

Chesed

The Ultimate Act of Loving-kindness

According to rabbinic tradition, there are many actions that fall into the category of *gemilut chasadim* or “acts of loving-kindness”—including visiting those who are ill, comforting mourners, providing for a poor bride so that she can have an adequate wedding, and giving interest-free loans to those in need. But traditionally, the greatest act of *chesed* one can do is to care for someone who has passed away in the days and hours leading up to burial—because this is a favor that can never be repaid by the one who receives it.

A few months ago, when our community suffered the loss of founding member Efrem Goldberg, Dorshei Tzedek members came forward in numerous ways, helping to comfort Efrem’s family and to honor Efrem’s memory. When Ellie, Reva, and Sasha learned of the mitzvah of *sh’mirah*—literally “guarding,” which refers to the custom of not leaving the body unattended in the days leading up to burial—they were particularly moved at the prospect of Efrem being accompanied in this way. Over 20 congregants came forward to participate in this mitzvah, each spending a few hours at the funeral home, at all hours of the day and night. Traditionally, the *shomer*, “guard,” reads Psalms or other sacred texts during this time.

We wanted to share here a few brief thoughts from congregants who participated in this mitzvah. Ora Gladstone writes: “Walking into Stanetsky’s, I’d assumed that Efrem’s body or coffin would be visible or nearby while I sat *sh’mirah*, so in some ways it was disappointing to be sitting in a hallway that felt far from him—though in some ways that feeling may have been more appropriate. Efrem had such a pleasant and easy and comforting way of being with people and I thought about that no longer being available to me, and more importantly his no longer being there for his family and close friends. Trying to find specific *tehillim* (psalms) that felt meaningful or comforting was a struggle. But simply participating in an ancient communal tradition, for someone whom I’d so much enjoyed having as part of ‘my congregation’, had much meaning. I was grateful to participate in a small way in so momentous a part of one’s life.”

From Wendy Gedanken: “For me, the *sh’mirah* was a way to do something for Ellie and Efrem. As part of a community, and as friends, it just seemed right that the ‘watchers’ or ‘guards’ should be Efrem’s friends. It was the last act to express one’s caring. On another level, it was also an opportunity. We live in an age where death and dying tend to be hidden. This was a way to make it more normal—part of the life cycle.”

From Debbie Waber: “The *sh’mirah* was very meaningful to me as well and I think for the others who did it. It wasn’t only that we were supporting Ellie and the girls, but it was such a meaningful and personal way for us to be able to deal with Efrem’s passing as people who cared so much about him and about the community. Thank you for asking us to do it.”

And as Meryl Kahn wrote to Ellie, “When Efrem died, I wanted 1) to support you; 2) to support the mourning of his close friends; and 3) to be able to mourn myself. *Sh’mira* gave me the chance to do all three at once. 1) I hope that your knowing that people from the community were physically with Efrem would let you concentrate on your own needs. 2) I like to think that this mitzvah allowed your closest friends and extended family to be available for other aspects of mourning. 3) Despite my being quite upset during the funeral and for many days afterward, I was very calm and content during *sh’mirah*. Whether it was my turn or someone else’s, knowing that several of us volunteered to do this small mitzvah reinforced my sense of community.”

In her appreciation of the congregation coming forward in this way, Ellie writes, “Reva, Sasha, and I were very grateful to all the people who participated in the mitzvah of *sh’mirah*. Over and beyond all the other aspects of our caring community, this mitzvah is part of my ongoing enlightenment about the importance of community and what a source of connection and strength it provided to our family at the times when we felt most helpless and overwhelmed with Efrem’s illness and death.” Many thanks especially to Nancy Gertz, who coordinated the *sh’mirah* effort.