

## Limnot Yameinu<sup>1</sup>

It was right after a delightful Bar Mitzvah, Saturday afternoon when I called home. Our son Daniel was visiting and we had talked about taking a walk after I came home from the synagogue. I was planning to let Daniel and Richard know that I would be home after the Kiddush, which would be in about an hour. But I never made it to the Kiddush. Daniel put Richard on the phone and Richard told me that my father had died. While my father had been in the hospital for two months and each time I spoke with my stepmother his health was deteriorating, I was still shocked by the news.

Let's face it; we're all getting older. In some cases our parents and partners are dying. Some of us have lost siblings and children. More of our stalwart seniors are dying. With all of this loss, we need to share how we navigate these difficult changes in our lives. Through the process of dealing with my father's death, I want to describe what I have learned about the wisdom of our tradition and the journey of grief.

The days following my father's death were filled with airline tickets, calls to the funeral home and canceling appointments. Many

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 90:12

of you have lived this scenario. My stepmother asked me if I would officiate at the memorial service and I said yes. I agreed without really taking a moment to think about it. They didn't know any rabbis in Florida. It was easy for me to step up and be "the rabbi".

But here's the catch. In being "the rabbi" I short-circuited my own process of mourning. Although I was physically present, in wearing the garment of "rabbi" I missed my chance to be a mourner at my own father's funeral. And this was just the first of missed steps on my own path of mourning. As the rabbi, I went on automatic and it lead me to make other decisions, which upon reflection, may not have been the best choices.

The memorial was a small gathering with stepchildren and step-grandchildren a few cousins and my uncle. Oddly enough my father's older brother, Charlie had died only two weeks before. The social worker at the hospital suggested not telling this to my father as it might compromise his chance of recovery. Since my dad died without knowing that his own brother had gone before him we joked about the yelling even we might hear when my dad got up to heaven a few weeks later and found his brother beat him to it. I really felt for my one remaining uncle, Uncle Nate, still alive, having lost his two best

buddies in under a month. I mean, they went to the same place for breakfast every week and ordered the same meal every time. They'd go to a small place in a strip mall, where the waitress seemed to really enjoy the quick witted banter with the regulars. My dad always ordered the Leo-lox, eggs and onions-bagel on the side. I'm sure my remaining uncle really misses this ritual.

To be totally honest, officiating at my father's memorial was a challenge but it would have been OK if I had been more careful about the following days. Here's what I did next.

I came back to Santa Cruz and went to work.

Friday night was beautiful, honoring Estelle Levine, as this year's Woman of Valor was so lovely. I didn't want to miss it. It was a beautiful service and all was well until we got to the Kaddish and I lost it. I was overcome by all of the feelings I didn't express during my father's memorial in Florida. At that time I was being the rabbi. But now, as I stood to say Kaddish on this bimah, I was the grieving daughter. The overwhelming feelings of loss I hadn't experienced at my father's memorial came flooding through my body. The words of the Kaddish were stuck in my throat and my tears wouldn't stop flowing. I was relieved that the choir was singing because I don't

know how I would have managed to get myself to stand at the lectern and sing a closing song. I slipped out the door through Rabbi Rick's office and went straight home. When I arrived home all I could do was sit and cry. I couldn't even explain to my husband what had happened.

Saturday morning I really wanted to help Rabbi Rick with the Bar Mitzvah and while I felt really good about supporting the student, the same thing happened when I stood to say Kaddish. Now understand that Jewish law exempts mourners from certain religious obligation during the early days of grief **and** I was still within the seven-day shiva period when we are encouraged to stay home and be comforted by our friends and family.

Here's where I learned something profound about grief. When one is grieving much of what we do doesn't make sense on the surface. Experts in the field of grief therapy, such as the late Elisabeth Kübler-Ross used to think that grief came in stages and that we would go through these stages and come to closure but current thinking has changed. Grief is not a neat and orderly process. In her book, Broken Open, which was a gift from a dear friend and TBE member who died a few years ago, Elizabeth Lesser writes, "I

am not a big fan of closure. It sounds so abrupt, so tidy, and so final. I prefer old-fashioned words like mourning, lamentation and grief. They suggest a slow and sloppy process – one that involves emotional upheaval, interrupted activity, and dark nights of the soul. They describe the true nature of family gatherings and memorial services, which are never neat and easy. Grief is messy and painful.”<sup>2</sup>

Upon reflection and conversation with some close friends, I began to understand why I chose to go to work during the first week of shiva. After being the rabbi for my father’s memorial so far removed from home, I instinctually yearned to ground my grief in our community. I wanted to be with you. Because I have watched you comfort each other. I have seen you reach out to help a widow or a child whose parent has died. I have learned that we are a community that expresses love in these moments of loss. And that was my experience here in this congregation, after my father’s death. Your cards, e-mails, calls and contributions amazed me. I did truly feel held in my grief.

