, or whenever my siblings or I would take him out. After a couple of years, though the excursions came to an end, and about as far as he got was to sit outside or to go downstairs to the dining room for his meals. And then the last few weeks of his life, this man who once travelled far and wide, who marched with Martin Luther King, who took me to the inauguration of President Lyndon Johnson, Orioles games, the funeral of John F. Kennedy and the rally for Israel in front of the White House during the Six Day War, was confined to his room, and eventually he could not even leave his bed.

I often thought of him and the other residents when reading the novel Water for Elephants, a story which dances back and forth between an elderly man in a home for the aged and the life he once had. When you see people in a nursing home or hospital ward, keep in mind that at one time the people you see had a life, hopes and dreams. They were not what they become.

The midrash says that we enter the world, just as we leave it. Our worldly possessions do not accompany us to the next world, which is why a burial shroud has no pockets. Ultimately, our legacy is in the deeds we performed in the land of the living and in the hearts and minds of those who remember us.

One of the ways we bridge the two worlds is when we say kaddish. Although associated with the loss of a loved one, the kaddish prayer makes no reference to death. Originally composed in Aramaic about 2,000 years ago evolved in its use and purpose over the centuries. There are several versions, used for various occasions and points in the service. The one we know best is what is called the Kaddish Yatom, the Mourner's Kaddish. It makes no mention of the dead or of loss, but rather is a praise of God and looks to the messianic era. Originally a brief message of hope, recitation of it is cathartic, even for those who do not know or understand its words. Trance-like, similar to a mantra, it brings a message of soothing calm, of continuity, of connection.

A congregant who had drifted away from regular observance once told me that the routine of saying kaddish after her father died forced her to come back to shul to attend services regularly. The repetition of the prayers made her feel more comfortable and familiar with the liturgy. By coming regularly she got to know people in the synagogue. As a result she came to feel more a part of the community which led her to become more involved and active in the congregation, and to become a member of the board. As she put it, her father would have kvelled at her level of involvement, since he had been president of his synagogue. As she explained, "it's ironic that it took his death to complete the circle and bring me back into the orbit of Judaism, but come to think of it, maybe not as ironic as I think."

I know of brothers who drifted apart and were not particularly close, but with the death of their parent, they started coming to shul regularly every Shabbat. Years after they completed saying kaddish, attending Shabbat services remains a special time they share together every week.

It is almost as if the kaddish and what we do to honor the memory of our loved ones gives them a hold on us and a reach that extends their grasp beyond the grave. One need not be observant or religious to say kaddish regularly, nor does it matter how religious the person who died was.

Part of the wisdom of our sages was to recognize that just when we may most be inclined to lash out at God and express anger over our loss, we are required to stand up and praise God. Similarly, precisely at the moment when we may want to withdraw, sulk, or be by ourselves Judaism demands that we be thrust into the presence of others. Since the prayer must be said in the presence of a minyan, a quorum of ten Jews, it demands that we find or be a part of a community, not alone, by ourselves. It necessitates that the community fulfill its obligation to provide those saying kaddish with that opportunity. Earlier this year I received an email from a congregant who felt let down, interestingly, not by her fellow congregants, but by Judaism because a minyan was not present at our weekday service, and so she could not say kaddish. She left feeling angry and deprived. It is a testament to the power of the prayer. But let us resolve today, to be sure that this never happen again to any of our fellow congregants. Come to minyan when it is your turn to do so. Bring your kids with you so they learn about supporting and being a part of the community. Come on Sunday and Wednesday mornings when you can, even when it is not your assigned date, to offer support to others and to be a part of the community.

The most well known story about the power of the kaddish, and one of the reasons it is such a significant and emotional prayer appears in several versions in the midrash and Talmud. Rabbi Akiva walks past a graveyard where he encounters the tormented soul of someone who has died. The soul who is in agony tells the sage that he heard that he would be freed from his suffering and the Sisyphean task of chopping wood if his son would say kaddish for him. Based on this story, the notion developed that the soul of a loved one can be elevated and redeemed when a relative says kaddish on behalf of that individual. The soul and fate of the deceased is judged 12 months after a person has died. It is as if the reciting of kaddish is credited to the account of the deceased so to speak, and accrues as if it were a mitzvah done by that individual.

In Israel, and among certain traditional Jews, there is a custom that when a baby boy is born, friends will say that “a kaddish is born,” meaning that there will be someone to say kaddish for the parents after they are gone. Aware of this tradition and the legend of Rabbi Akiva, I often think of an original story I would wish to compose, but it would have to be in Yiddish, and since I am not fluent, but only know a few words of Yiddish, I have not been able to write it. It would have to do with a parent being admitted into heaven because of the merit of a son saying kaddish.

