

## **Know Next to Whom Do You Sit?**

**Yizkor, Yom Kippur 5779**

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Having been the rabbi here for a while, I recognize nearly all of our members and even know the names of a large majority of those who are here. And so, when someone comes to our daily minyan, if I don't recognize them, there is a good chance that they are visiting from elsewhere. And, if that person stands for the Mourners' Kaddish, I know that there is a story.

Recently, at our morning minyan, I noticed an unfamiliar face. Standing quietly in the back row of the chapel, he was following the service and responding to the leader, bowing, bending and saying: amen. I noticed as well that, as we recited the Mourners' Kaddish, he stood, mouthing those words.

The visitor was young (relatively speaking), much younger than I. As he wrapped his tefillin and replaced them to their bag, I approached him and introduced myself. I asked his name. I welcomed him and asked where he was from. He told me that he was in town on business. We talked about his job.

After a few minutes I asked, "Who are you saying Kaddish for?" I expected him to say that a parent had died. Instead, he looked at me somewhat quizzically. After a slight hesitation he said, "My wife". I stood silently for a few seconds and asked, "If you don't mind my asking, what happened?"

He proceeded to tell me a long and sad story, how he met his wife in college and had fallen in love almost immediately. Shortly after they were married, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. They decided that they would wait until she was healthy before having children. Long story short, he said, she never got healthy.

I am from a traditional home, he continued. I went to Day School and went to shul often. I have always found comfort in Judaism and in our traditions.

We both stood quietly for a moment. He continued:

Can I ask **you** something?

Of course, I replied.

Why did you ask me about saying Kaddish?

“Well, you are not from our congregation. I didn’t know who you were, and I was interested to know what brought you here. I am sorry if you felt that I was prying”.

Not at all, he said. When my wife died, I went to the local synagogue to say Kaddish. I went every day for an entire month. The people there were nice enough. They smiled at me when I entered the chapel there. But no one ever asked why I was there. They never asked. For a long time after that, I didn’t go back to that, or any synagogue. I came here today because today is my wife’s yahrzeit.

I’m sorry, I said.

Don’t be, he replied. Just the fact that you asked makes it a little easier.

Can you tell me a little about your wife? I asked.

We spoke for another five minutes or so. By that time, he had finished folding his tallit and left. I have not seen him since that encounter.

In ancient times, when the Temple in Jerusalem stood, a mourner would enter and depart from the Temple Mount using a door designated for mourners. At

first, one might consider the requirement to use a particular door designated for mourners and no one else, to be offensive, ostracizing the mourner from the rest of the community. But I believe the effect of this practice was different. Anyone who came through that door had sustained a loss. Knowing that the person was a mourner, having a sense of what was happening in that person's life, allowed others to approach them and offer words of comfort. While in pain, mourners were encouraged to bring their sorrow and anguish with them. When they entered the Temple Mount through the Mourners' Gate, **that** was the signal about what they were carrying and reminder for others to respond.

In our congregation, I ask mourners, not the entire congregation, to stand for the Mourners' Kaddish. In some congregations, everyone stands as a sign of support from the community. But I choose to ask **only** the mourners stand, because I want our congregants to know who is grieving. We want to know, who is mourning? Who is observing a *yahrzeit*? These are the clues, the reminders for us to respond.

When a relative or someone close to us dies, our identity changes. At that moment, some become mourners and the rest of the Jewish world itself becomes comforters. I want those in the congregation who remain seated, to take note of who stands, to approach them after services, find out who died. Find out how we can support or comfort. That is what being a part of a community is all about.

That is why we continue to struggle with such great tenacity to sustain and grow our daily minyanim, so that those who mourn can say *kaddish* with a minyan. If not for our own spiritual growth, we want to be there for those who are mourning, for those who need our support. When we know who is standing, when we know who sits beside us, when we are ready to extend a hand to help or a shoulder to give support, we become a stronger and a better community.

As I discussed on Rosh HaShana, it is hard to stand before God. And we continue to try. But it is both easier and, in fact, more urgent than standing before God to know who stands and sits next to us.

The Yizkor Service is a deeply ingrained part of the Yom Kippur service. We use this moment on the holiest day of the year, to remember those of our family and friends who have died. On Yom Kippur it is also our tradition to read the names of those, connected to our community, who have died since last Yom Kippur. Their deaths are still fresh and painful for us.

It is not because we want to cause pain to those for whom the loss is still fresh and palpable that we read those names. It is because those who mourn want to keep those memories alive and close our hearts. We **want** to feel the pain of loss because it is in the pain of loss that our memories of the deep love we shared with them during their lives resides.

Our Sages remind us (*B'rachot 28b*),

*Da' lifnay mi ata 'omed/know before whom you stand.*

As we live, work and pray, our Sages advise that we remember, no matter where we are or what we are doing, we stand before God. But I would amend that quote and the implied challenge:

*Da' 'al yad mi ata yoshev / Know next to whom you sit.*

Of course, we should be aware of God's presence at all times. But in the context of community there are other things about which we should be cognizant, in particular, we should take note of those around us. When we enter this building, I believe that we must remember that we share this space with others. We should extend a hand, a smile and we should engage that person, if only to know their name. But when we are seated in the Sanctuary or Chapel and someone stands for the Mourners' Kaddish, we should go to that person after services, learn their name and find out, if they are willing to share it, for whom they are saying Kaddish. Are they in a period of mourning? Are they observing a *yahrzeit*? Tell me something about that person.

I find there to be comfort embedded in the Yizkor service. The pain we recall, the gaping holes left in our hearts when we bring to the fore the loss of the presence of those who have brought to our lives joy, strength, guidance and laughter. Our tears are tangible reminders of the love and care we received from our parents, their wisdom which we continue to use, and even the joy which we and, perhaps, our children brought to those we recall today.

But there is comfort, as well, as we stand together, in the knowledge that we are not alone. We are comforted by the fact that those around us have endured their own difficulties. They too miss their loved ones. They too have felt anger. They too have experienced solace. And, in coming together at this moment we feel the support of those who are seated now, and, in a moment, those who will be standing beside us. That is what we do for each other.

We have not been the first, nor shall we be the last, to find comfort in the simple act of recognition of another's pain, the simple act of a greeting, a smile or kind word. Standing or sitting next to someone who knows that **you** know that they are in pain means more, to some, than can be expressed. When someone walks through the valley of the shadow of death, it is our reassurance that they are not alone, that allows them to persevere, to emerge from the darkness and, finally, to return to the light.