

The Comforts of Jewish Mourning Practices

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The ringing of my bedside telephone woke me before 4:00 in the morning on Sunday, April 26, 2015.

“Is this Van Lanckton, father of Sam Lanckton?”

“Yes. Who is this?”

“Mr. Lanckton, I am sorry to tell you: this is McLean Hospital calling. Your son Sam was found in his bed here unresponsive. We could not revive him. He is being transported now by ambulance to Mount Auburn Hospital in Cambridge. You should call Mount Auburn right away.”

So began any parent’s worst nightmare.

I called Mount Auburn immediately, even before telling Alice anything. She had already been up worrying about Sam and was in her study.

The emergency room physician at Mount Auburn confirmed that Sam had been taken there. She told me he is very sick and I should come to the hospital right away.

Quickly I informed Alice. We dressed. We got in our car. We drove to Mount Auburn, a trip that took ten minutes and an eternity.

At the hospital, the doctor kindly held our hands and said, “I’m very sorry to tell you that your son has passed away.”

The first stage of grief as I experienced it was shock. Just that. Shock. I knew with part of my brain in those first phone calls that Sam was probably already dead. But I managed to speak to Alice, get dressed, drive to the hospital, speak to the doctor, and go to the room where we saw Sam for the last time, lying dead on the gurney, where we said good-bye to him and gave him one last kiss.

After that I also managed to call our rabbi and drive home. We made it home without an accident only because I was in a kind of shock that allowed me to keep functioning.

The collapse came a little later, as the news that was impossible to believe became unavoidably and horrifyingly real. Our amazing rabbi, the Dean of my rabbinical school, Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, told me in that 5:00 a.m. phone call that she would be at our home by 7:00, and she was. When we sat together in our living room and started to tell her what happened, it was no longer possible to deny the awful truth: our son was dead.

Over the next days and weeks and, now, months, we have experienced the many ways in which Jewish practices and a supportive community combine to sustain us and hold us up.

For all the good reasons to feel angry and bereft and forlorn, I am now also grateful that the traditions of Judaism and the people we know supported us in our time of greatest need.

It began with Rabbi Anisfeld. Woken from sleep by my call at 5:00 a.m., her immediate and reassuring response was, "I'll be at your home at 7:00." And she was, and stayed with us through the morning.

She helped us figure out how to enlist the help of a rabbi who knows our other son so that the two rabbis could go to his home and tell him in person that his brother had died. She worked with us and with Rabbi Michelle Robinson of Temple Emanuel in Newton, the synagogue to which we belong, in order to contact Sharon Memorial Park and the Brezniak Rodman Funeral Home and to help make those impossible calls to arrange for graves for Sam and for both of us and to order the coffin and the police escort and all the other details of the funeral.

Sam died on April 26. Because of the circumstances the medical examiner had to conduct an autopsy to determine cause of death. It was not clear how long that would take. Our rabbis helped us to arrange for a shomer to be at the medical examiners office until he could be released to the funeral home, where there would be a shomer for him.

A shomer is a person who remains with the deceased so that he is not alone. One was provided for Sam at the medical examiner through the hevra kadisha, the Jewish burial society. It was comforting to know that Sam was not alone in that time.

On April 27 Rabbi Anisfeld returned to our home with Rabbi Robinson to talk to us about Sam and ask us about all his wonderful qualities. We cried as we spoke, as they sympathized with us while preparing for their eulogies. And at the funeral three days after Sam died, they painted beautiful, sad and yet funny word portraits of Sam so that everyone who attended his funeral had some idea of who he was and what the world had lost.

At the cemetery we participated with heavy hearts in the ceremony of adding earth to Sam's grave. That has to be one of the most difficult tasks for any parent or indeed for any family member who has lost a loved one. But it's also true that the act of adding earth to the grave also helped, because it drove home the reality of our loss. The finality of that act served as the first step in beginning however slowly to move beyond Sam's death to whatever will happen after that.

The seven days of shiva were days crowded with colleagues and friends and relatives coming to our home to offer condolences and sit with us, including many of you. Those days were difficult, but necessary.

So many people came to help us, bringing food and calling friends and answering the phone for us. Rabbi Wes Gardenswartz, the senior rabbi of Temple Emanuel, recommended that we limit shiva visiting hours to two hours in the afternoon and two hours in the evening. He told us we would be exhausted anyway, and all the more so if we tried in addition to have a morning visit and minyan time. Over those seven days we learned how right he was.

