

Excessive Mourning: Yizkor 5786

I guess it's fairly unusual for a sermon to have a prequel, but this one actually started back almost three years ago, Shemini Atzeret 5783, when I talked about beginning to shop for a new tallit to replace the one that I had been wearing, still am wearing in fact, since the death of my father, *zichrono livracha*, in January of 2012. For those of you who weren't here that morning, I explained that when my Dad died we gave his jewelry to my brother – the gold wedding band, the college class ring, the mezuzah necklace he always wore discretely tucked underneath his shirt – as I couldn't see myself wearing any of these items which were too large and too masculine and not really my style. My Dad's tallit, on the other hand, went straight to me and wrapping myself in his memory has been one of the sweetest parts of my Shabbat morning routine for the past 13.5 years. But despite dry-cleaning and deodorizing and limiting washing in order to preserve the old fabric, this well-worn garment has started to yellow and fray and probably should be retired at this point, only to be used on special occasions. Three years ago now, I announced that it was finally time to buy a new tallit!

You may remember that I tend to have a hard time letting go of items imbued with the memory of my Dad – it took a similar 13 years for me to finally get rid of the old Corolla he had bought me upon graduating from rabbinical school, a trusty and reliable vehicle that ultimately outlasted my father himself. And, to be fair, the last three years have been pretty busy with less time for shopping than I might have expected. Do you even know how many hundreds of beautiful tallitot exist out there on the market these days? It's more than enough to spin the head of a picky and indecisive rabbi whose sartorial choices are constantly on display for all to see! More seriously, however, it was only when I decided to commission a new tallit and when the artist, our own Heather Stoltz, suggested a particular idea for its design, that I felt my heart starting to shift from reluctance and resistance to something closer to peace. How very hard it is to move forward after losing someone that you love.

אל יתקנַשְׁה אֶקְמָעַל מִתּוֹ יוֹתֵר מִזְאֵי, the great Rabbi-Philosopher Moses Maimonides wrote, which I'll translate as "A person should not become excessively broken-hearted over a death" (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Mourning, 13:11). But at what point does heartbreak become excessive rather than simply idiosyncratic? A friend of my mother's visited the grave of her late husband every single day after his passing for months on end, only stopping once she was no longer able to drive. Many of us who have experienced loss will say that not a day goes by without us thinking about our loved one – even 10, 20, 50 years after they have passed. Broken-heartedness, it seems to me, is a natural part of the mourning process that can endure for years, and sometimes even decades, after a person has died. What does it mean to mourn "too much" and what, exactly, was Maimonides worried about in forbidding such behavior?

In the Babylonian Talmud Moed Katan 27b, the rabbis - in their characteristic way - seek to quantify this idea of excessive mourning. Drawing upon Jeremiah 22:10 which reads *אַל תְּבֹכֵן לְמַת וְאַל תִּמְנֹדֶן לוֹ*, “Weep not for the dead, neither bemoan them” - the rabbis decide that this verse can’t possibly refer to normal grief, which would of course be appropriate and permissible, but rather must indicate immoderate lament which they define as going beyond the fixed times that are set by tradition: 3 days for acute weeping, 7 days for what we would call shiva, 30 days for the kinds of grooming and social restrictions associated with sheloshim (unless mourning a parent in which case these extend to a full year). I’m sometimes asked by members of our community if they can continue reciting Kaddish even after their period of mourning has officially ended, and the rabbis of the Talmud would say “no” - as tempting as it can be to stay in the cocoon of comfort that Jewish mourning practices so wisely provide, tradition just as wisely insists that we push ourselves to re-enter life again on a set schedule, even if we don’t quite yet feel ready. For indeed, who ever really feels ready after losing a loved one?

Along with this *halakha* (law) about mourning, however, the rabbis of Moed Kattan also share some *aggadah* (narrative), recounting the story of a neighbor of Rav Huna’s, a mother of seven sons, who wept excessively when one of them passed. Rav Huna advised her not to act in such a way but she paid him no heed. He then warned that if she did not listen to him, she would soon find herself preparing for yet another burial. Unable to control her grief, the mother persisted in her immoderate lament and soon after, all her remaining sons died. Rav Huna again counseled his neighbor to curtail her mourning lest her own death occur. Powerless to do so, the bereaved woman soon passed away as well.

What a devastating story this is! I imagine there’s not one amongst us who doesn’t have profound sympathy for this poor mother, who can’t understand her inability to move forward after losing a child, the most terrible of all things. And yet, perhaps, there is a lesson here, not necessarily the harsher one that Rav Huna seems to convey, but rather a quieter one that many of us will recognize as true: losing ourselves too deeply in grief imperils our relationships with others and ultimately deprives us of truly living. Rav Huna’s message, I would suggest, is not about composure and restraint, and certainly not about reigning in maternal love, it’s about pushing through the unimaginable pain of grief in order to care for the living and to give ourselves the blessing of life. It is, indeed, hard to move forward after loss. Yet move forward we must, for ourselves and for our loved ones.

