REFLECTIONS

After everyone leaves, what do mourners need? Although Jewish tradition presumes that a mourner will slowly reintegrate themself into the community and eventually return to their "regular" patterns (from loss, to funeral, to *shivah*, to *shloshim*, to *yahrzeit*, and beyond), there is no precise schedule as to how long an individual will need the support of others. How can we be sensitive and aware of individual needs?

1. **Rabbi Daniel Greyber** wrote the following as part of a *Teshuvah* (e.g., responsa or answer to a question of Jewish Law) relating to *Nikhum Aveilim*:

   "Several years ago, I had coffee with a young woman whose husband had died tragically of cancer 18 months earlier. When asked how she was doing, she started to cry and described a "double loss": not only was she still grieving the death of her beloved husband, she also was pained because, once the year of *kaddish* had passed, some (perhaps) well-meaning people told her she was grieving "too much," and that it was time for her to "move on" and to find a new husband.

   These comments misrepresent Jewish tradition by interpreting its time-based mourning structures as placing MAXIMUM limits on our emotional experience of grief. Jewish law limits mourners' BEHAVIORS during periods (such as a *shiva* and *sheloshim*), but even Jewish sources that limit mourning practices do not claim that these mourning practices must perfectly map onto an individual's experiences of grief."

2. **Rabbi Maurice Lamm** (author of *The Jewish Way of Death and Mourning*) wrote:

   "A sacred obligation devolves upon every Jew to comfort the mourners, whether they are related to them or not, and whether they were a close friend or a passing acquaintance...The fundamental purpose of the condolence call during shiva is to relieve the 'mourner of the intolerable burden of intense loneliness'. At no other time is a human being more in need of such support...Recognizing this state of mind, the visitor comes to the house of mourning, silently, to join the bereaved in their loneliness, sorrowfully to sit alongside them, to think their thoughts and to linger on their loss. The warmth of such human presence is inestimable."

3. **Jodie Goldberg,** after losing her father Ned from metastatic prostate cancer, wrote about how hard it is to let go, and how Jewish tradition helps in the process.

   "At the end of *shiva*, a seven-day period of Jewish mourning, I was confronted with my greatest nightmare: I had to start existing in a world without my dad. I wondered, "Who am I without you?" I was physically depleted and emotionally paralyzed, and yet, Judaism teaches us that even in our own extreme discomfort, we must find a way to walk around the block at the end of the shiva period. So I did, holding my breath for the new reality that came next. Channeling my father's conviction, I am attempting to take small steps forward, and yet some days it feels insurmountable."

4. Rabbi Melissa Crespy wrote the following reflection after the sudden death of her 38-year-old brother:

> "How can we find some *nechama* – some COMFORT when faced with loss? First, we look to FAMILY. The people who know us best – our spouses, our children, our siblings, our aunts, uncles, and cousins – are often the ones who provide the hugs, the words, the freedom to cry, the shared memories which help us get through the most difficult times. I know that my surviving brothers, my husband, and my children have been enormous sources of COMFORT for me.
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> But FAMILY may not always be there to COMFORT us; and sometimes the bonds grow looser over time. FAMILY members have their own ways of grieving which we may not share. Sometimes FAMILY members are so bereft, they have no comfort to give. To whom do we turn when our FAMILY can't be there for us to cry with?
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> We often turn to our FRIENDS and our COMMUNITY. I am blessed to belong to a community which actively sought to COMFORT me in all the Jewish and human ways possible after my brother died: they did everything from ritually washing my brother's body in preparation for burial (*taharah*), to providing *minyanim* morning and evening at my home for prayer services, to providing all the meals we needed for the week of *shiva (sic)*, to extending invitations to bring my children over to their homes so that the children could play while the adults offered tea and comfort. There are FRIENDS who have called from far away, numbers of times in the week just to "check in" to see how I was doing. And my *shul* has a daily *minyan*, where I find a peaceful place to pray, a quorum of ten Jewish adults, and the ability to say *kaddish* for my brother's soul. My FRIENDS and larger Jewish COMMUNITY are a great source of strength for me, and I wish everyone who is suffering a loss such a caring group of people.
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> And finally, for some of us, we find COMFORT in GOD. I can't claim to have passively accepted my brother's death as "GOD'S will". I've argued with GOD a lot in the past weeks (and years). But ultimately, the words Jacob blesses his son and grandsons with have deep resonance for me: "The GOD in whose ways my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, The GOD who has been my shepherd from my birth to this day – The Angel who has redeemed me from all harm – bless the lads . . . " (*Genesis* 48:15-16). These are words which I hope will apply to my brother, and to me. I pray that GOD – in GOD'S way – continues to be a shepherd for my brother's and parents' souls; that GOD is taking care of them and that they somehow feel the warmth and embrace of GOD'S love. And I pray, that GOD will continue to be a shepherd for me – and all who suffer loss – to guide us in how best to mourn and to continue living life fully, despite our tremendous sense of loss and pain. I pray that I will always be able to walk in GOD'S ways – and to pass on to my children the sacred rituals and morals which GOD has commanded of us. I pray that in teaching my children about GOD and our beautiful Jewish way of life, I will bring some COMFORT to myself, and honor to the memory of my brother.

