

*Adonai natan, vadonai lakach. God has given, God has taken.  
Yehi shem adonai mevorach. May the name of God be blessed.*

*Adapted from Rabbi Scheinberg's yizkor sermon Yom Kippur 5767 – October 2, 2006*

At dozens and dozens of funerals, I have led friends, congregants and family through the recitation of these words. But eight weeks ago, as I said them at my mother's funeral, the experience was unprecedented for me. I've been in this movie before, I thought, but I was always playing a different part. Even at the funerals of my grandparents, and of friends, my role was always to "take care" of the mourners who were 'closer in' to the circle of grief than I was. And here I was, at the innermost circle.

I would like to tell you what it's like to be at that innermost circle, from a Jewish perspective. What it was like for me to endure this tragedy through a Jewish lens. I've actually planned for a long time, for several years, to give a sermon like this. I just didn't think it was going to be about me.

Now, I harbor no illusion that the way I responded to my grief is exactly the way that others might respond to theirs. Grief is very individual, and the 400 people or so in this synagogue right now have at least 400 different kinds of relationships to Jewish tradition. The choices I made may not be entirely the choices you would make. But I found the rituals of Jewish tradition to be extraordinarily powerful, helpful and comforting. And to tell you about my experiences, and the roles that Jewish teachings and traditions played for me over these last several weeks, is a way for me to wrest some blessing even from the midst of sorrow. And unfortunately, almost all of us will face some kind of grief and mourning in the future. So the perspective I can provide may be, for some, a practical guide to issues that YOU may face, as YOU seek to discern the role that Jewish tradition will play in YOUR life.

**Tuesday morning:**

I was in my office downstairs when I got the call with the news. The only way that I know how I reacted was that about 5 minutes later, Rachele, our pre-school director, came knocking at my door because she was concerned that there must be a crying infant or toddler there. How thankful I am for a religious and cultural tradition that completely abandons the figment of the 'stiff upper lip,' that wishes to affirm emotions rather than trying to control or stifle them. Very sensibly, the Talmud tells us: *al tenachamenu be-sha'ah she-meito mutal lefanav.* (Avot 4:18) Don't even bother trying to comfort your friend, when his deceased relative is still lying unburied. It won't work, and it will just add insult to injury. And it goes even further. For those in the state of *Aninut*, that stage of absolutely brutal, painful sorrow amidst the shock of the death, not only are you not supposed to be comforted. You're not supposed to do any of the mitzvot. You're not supposed to take ANY affirmative steps to fulfill ANY positive precept of Jewish tradition, with the exception of ensuring prompt burial for your loved one. Now obviously, this will affect people differently depending on how many mitzvot they are doing on a daily basis. For me, prayer normally punctuates my day - and saying blessings before and after I eat is basically automatic for me. But after hearing the news

of the loss, Jewish tradition asks me not to pray, not to say blessings before and after meals, not to give tzedakah -- essentially not to do any religious act until I have had a chance to get the minimal emotional closure that burial can provide.

Why? Some say it's so the mourner can better focus on the task at hand. And some say I shouldn't say blessings at this stage because blessing seems so truly absent from my life. Like a treasured friend, like a good listener, Judaism doesn't want to drag me away from my emotional state. Judaism wants to **affirm** the emotional state where I currently am. No blessings; no words of comfort. I usually thrive on both, but at that moment, I had no patience for either.

### **Tuesday night:**

My family has finally arrived at my parents' home in Maryland. We are preparing for the funeral tomorrow morning. And my first true moment of comfort comes - surprisingly enough - while I am on the phone with my parents' rabbi, when he says to me: "I wanted to let you know that the *chevra kadisha* finished the *Tahara* for your mother." So what does this mean? -- it means: the group of volunteers who form the *chevra kadisha* - the synagogue funeral and burial committee -- have just completed the ritual washing of her body and putting her burial shrouds on her. And for the first time that day, I feel a calm wash over me. It was not paid functionaries who attended to the final earthly needs of my mother's body. It was volunteers - volunteers from her synagogue - a squad of about four women came to the funeral home. (For modesty's sake, women wash women and men wash men.) They recited some prayers as they prepared her for burial as an act of communal love and dedication. Perhaps they knew my mother from synagogue life; perhaps not.

