

Lessons of a Bereaved Parent

Temple B'nai Shalom

Braintree, Massachusetts

Rabbi Van Lanckton

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My dear friends,

Alice and I thank you most warmly and sincerely for your kindnesses and concern. Rabbi Feierstein said in his condolence call that we have suffered a grievous loss. How right he is.

Every death is a loss. I do not mean to compare our grief at the death of our dear son Sam to anyone else's grief. I have sat with many of you in times of great sadness.

We are discovering that you may experience your love for someone close to you even more intensely after the one you loved has died. That has been our experience.

Your expressions of condolence, and those of many others close to us, have been of immeasurable comfort. And the many people who kindly visited us during shiva, which included many of you, helped us through those days of greatest pain.

We learned three lessons so far in this experience.

First, we must all treasure our relationships with others. Stay connected with everyone we care about, particularly when they need company. We have seen in this last month too many people who were doubly devastated by Sam's death; first, because he was gone, and second, because they had failed to stay in touch with him when he was alive.

Sam suffered for two decades from a disease of the brain called bipolar disorder. This terrible disease can last a lifetime after its onset. In Sam's case, it did; he was only forty years old when he died.

We still do not know for certain the cause of his death. It was not a suicide. Sam was an inpatient in a mental hospital when he died in the early hours of Sunday morning, April 26. The cause of death has not been determined. He may have died from sleep apnea, possibly because the hospital personnel failed to check on him with sufficient frequency that night.

A person with bipolar disorder can have years without the symptoms of mania and depression that are so devastating when they appear. Fortunately, Sam did have some such years, times when he was truly happy and productive. But Sam, like others with bipolar disorder, had periods of mania followed by periods of depression. Sam suffered from depression in the final years of his life.

It is difficult to be with a person who is clinically depressed. They will find it hard to see visitors. They may be silent. They may push you away.

Sam could count on Alice and me to be with him always, in good times and in bad. He also had one friend, John, who stuck with him. John would call regularly and suggest that he and Sam go out for a meal or a movie. The two of them even collaborated on a show for the local Newton cable station, a movie review with multiple episodes that ended up winning an award from the station for the best series of the year.

But, sadly, John was the only friend who did this. We were with Sam every single day, and saw that none of Sam's other friends made themselves part of his life in these last years. Only after he died did they come and tell us how much they loved and missed him.

Love is not a mere verbal expression. Love is action.

So our first lesson from our experience is this: visit and enjoy life with people you care about. Spend time with your friends and relatives, whether they are healthy or mentally or physically ill. If you don't, you will experience deep regret when you no longer have the chance to be with them.

If you do make them part of your life, you will provide cheer and comfort and joy, even if the person you are visiting may have a limited ability to show appreciation.

Our second lesson relates to the behavior of visitors during shiva that we found most comforting. This I can explain in one word: silence.

Shiva visitors want to comfort the mourners. The visitors aren't sure what to say. One visitor provided the best answer to that question. He told us, "I have learned that, if you cannot say something to improve upon silence, then remain silent."

An excellent book about Jewish mourning practices gives this advice with a bit more context. The book is this book: [A Time To Mourn, A Time To Comfort: A Guide To Jewish Bereavement](#) by Dr. Ron Wolfson. Here is the advice from Dr. Wolfson that summarizes well the best comfort we received from our visitors:

Perhaps the single most difficult challenge in comforting a mourner is in the initial moment of greeting: What do I say? What can you say that will offer the bereaved some consolation, some measure of comfort? In a way, it is a definition of chutzpah to think that anything anyone can say or do will comfort someone in the throes of grief. You are filled with sincere feelings, but the words seem so inadequate, even petty. So, often, you say nothing.

Ironically, silence is the most powerful language of all. It is perhaps the very best place to begin a conversation with a mourner. A warm embrace, a kiss, an arm around the shoulder, an empathetic look, the sharing of tears together – these are the nonverbal messages to the bereaved that often say more than a thousand words. And, the underlying message sent by these gestures – undoubtedly the most important act of comforting – is the wordless proclamation, "I am here for you."

Being there. Being present. Listening – not speaking. Accepting – not rationalizing. Allowing the mourner to do the important grief work – not

repressing emotions. When asked to name the most helpful thing comforters can do during bereavement, “just being there” is the number one answer reported by mourners.

Two of our cousins, Joanne and Susan, put this advice more memorably. They had observed in the first couple of evenings that there were many visitors, and some of them talked with each other at length about topics other than Sam, sometimes at a surprisingly high volume. Joanne and Susan concluded that, as they said to us, “We think it’s time to put the shoosh back in shiva.”

Our third lesson is that grief is exhausting. It’s exhausting to return to work. It’s exhausting to contemplate making dinner at the end of the day when you’ve come home from work. You need a sleeping pill to get through the night, and still you lose one or two or more hours of sleep compared to your usual pattern, and you start your day already exhausted. It’s even exhausting to remember details of the life of your departed loved one, or to write a sermon about mourning.

Given the reality of that exhaustion, the mourners need to continue to hear from their long-time close friends and relatives who offer to bring food, or who just drop in, or who invite the mourners for Shabbos dinner. In these and other ways these friends and relatives help to remove the burdens of daily living after a loss.

I believe everyone experiences a loss in his or her own way. We each may draw our own lessons from these terrible experiences. For us, it was valuable to learn these three lessons: treasure your relationships while you can; say little in a shiva house; and know that the mourners will need help long after shiva is over, because grief is exhausting.

[I concluded the service as follows]

Please rise. Ribono shel Olam: You have been our refuge in every generation. Before the mountains came into being, before You brought forth the earth and the world, from eternity to eternity, You are God. You return man to dust; You decreed, “Return, you mortals.” For in Your sight a thousand years are like a watch of the night. You engulf men in sleep; at daybreak they are like the grass that renews itself; at daybreak it flourishes anew; by dusk it withers and dries up. We spend our years like a sigh. The best of our years pass by speedily and they fly away.

Help us, O Lord, to number our days that we may get us a heart of wisdom.

For this let us say, amen.

Shabbat shalom.