5. The following readings are from *Siddur Lev Shalem Kaddish*

a. Kaddish

The custom for mourners to recite *Kaddish* began sometime after the 11th century. Though its origin is obscure, it has become an essential element of Jewish prayer. The *Kaddish* is not a private prayer; rather, it is recited in community with a *minyan* present. In that context, the mourner affirms that tragedy has not separated him or her from God or the Jewish people, and, in turn, the communal response then constitutes an acknowledgement of the mourner.

It is sometimes difficult for a mourner to reintegrate into a community after the loss of a close relation. Equally, it may be difficult for the community to know how to receive a mourner in its midst. In reciting the *Kaddish*, the mourner takes a formal role in relation to the community. The mourner is able to say, "I am here in your midst, praying alongside you"; and the congregation can respond: 'Along with you, we all turn our eyes to God."

The prophet Ezekiel remarks that after great tragedy, God's name will become great throughout the world (38:23) with some grammatical changes, these are the first words of the *Kaddish*. By the end of the Mourner's *Kaddish*, whatever our loss, whatever tragedy we have suffered, we took to God in hope and we hold on to a vision of some moment when we all may be at peace.

b. The Blessing of Memory - Chaim Stern

It *is* hard to sing of oneness when our world is not complete, when those who once brought wholeness to our life have gone, and nothing but memory can fill the emptiness their passing leaves behind.

But memory can tell us only what we were, in company with those we loved;;it cannot help us find what each of us, alone, must now become. Yet no one is really alone; those who live no more echo still within our thoughts and words, and what they did is part of what we have become. We do best homage to our dead when we live our lives most fully, even in the shadow of our loss. Each life is a whole world; in each is the breath of the Divine. In affirming God we affirm the worth of each one whose life, now ended, brought us closer to the source of life, in whose unity no one is alone and every life finds purpose.

c. Holding On and Letting Go - Harold M. Schulweis

Hold on and let go.

But one does not negate the other.

The two are complementary, dialectical, two sides of one coin.

Hold on—death is not the final word, the grave no oblivion.

Hold on in *Kaddish, Yahrzeit, Yizkor.*

No gesture, no kindness, no smile evaporates
Every kindness, every embrace has its afterlife in our minds, our hearts, our hands.
Hold on…

Not enslaving memory that sells the future to the past,
nor recollection that makes us passive, listless, resigned.
But memory that releases us for a new life.

The flow of life—the divine process gives and takes, retains and creates. Return the dust to the earth, but not to bury hope, but to respect the will to live.

d. Saying *Kaddish* - Anita Diamont

Beyond language, *Kaddish* is more than the sum of its words. First and foremost, it is an experience of the senses. Like music, there is no understanding *Kaddish* without hearing and feeling it and letting go of the words.