We discovered another benefit of shiva that we could not have predicted. A dear friend of ours had also experienced a recent loss. Her sister died. But her sister's family had not had any shiva for her. So our friend attended ours, and found comfort there for her own loss.

Another wonderful friend guided us through the ritual of returning to the synagogue for Shabbat. The tradition is that on the Friday evening during shiva the mourners attend the Kabbalat Shabbat service, but wait outside until the last verse of “L’cha Dodi.” They then enter and are greeted by the congregants who have turned to face the entrance. The congregants welcome the mourners with the traditional greeting, “Hamakom yinachem et’chem b’toch sha’ar avelei Tzion v’Yerushalayim” “May God comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.”

Our friend was particularly sympathetic to our loss; his own son, age 27, a rabbinical student, died six years ago after a fall at a wedding. Our friend invited us to his home where he regularly has a small minyan for Kabbalat Shabbat. We accepted. We waited with him in another room, then entered at the end of L’cha Dodi to be greeted by the small group, a comforting way to experience this ritual

At the end of shiva, on the seventh day, Rabbi Gardenswartz came to our home. He met with us, then accompanied us on a walk around the block. This practice of getting up from shiva marks the transition from the intense mourning of the shiva period to the 30-day period known as shloshim.

During shloshim we continued to stay away from work. Instead we started to respond to the flood of condolence cards and we had visits from closest friends.

The next stage of mourning was the conclusion of shloshim and the return to our normal routines as best we could follow them after our devastating loss. Alice returned to her job, which she loves, teaching Latin at Newton South High School. I resumed my schedule of being with you for Shabbat services.

The following week many of us came together to pay our last respects to Rabbi Milton Feierstein at his funeral in Canton. The day before that funeral I received a call from my friend and colleague Rabbi Karen Silberman. Many of you remember Rabbi Silberman from when she joined me here as successor to Rabbi James Kahn. You may also recall that Karen had two sons. One of them, Scott, died seven years ago while he was a college student and Karen was studying in rabbinical school.

When Karen called me on the day before Rabbi Feierstein’s funeral, she said that we were not going to go to the cemetery directly after the funeral. Instead, she would take Alice and me to lunch, and then we would go together to Sharon Memorial Park to visit Sam.

I started crying. I told Karen I was afraid to go there, his grave has no marker, I don’t know what it will look like, I’m afraid I won’t be able to find it. Karen said, “Van, don’t worry. I was at Sam’s funeral. I know where he is. He’s 50 feet from where Scott is.”

And so we went that day together with Karen to visit both Sam and Scott. And last month, in the month of Elul, the month when Jews traditionally visit the graves of their loved ones, Karen and Alice and I went to the cemetery again to visit Sam and Scott.

We don’t yet have a marker for Sam’s grave, but we will, so we will also have an unveiling. And in this new year of 5776, on the Seventh Day of the month of Iyyar, which will be May 15, 2016, and every year after that on the seventh of Iyyar, we will mark the Yahrzeit for Sam by reciting Kaddish, as we will during Yizkor services.

I leave you with three recommendations.

First, think in advance what you want for yourself, then tell the people close to you what that is, and ask them to do the same for you. When your time comes, or you are in a position to make decisions about a loved one, it's important that the person's wishes are known as far as possible.

Second, please consider carefully the choice of cremation or traditional burial. Jewish custom and law discourage or prohibit cremation. But even if the choice is cremation, please consider nevertheless having a burial ceremony and a grave that will have a permanent marker.

I know some people choose cremation and then a scattering of ashes at some location that has particular meaning. But in the years that follow, that approach will leave bereaved family and friends with no place to focus their remembrance. So please: include a burial in your plans.

Third, consider following all the Jewish customs of mourning:

- Engaging a shomer.
- Prompt funeral.
- Traditional burial.
- Shiva for all seven days, with daily minyan.
- Shloshim for 30 days.
- Visiting the cemetery during Elul.
- Reciting Kaddish for Yizkor and every Yahrzeit.
- Unveiling.

These Jewish practices have helped mourners over the centuries to bear with less pain the devastating loss of a loved one.

I hope that we all are far away from having to experience such a loss, but life is uncertain. Preparing for that loss is work we can do now. I recommend it.

May 5776 be a year of continued healing for all who have suffered a loss, and a year in which we all cherish the relationships we now enjoy.

For this let us say, Amen.