I can't imagine how psychologically difficult that volunteer opportunity is, how brave these people are, to donate their weeknights, on just a few hours' notice, to attend to the needs of the dead. I should add that for a period of time in my childhood, my mother was one of these brave women on the *chevra kadisha*. Me, I've never done it - for a variety of reasons and excuses, but frankly the most significant of which is, frankly, that I'm scared. But I found myself full of gratitude. The *chevra kadisha* reminds me of an earlier time, when death was truly seen as a natural part of life, an organic process that was not sterile or hidden away. No wonder the literal translation of *chevra kadisha* is 'society of holiness.'

### **Wednesday morning:**

I have known for a long time that when the time came for me to do the ritual of *kriah*, tearing an article of clothing immediately before the funeral, I knew that a symbolic black ribbon was not going to be sufficient for me. If my ancestors, with just two or three sets of clothing, actually tore their clothing, then surely I can find a shirt in the back of my closet that I'm never going to wear again. Tradition says that upon the conclusion of 30 days, I am allowed to mend the gash that I make in my shirt, but just a basting - not a professional mend. This mirrors how loss works. Eventually the hole in our hearts starts to close up, but never perfectly, and it is never the same as it was before. It all seems only theoretical to me. Not only do I have no plans to mend the shirt, but I could not imagine

that gaping hole in my heart ever healing. At that moment I wonder if I will be feeling this much pain forever.

Walking in to the chapel where the funeral will take place, I see the casket, the proverbial 'plain pine box' that puts my mother in continuity with dozens of generations of ancestors, that reminds us that in death, all distinctions of rich and poor, high or low status, is rendered strictly irrelevant. And I realize that at this moment of discontinuity I treasure any link between the generations, any reminder that my mother is actually a part of a tradition much greater than herself, which began long before her birth and that will continue long after her death. Some aspects of the funeral service focus on her distinctive personality, values, relationships and achievements. Other aspects of the funeral put her in the context of all of Jewish tradition. It's that combination that provides the comfort.

**Wednesday afternoon:**

We stand at the cemetery, shoveling earth into the grave. My older daughters solemnly share in this task. Later on, some people would approach us at Shiva and tell us how they were a bit surprised that we had brought our children to the funeral and burial -- all our daughters, age 7, age 4, and age 1½. Weren't we concerned that it would be disturbing to them? In truth, Naomi and I never actually discussed it. It was just an automatic assumption, a value we knew we shared. Of course we would bring them. And yes, it might be difficult for them, but not appreciably more difficult than suddenly losing their grandmother, and quite possibly it would be a source of comfort to them, and without a doubt they would be a source of comfort to us. This is why we brought them also to the funeral of my grandfather, and to Shiva for both of my grandparents who died this past year. It is not our job to shield our children from all the pain of the world, but rather to help them to face the pain from which we are unable to shield them with confidence and strength. Throughout their lives, my children will always know that their bond with their Savta, their grandmother, included participating in the task of *Chesed Shel Emet* - assisting in someone's burial, that truest act of lovingkindness because it's the one thing that can never be reciprocated.

**Later on Wednesday afternoon:**

I have sometimes thought that a casual visitor to our pre-school, listening to the Jewish songs we teach the kids, songs about challah and wine, and shabbat dinner, and apples dipped in honey, and latkes sizzling in the pan, would conclude that Judaism really is all about food. I think you could have come to a similar conclusion if you looked at my parents' home on the first afternoon of shiva. When you want so much to help and comfort someone, and you know that there's almost nothing you can say that will really be a source of comfort, it's much easier to express that love and concern through food. My parents for their entire lives have been givers, not takers. That's also the way my brother and I were raised. It's far better to give than to receive; in fact, receiving is always a little awkward. The thought of all these gifts of food entering my parents' home was uncomfortable. But perhaps it was our first lesson that, at a time of need, we had better learn how to stop giving for a while, and just to sit, and receive, and to let other people do things for us.

I've told so many people who are grieving that they shouldn't be surprised if they find the acts of mourning and grieving to be absolutely exhausting and draining, much more so than their normal work and their normal routine. No wonder it's called SITTING shiva. I get up to make myself a sandwich, and one of my mom's friends tells me, "You – sit! I'll get your food. What do you want?" And I know at that moment that we are playing roles in a cosmic drama, that just as much as I need her to provide for my needs, she has a deep need herself to take care of me.