So how is it that I was finally able to break through my tallit paralysis (even if, admittedly, the project isn’t quite yet complete)? When I spoke with Heather she had a gorgeous idea - to repurpose pieces of my father’s old clothing as fabric for the design of a new prayer shawl. I’d briefly thought about using sections of my Dad’s old tallis in creating a new one but rather liked the idea of keeping it whole and available to wear on special occasions - like my father’s birthday or yahrtzeit or my parents’ anniversary. And while my Dad’s tallit holds enormous sentimental value for me, its actual colors and look are not anything I really would have chosen for myself - too plain and masculine and not really my taste, just like the jewelry I ceded to my brother all those years ago. Using my Dad’s clothing, however, immediately appealed - that

same sense of memory and connection and being literally wrapped in his presence - but this time with a bit of color and style too. Being a bit of a fashionista himself, I think my Dad would have approved!

What is excessive mourning? Is it holding onto a ratty tallit? Visiting a gravesite daily? Refusing to get rid of a loved one's clothing or shoes or other possessions? Is it crying too much or too often? Is it feeling very, very sad months and sometimes even years after a loss occurred? These are some of the questions I hear from members of our community, questions I've sometimes asked myself throughout my own grief journey. Mourning, like most things in life, is personal and subjective and highly idiosyncratic, and it depends not only on one's emotional/psychological makeup but on so many other things, too, from the timeliness and circumstances of the death to the depth and complexity of the relationship contained therein. It is hard to move forward after losing someone that we love, sometimes exceedingly so.

What I take from the story of Rav Huna, however, is that mourning should not be measured so much in terms of what a person *does*, no matter how seemingly odd or overwrought it may appear to others, but rather in terms of what it *prevents* a person from doing. Mourners should feel what we need to feel and engage in the sometimes strange behaviors that we need to engage in - but never at the expense of continuing to connect with others and living full and vibrant lives despite it all. *אל יתקנשָׁה אֲקָם עַל מַתּוֹ יָוָתָר מַזְאִי* - "A person should not become excessively broken-hearted over a death." It is when we refrain from truly living, I would argue, that our grief has become "too much."

The holiday of Yom Kippur, too, is a strange and counter-intuitive reminder of how we must embrace life, even in the face of death. The death confronted here is less that of others and more personally, excruciatingly, our own eventual passing as we dress in white kittels which represent burial shrouds, recite the words of the *Viddui* which remind us of the confessional we will one day say upon our death beds, and refrain from life-sustaining food and drink. The words of our liturgy, too, most hauntingly the *Un'taneh Tokef* with its searing "Who will live and who will die?" place our mortality on full display while Martyrology reminds us how individuals sometimes meet untimely death for the mere sin of being Jewish and *Avodah* seeks to capture the sense of vulnerability and powerlessness that the community felt in waiting for the Cohen Gadol to return safely from atoning for *b'nai Yisrael*'s sins.

These words from our liturgy, I believe, are not meant to frighten and overwhelm us, although they can often have that effect. It is scary to live in the face of so much potential threat and harm, humbling to acknowledge human frailty and impermanence. These words, however, are rather meant to inspire us to live our best lives, understanding that our time on this earth is limited and so there's not a second to waste. A person should not become excessively

broken-hearted over a death, and that includes our own death as well. Instead, we should use knowledge of our eventual passing to spur us towards living deeply, purposefully, joyfully, and well in whatever time we have left.

And so I return to my new tallit, one which I look forward to inaugurating sometime later this year, ushering in a fresh season of remembering my father. In a strange postscript, my Mom had actually given away most of my Dad's clothing by the time I approached her with this idea and sheepishly suggested that mostly what we have left are ties and socks - not exactly what I had imagined, I'll admit, but abundant and colorful nonetheless, with the added bonus of leading to a sweet story with which I'll close this morning.

My father was a meticulous and dapper dresser - fine suits, beautiful dress shirts, pristine leather loafers - but for some reason he hated wearing socks. He hated wearing socks so much, in fact, that he often just didn't - even when otherwise dressed to the nines - it was sort of a signature quirk of his, something that people noticed and teased him about, this tall, handsome man clad in Brooks Brothers and Cole Hann with bare feet underneath.

Yes, my Dad would very often wear dress shoes without socks, including to synagogue, but he was also a person who believed deeply in the sanctity of Jewish tradition and would never allow himself to do anything as sacreligious as to go onto the bimah sockless. So what to do if offered an aliyah or other honor spontaneously, the day of, without having been asked in advance? For just this occasion, my father carried a pair of socks in his tallis bag, there to pull on in a pinch if ever needed.

It seems somehow fitting that these socks will now grace my new tallit, a reminder of my Dad's unique charm and personality, respect for Jewish tradition, enthusiasm for participating in Jewish community, and - of course- immense love for our family who would sit beside him in shul, playfully giving him a hard time each Shabbat. Are cut up old socks on a tallit excessive mourning? They're certainly unusual! But I ultimately think that they help me to move forward, even while bearing the great loss that they represent.

Y'hi zichram baruch - May those that we remember this day be for a blessing, pushing us to lead lives of joy, meaning, and purpose, and intention. We now rise for the Yizkor service on page _____.