One of the great ironies of *Kaddish* is that it was written in a vernacular language so that it could be understood and led by scholars and laborers alike. Today, of course, Aramaic is far more obscure than Hebrew.

That the recitation of words long dead can remain a source of consolation testifies to the fact that *Kaddish* transcends language.

Its comforts are rooted in preverbal ways of knowing. Like a mother 's heartbeat against the infant ear, *Kaddish* makes an elemental sound—natural as rain on a wooden roof and as human as a lullaby.

In addition to being a profession of faith and a doxology, it is also mantra and meditation. In rhythmic repetition of syllables and sounds, the list of praises (glorified, celebrated,

lauded) builds into a kind of incantation. On some level, the words are pretext. The real meaning, the subtext, is embedded in the repetition. Perhaps another reason the rabbis were so insistent it be recited within a minyan.

Only with a collective voice is there enough energy to lift up the lonely mourner, the angry mourner, the mourner too hurt to even say "Amen." The *minyan* chorus implicitly reassures the wounded soul, "You are not alone."

e. Reciting *Kaddish* - Ron Wolfson

The blow to faith is never more pronounced that it is at the moment when you bury a loved one. Yet, here comes the *Kaddish* and proclaims faith in God. It isn't that the mourner is talked back into faith by reciting the *Kaddish*. But the fact that a mourner says *Kaddish*…keeps the mourner in the community of faith. By standing up and

proclaiming publicly *Yitgadal, v'yitkadash sh'meih rabbah- "May God's great name be exalted and hallowed throughout the created world"* - the body and soul of the mourner have a chance to recuperate, to go through a healing process. The perspective changes from that first day, that first week, that first month. The mourner begins to see that there are magnificent mountains and blue skies and gorgeous flowers and lovely birds. You don't know the day you bury your mother. But a month later you do, two months later, you certainly do…There is a certain pattern to live and death in this world which seems to be inherent in creation.

f. On a *Yahrzeit* - Nessa Rappaport

To my astonishment, my father returns, sometimes daily, with a power that is revelatory. In the immediacy of grief, the idea that he would be "only a thought away" or "always with me" seemed a not believable comfort. Now, four years later, my sisters and I are amazed by his presence. We use his expressions; we laugh at his voice in our heads, for we can hear exactly what he would say.

g. The Year of *Kaddish* - Nessa Rappaport

Loss steals language; you have nothing to say.

A loving community buttresses you, feeding you, telling you when to stand and sit, thrusting into your slack hand the prayer book containing the chanted words that, until now, only other people knew by heart.

h. From a Father's Ethical Will - William Lewis Abramovitz

Say Kaddish *after* me but not *for* me. *Kaddish* is the unique Jewish link that binds the generations of Israel. The grave doesn't hear the *Kaddish*, but *the speaker does*, and the words will echo in your heart. The only immortality I seek is that my children and my children's children be good Jews, and thereby good people. God bless you and keep you.

-- Your father

i. *Yizkor*, We Recall

Some of us recall parents who gave us life, who cared for us and nurtured us and who taught us to take our first steps on our own.

Some of us remember a wife, husband, or partner—our friend and lover-with whom we shared so much of our lives, our failures and achievements, joys and sorrows, intimate secrets.

Some of us recall brothers and sisters, who matured together with us, sometimes competing with us, and sometimes encouraging us on, bound to us by a life-long relationship.

Some of us remember children, entrusted to us too briefly, to whom we gave our loving care and from whom we received a trust that enriched our lives. Their memory is always with us.

Many of us recall relatives who knew us, teachers who affected us, and beloved friends who walked beside us in life, guiding us, listening to us, supporting us.

Our lives are shaped by those who were alongside us as we walked on our path.

May our inheritance impel us to strive to live lives of holiness and service. May memories of love inspire us to love; may painful memories impel us to mitigate the pain others experience. And may we be granted the strength to affirm life's meaning, even in the face of death.