All the food accumulates in the kitchen, meticulously labeled with the names of who provided it, what the ingredients are, in some cases what kashrut standards were used in preparing it. Except for one gift bag containing three delicious home-grown tomatoes, evidently from someone's garden, that seems to have no name on it. Until my sister-in-law notices that there is actually a tiny little gift card attached to the bag. She opens it and reads it. It says:

*'Mazal Tov! Enjoy living in your new home. Fondly, Ella and Stan.'*  
[The names have been changed to protect the innocent!]

We simply erupt in uproarious laughter. An even better gift than the tomatoes, is the chance to laugh for the first time in days. I knew a gift can sometimes be a faux pas, but I didn't realize that a faux pas could actually be a gift.

### **Monday morning:**

Someone from this community visits me for shiva, now relocated to Hoboken, and gives me a hug and says, "There's never anything good to say." And he's right. I've taught before that the comfort at a time of bereavement comes not primarily from people's words, but from the mere fact of their presence. And now I really know how true that is. One of my friends and colleagues reminded me that in the Sefardic tradition, the traditional greeting for someone who is bereaved is *tenuchamu min ha-shamayim*, "may you be comforted from heaven." As if to say: authentic comfort is unlikely to come from anywhere else.

The Biblical precursor to the observance of shiva is found in the book of Job, where Job's three friends visit him as he mourns for his losses, and they join with him in sitting on the floor and crying with him for seven days. They don't actually say anything to him; they are comforting just with their presence. Then, after seven days, one of them starts to speak. And let's just say that they were doing a better job when they stayed silent. I noticed for myself - though of course some may perceive this differently - it was not the content of what people said to me that provided the comfort, but rather the fact that you were there saying it. And it was not the content of the cards and notes, but the FACT that you took the time and energy to send them. With one exception: when people had either known my mother, or read my eulogy and commented specifically about my mother's life, THAT was extraordinary. That, I lived for. But in general, when it comes to helping someone at a time of grief, perhaps the best advice is counter-intuitive. Don't just say something - stand there.

Shiva is like a trust-fall game, one of those group-building games I remember playing at summer camp, where you are supposed to close your eyes and lean back into nothingness, just trusting that the other people in the group will catch you. And I was caught. I was caught SO well, by this community and my parents' community, that by this point during shiva, I was starting to say, when people asked me about my week, that I had experienced the most terrible thing, but it was followed by a succession of only wonderful things. This is a credit to some extraordinary communities in Hoboken and in Maryland. But it is also a credit, frankly, to my parents: to the lives they have led, the attachments they have forged, the love and devotion they showed to others throughout their lives, that was now being reciprocated. I would love to say that the outpouring of love and support that my father is currently receiving from his community is a birthright to which any Jew in a similar need is entitled. But it is not. The full extent of the communal response to my father's needs is, frankly, a right due to someone who has lived an unselfish life, devoted to the needs of the community. It's the "bank of social capital": the more you deposit, the more you can withdraw. Every so often you should check your balance.

**Wednesday, September 20:**

It's 1:35pm, I'm on the 2nd floor of the Newport Tower in Jersey City, waiting outside a locked door. Exactly at 1:36pm and 30 seconds, someone comes to unlock the door. Within the next three-and-a-half minutes, the unpainted and unfinished room behind the door is suddenly full of men who have seemingly come out of nowhere, but actually have come from the various office buildings on Washington Boulevard. Promptly at 1:40pm, we begin the daily *mincha* afternoon service, with some communal chanting in Hebrew, some silent prayer, some individual chanting, and we conclude with the Mourner's Kaddish, which I lead together with the other mourners present. By 1:50pm, the brief service has concluded. By 1:51pm, with the room empty and the door locked, you could not possibly have believed that that room had been used as a makeshift synagogue.

There are various places I have gone over these weeks to gather with a *minyan* - with a quorum of 10 adult Jews - for daily prayer services, morning, afternoon, and evening, and for me to be one of the leaders of the Mourner's Kaddish. Some of those places are familiar and comfortable, like here in this sanctuary. Some of those places remain completely foreign to me, no matter how many times I go there, like the Hasidic synagogue in Union City. And some are simply unlikely or unusual, like the minyan in the Newport Tower.

A couple of weeks after my mother died, Naomi and I and our kids took a previously scheduled trip to the Boston area. And in advance, I had scouted out synagogues in proximity to each place we were visiting, so I could pray and say Kaddish with a minyan each morning, afternoon and evening. The image in my mind, though of course it is an imperfect analogy for a host of reasons, was that of a dialysis patient on vacation, who has to seek out other places to receive life-sustaining treatments, even away from home. When I gathered with a minyan - and in Boston, it was always a minyan of complete strangers - I felt them holding my hand, sustaining me, and leading me back towards wholeness.