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<sup>2</sup> Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help us Grow, Elizabeth Lesser Villard Books 2004 p 210

In my coming to services that Friday evening there was a bit of denial involved in thinking that I was OK to be back at work. And after crying at that service and the Saturday morning Bar Mitzvah, I cleared my calendar for the rest of that week. I stayed home, received some visitors, walked by the beach and let all of my sadness and loss surface. I read letters and looked at pictures, much of what many of you have done after someone you love has died. Looking at pictures and reading letters helped me open myself up to the pain of my loss and embrace my own mourning. From this tender place, I found myself writing about my relationship with my father. I was able to examine more clearly the ups and downs of our complicated history and begin to let go of regrets and unfinished issues.

Our weekly, Tuesday minyan was founded when one of our young people was killed by a drunk driver and his parents wanted another opportunity during the week to say Kaddish. It has been a place where other members have been able to say Kaddish for their loved ones, and that was the first time this same group of people were supporting me in my grief. The last day of Shiva fell on a Tuesday and I attended our morning minyan, lead the prayers and took a walk around our building, as is the custom at the end of shiva.

As I moved into the next stage of the Jewish mourning period, the shloshim, or 30 days, I noticed some changes. But there was one thing that stayed the same. It was difficult for me to be in social situations when I was with more than a very small number of people. I could go out to dinner with a few friends but I wasn't comfortable attending a Bar Mitzvah reception. I still found myself crying at times when I wasn't expecting to feel sad, or wanting to pick up the phone and call my dad but that's part of why we understand that grief is not a neat and orderly process. I was learning to be gentle with myself and not have expectations about how I should be feeling.

Sometimes a holiday, like these High Holidays can arrive and we may feel that our grief is as powerful as it was right after our loved one died. We remember sitting around the holiday table with them and we yearn to have them back again. Maybe there were special foods we like to eat with them and even the smell of that brisket brings makes us sad.

The journey of healing in our grief is not about overcoming the pain but finding ways to remember the love that was shared and what was life giving about this love.

One of our members told me a story that has helped her in her journey. Every Sunday, she and her husband always looked forward to a call from her father. Her dad was an amazing human being but one of his greatest gifts was his role as the family's communicator. His list of Sunday calls went far beyond just calling his kids, he'd call cousins of his generation and the next and in each call he'd share the news he'd heard from the call he made earlier in the day so that everyone knew the family news! As the High Holidays approached and his daughter, our TBE member, was missing her father, she decided to contact all the family members she could find, about starting a family newsletter. This would be a way for her to continue and spread her father's legacy, and reunite family members who had drifted apart since her father's death. In the process of contacting relatives she hadn't spoken to in years, she is now hearing new stories about her dad, things she never knew about his life. She has found a way into the comfort of feeling close to her father and cherishing what he left behind. She is blessing his memory.

I cannot begin to explain how important it has been for me to talk about this journey of grief with others. In the past I understood intellectually the benefit of joining a grief support group through

Hospice, I now understand from personal experience how important it is to have people with whom I can share this circuitous process of coming to wholeness after a loss.

Every year, the SF Jewish Healing Center and Sinai Memorial Chapel offer a conference called “Grief and Growing”. Some of our members have attended this conference and shared how profoundly supported and guided they felt during their time with rabbis, teachers, therapists and most importantly, other people who have been working with their grief. I have heard from attendees about practical tools people have learned to work with their grief and you’ll find some information about these tools on the table in the hallway. But most importantly, the trust established through the sharing of individual stories creates a vessel in which healing can occur.

I want to share a ritual from this conference that one member of our congregation described to me. This ritual gave her great comfort. But first some background. This woman had been caring for her sister during her seven-year struggle with lung cancer. She had moved her sister into her home, and during that time the whole family helped take care of her.

Soon after her sister's unveiling, this woman's cousin died. The cousin was living in a care facility over the hill and our member was the person managing her care. Within a year and a half, she suffered two very difficult losses. When a loved one dies, many of us are beset with regrets and this ritual was designed to encourage healing around these regrets we may carry. Each participant was invited to write or draw a regret or an "if only, I had..." that they would like to release on a piece of paper. These papers were then collected and buried in the ground. But it didn't end there because after they buried their regrets, they planted a fig tree so that their regrets were transformed into new growth. The ritual of burying regrets was a mirror of burying their loved ones, but this time there was a new element, planting nourishing new life.

What do we want to regenerate in our journey of grief? How can you moved towards shalom-wholeness, through your loss? As the holidays drew near I yearned to call my father, just to hear him say, Shanah tovah with his Ashkenazi accent.

This will be the first year that I observe Yizkor for my father on Yom Kippur. I am grateful for the marking of memory we have in our tradition. As we remember, we gaze through the windows into the life

we shared with our loved ones who have died. May this Yom Kipur help us find ways to let go of our regrets and unfinished business so that we may find comfort in our coming together to mourn all of our beloved dead.

Rabbi Paula Marcus

Yom Kippur 5772