The kaddish links the living and the dead, as well as this world and the world to come. Leon Wieseltier wrote that he felt compelled to say kaddish during the year after the death of his father, “Because it is my duty to my father. Because it is my duty to religion....Because the fulfillment of my duty leaves my thoughts about my father unimpeded by regret and undistorted by guilt.”

There is a wonderful midrash that asks how God spoke to Moses when he appeared to him at the burning bush in the wilderness. It says that in order not to startle or frighten Moses, God spoke to him in the voice of Moses' father. I think there is something in each of us, especially in sons, that longs to hear the voice of one's father, the voice of approval, of love.

In Ernest Hemingway's short story, "The Capitol of the World," a father comes to Madrid to find his son, Paco, who had left the farm after a misunderstanding and altercation. In order to reconcile with his son, the father put an ad in the newspaper which read, "Paco meet me at noon, Tuesday, at the newspaper office. All is forgiven. Signed, Your Father." In the story, 500 young men named Paco came the next day and stood silently in line, waiting to see if it was their father who had reached out to them and granted them forgiveness.

A number of years ago a woman in her 60's came to speak with me about what to do with her father from whom she had been estranged for many years. Knowing that he was getting up in years, it troubled her that they had no relationship. It bothered her and was a source of great pain. I told her she had to try to reach out to him and to make amends. A few weeks later she wrote me a heartfelt letter in which she said that she appreciated the time I had spent with her. She wrote that she took my advice, but it hadn't helped and nothing had been resolved. He was still harsh and not interested in reconciling.

Nevertheless, I believe we have to always do what we can to reach out to make the effort to heal relationships, knowing that sometimes, some things just won't or can't be fixed. But at least we can have inner peace knowing that we tried and did all we could.

As I said to one of my siblings during the shiva period, "we are mourning the same person, but differently." I wasn't referring to how we were fulfilling the mitzvah of saying kaddish or other rituals that I was doing that my siblings were not following. I was referring to the nature of the role our parent had played in our lives and how we were each grieving and experiencing a different loss.

Sometimes we mourn what we had, and sometimes we mourn what we wish we would have had.

So what is my advice to someone who may not have had an ideal relationship with a family member? First of all -- do all you can while the person is alive to mend the relationship. Do we still observe the laws of mourning? Every relationship has its complexities, but the halacha commanding us to mourn and observe the rituals is clear. Speaking personally, and by way of example, all I can say is I have tried my best throughout this year to follow the laws of our tradition, and have found meaning in them. I have not worn new garments or gone to hear music at a live concert, and have done my best to attend a minyan to say kaddish as frequently as possible. Following our traditions put me in touch with my heritage and allowed me to honor my parent. I understand all too well why our sages tell us that the hardest of all mitzvahs is to honor our parents. They point out that the commandment is not to love our parents, but to honor them. Not all family members are perfect or lovable. But the time we set aside

and the observance of our rituals and customs can help us deal with the mixed emotions we all harbor.

Nothing is ever simple, or black or white. Nothing is ever all good or all bad.

It is always best to remember the good and not dwell upon the negative. Think of the intangible things a parent leaves a child. I still have the piece of paper my father scrawled on a small index card over 43 years ago when I was about to speak for the first time as a 12 year old in an oratorical contest, competing against kids older than me. And I remember the time he asked me to caddy for him. We got to a big hill, which looked like a mountain, and I told him I didn't think I could make it. He spoke to me as we walked, and then when we got to the top, he said to turn around and look back, and see that I had just done what I thought I couldn't do.

Yom Kippur is such a powerful time of year because it reminds us that we have but limited time on earth. We look around and see that there are new lives to love, but there are those who we can only remember, whose seats are empty. We think of the legacy we leave behind, and how we wish to be remembered.

Towards the end of his life, the painter Renoir was in great pain, suffering from arthritis. Yet he still continued to paint. One day Henri Matisse was visiting the master and noticing his pain, asked, "Why do you persist and continue to paint?" Renoir responded, "The pain passes, but the beauty lasts forever."

My message this morning is to think about how we will be remembered and what will live on after us, how we will be mourned, and how we should mourn. I wish to impart to you how important and essential it is to allow yourself to be guided by the wisdom of our heritage and to follow the rituals at a time of loss. The Jewish customs provide a format, a structure, a beginning and an end, thereby allowing us to continue living. In commenting on the laws Leon Wieseltier says that the Jewish way of mourning turns an absence into a presence.

May the loved ones who are no longer present on earth always be a presence in your lives. May you honor them through your actions, and I pray that their memory and legacy be one of love and blessing.

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