And just like the food at the shiva house, saying kaddish is another kind of training for the mourner to be willing to take, not merely to give. Almost every daily minyan I go to is somewhat precarious. Assembling ten people is not the easiest task. I have no illusions that being at a prayer service is exactly where all those people want to be at that very moment. Daily minyanim are sustained by people pledging **responsibility**, people who are giving the free-will gift of their presence. I am conscious that I am benefitting from their generosity.

I think about how the Kaddish prayer is thousands of years old, but there was no such thing as the Mourner's Kaddish until approximately the era of the Crusades. The Mourner's Kaddish may not mention death, but speaking historically, it grew out of one of the most famous Jewish ghost stories. The *Or Zarua*, a text from central Europe in the 1100's, is the first to tell the story, of how the esteemed Rabbi Akiva once saw a ghost, a disembodied soul, engaged in hard labor. The dead man tells Rabbi Akiba that he is doomed to hard labor forever, but he would be freed from punishment immediately if his son were to stand before the congregation and say *Yitgadal ve-yitkadash shemeih rabbah*, "Let God's holy name be magnified and sanctified," and the congregation would respond: *yehei shmeih rabba mevarach*, "May God's great name be praised." But the man laments: "Who would teach my son? I have no friends in the world!" Rabbi Akiva then commits himself to finding this man's son and teaching him enough Hebrew so he can lead the community in prayer. Though the son is not a particularly motivated student, eventually he learns to say the words *yitgadal ve-yitkadash shemeih rabba*, and the community responds with the words *yehei shmeih rabba mevarach*.

The next night, Rabbi Akiba has a dream in which the deceased man thanks him profusely, because this has indeed liberated him from his torments. As the story spread, so did the practice of children of deceased parents leading the Kaddish. It is meritorious for children of deceased parents to be the ones to invite the entire community to praise God's name. Because that's what the Kaddish really is: it's a delivery system for Divine praise. It's an invitation for the community to praise God's name.

So is this why I am saying the Kaddish three times (almost) every day, for almost a year? Is it to liberate my mother's soul from its hard labor? Actually, my picture of the afterlife looks somewhat different from this. Plus, try as I may, I can't believe there are any sins that my mom is being punished for. The greatest gift that saying Kaddish gives to me is the gift of regularity, of a structure in which to remember her, every day, in the presence of a community. But I am also intrigued by this idea that the way that I best honor my mother's memory is by inviting people to praise God, to increase the quotient of God-praise in the world. And so, for several months, those who have suffered losses are asked to wander the world as freelance itinerant God-praise-invited.

The Kaddish is said only with a minyan, since a minyan is the minimum number of people who can truly speak for the Jewish people. Every time you assemble a minyan, you have reached quorum. Every minyan is really a meeting of the Jewish people in conference assembled. And so, as the meeting comes to order, I make a motion: *yitgadal*

*ve-yitkadash shemeih rabba.* On behalf of the Jewish people in their entirety, let us praise God. In memory of my mother. And so, in communities that are so diverse geographically and ideologically, I assist in spreading the God-praise. Because henceforth, there's really only one kind of gift I can give to my mother anymore that really matters. I can live my life in such a way that it motivates praise of God. I can strive to make the world better, in her name.

I notice how often it is that I show up at a minyan, somewhere, and I realize that there are only ten Jewish adults there. If I hadn't been there, they wouldn't have had a minyan. And gradually, it happens more and more that I meet other people whose losses are more recent than mine: someone who just completed the shiva mourning period; someone who is earlier on the emotional arc of grief than I am. I look at them, and I remember what it was like back when I was there. I hadn't noticed, but I have come a long way in a short time. They look at me as a signpost further on the way towards wholeness. We each benefit from each other's presence. Gradually, it happens more and more that I officiate at funerals, and visit people during shiva, and I may act exactly the same as before, but in some intangible way, the interaction is different. Just as, during shiva, I found myself yearning to spend the most time with my friends who had lost parents themselves.

I never realized that so much of Jewish grieving and mourning is about learning how to take, and learning how to give again. When we give, obviously we are emulating God. But perhaps we are also emulating God when we take. Because I have to hope and pray that it is at least as painful and agonizing for God to learn how to take as it is for us.

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