

My Father's Tallit: Yizkor Shemini Atzeret 5783

I've recently begun shopping for a new tallit. Normally this wouldn't be such a significant event, certainly not one worthy of beginning a sermon with, except for the fact this new tallit will eventually replace the old one – that of my father, *zichrono livracha*, whose prayer shawl I've been wearing for the past almost 11 years since he passed. When my Dad died, we gave my brother his jewelry – the gold wedding band, the college class ring, the mezuzah necklace he always wore discretely tucked underneath his shirt – as I couldn't quite see myself wearing any of these things which were too large and too masculine and not really my style. My Dad's tallit, on the other hand, went straight to me. Wrapping myself in his memory has been one of the sweetest parts of my Shabbat morning routine for over a decade.

There is such wisdom in Jewish tradition which provides us with detailed and specific rituals to mark some of the most painful milestones and transition points of mourning. Our homes are filled with friends and relatives during the devastating first week of shiva. We feel the strength of community during the thirty days of *sheloshim* where reciting Kaddish gives us designated time and space to experience the full weight of our grief. Returning to the cemetery for an unveiling allows us to acknowledge the passing of a full 12 months, sitting with the strange reality of an entire year gone by without our loved one in it. Arriving at *yahrtzeit* again each season allows us to reflect on how much they have missed, even as we've improbably found ourselves able to move forward without them beside us.

For all of these more formal moments of mourning, however, there are so many others that don't necessarily have a prayer or ritual or ceremony to accompany them but which often feel painful and

bittersweet all the same. There are the milestone events, of course – the weddings, the graduations, the new jobs and new babies – that our loved ones are not there to experience. There are the birthdays and anniversaries and *yahrtzeits* by secular calendar, those dates so suffused with a person's presence that their absence leaves a gaping hole. There are moments that represent moving forward as, for example, when a widow finds a new partner and perhaps remarries, often eliciting complicated feelings even as we know that ultimately our spouse would only wish for us to be happy. There are moments that remind us of where our loved one should otherwise be, as when we see our late child's friends go off to prom or begin college or start creating families of their own.

And then there are the new tallit events, smaller and quieter ones that often creep up on us without warning. When I first started noticing the small holes in my Dad's tallit, the yellowing of the *atara* and the fraying of some of the stitching, I couldn't quite believe it – how could it be that my Dad had been gone so long that even his tallit was no longer holding up? And then, as I realized that in order to preserve this precious garment for the long term I would soon have to transition to something new, I felt a sense of loss – not dissimilar from the loss that I felt at the end of my Kaddish period, or when I got rid of my old Toyota Corolla, the last car that my Dad ever helped me to buy, or when we sold *his* old car, a gorgeous hunter-green Jaguar that was one of his few indulgences and most prized possession. I know that cars and *tallitot* don't carry the essence of a person, nor do the sacred words of Kaddish have any magical power to release memory but somehow there are certain objects and rituals and times that help us feel connected to our loved ones all the same. Which makes it painful when these gifts are suddenly taken away from us.

Perhaps it is for this reason that the Yizkor service was created, the rabbis, in their great wisdom, knowing that we all need some help, every so often, to feel the closeness of those no longer here,

especially as there are so many small things that carry them just a bit further away from us as time marches on. We move out of the houses we once lived in together. We reluctantly give away their old clothes. Our worlds expand to incorporate new people who never had the privilege of meeting them in the first place. Our memories start to fade and there are small details we can no longer recall. While the most central parts of our loved ones, and certainly the strength of our relationship to them, will never diminish, there are so many little losses that we continue to experience years and even decades after they died. Yizkor is a time to gather our memories back together and feel the sacred gift of connection transcending distance.

There are so many things that I have loved about wearing my Dad's tallit. At the beginning, right after he died, it still smelled like him – a mix of his shampoo and cologne and signature scent which has now, unfortunately, been replaced by my own. I can still see him wearing the tallit, sitting in the pews or standing on the bimah at our family's synagogue, Temple Emunah, where he often served as Torah reader and *shaliach tzibbur* with his sweet, gentle voice and excellent Hebrew learned at Camp Ramah in the Poconos. Most importantly, when I wrap the tallit around myself I feel almost as if I'm being embraced by my Dad, practically hearing him say "Who am I going to hug next week?" as he did every time I'd see him, returning home from college or JTS or my first job in Princeton for just a short while before setting back out again on my own. The tallit returns my Dad to me for just a short while each week.

And so, it will be sad when I finally pick a new tallit and it eventually arrives, ushering in a brave new era in my life as a fatherless daughter. I think I will choose in the future to wear my Dad's tallit on Yizkor days and on his *yahrzeit* and on other special days in the life of our family – his birthday on March 9, my parents' anniversary on January 6, January 2 which is the day on the secular calendar when he died. In

certain ways, this new tradition gives me something “extra” to do on all those days that feel like they *should* have a Jewish prayer or ritual or ceremony to accompany them. This will be my new custom, my way of remembering my Dad.

Y’hi zichram baruch – May the memories of all of our loved ones be for a blessing, as we draw them close to us at this sacred hour of Yizkor.

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