

Lilith

INDEPENDENT, JEWISH & FRANKLY FEMINIST

by Elizabeth Reis

What Do Jews Do? Reflections on the Strangeness of Death

When it was clear that my father was about to die (we were going to remove life support after he suffered a major heart attack), my mother called her rabbi to tell him that death was near. She wanted the rabbi to have enough time to schedule the funeral, which in Judaism typically occurs as soon as all the relatives are able to arrive.

The rabbi already knew that my father was seriously ill and probably would not recover or even emerge from a coma. He told us that it is customary to recite one of the psalms just before a person dies. And so my mother, brother, and I went out into the hall at a New York City hospital to say the prayer together. It was no doubt the strangest of the many unfamiliar moments we would experience over the next few weeks.

We are not a particularly religious family. None of us knew the prayers that the rabbi was referring to. We had to Google it. There are several choices of psalms for the final moments, and we just picked one. Luckily it was transliterated next to the Hebrew, as none of us can read Hebrew very well either. We didn't want to mess this up, as if saying this prayer all together, in the right fashion, would somehow facilitate my father's passage to whatever happens next. We were glad to have something concrete to do.

Like many other people today, we had never witnessed death or been so close to the center of it. I hadn't read up on what the experience would be like, as I had for a happier life event at the other end of the spectrum: the birth of my first child. So we had very little idea about what Jews do in these circumstances. Recite a particular psalm? OK, that sounds fine.

We left the room because we didn't want my father to know what we were up to. We didn't know if he knew he was dying. Do people in comas know what's going on around them? Just in case, we thought that he'd be better off not seeing or hearing us reciting these Hebrew words, even though he would have been just as clueless about the psalm's traditional purpose. Still, if he knew that WE knew death was near, he'd feel bad that we were sad. He would have wanted to protect us, especially my mother, from that. So we drew the curtain closed, stepped out into the hall, and tried to keep our voices down.

The nurses hurriedly cleared away from the nurses' station, located right across the hall from my father's room in the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit, when they figured out what we were doing. They'd probably seen this kind of thing hundreds of times, but we were self-conscious and awkward about our activity nonetheless. We must have seemed super observant, carrying out a mandatory Jewish ritual, when really we were flailing, and Googling, and trying not to laugh at how my father would also have been amused by what we were doing, before he realized its meaning.

But it felt good to have something to do, to have a plan for how death was supposed to proceed.

I came to appreciate the rules for death that Judaism prescribes, especially over the next few days.

My father passed away the next morning. Then came the next strange moment: when we left the hospital without him. The funeral home had been called; "arrangements" had been made. The funeral was going to be in Connecticut, and so someone from a funeral home in New York was going to drive him to the state border, where a hand-off was made with the funeral home there. Apparently there are rules about taking bodies across state lines. It seemed so weird to just leave him, dead, unattended, in a hospital room and to trust that everything would be taken care of. Once he got to the funeral home, he would be "watched" until the burial, as Jewish tradition dictates, but what about in this in-between time? What if he wasn't really dead and he miraculously roused, only to be unheard and unnoticed? He had already been pronounced dead by a physician, and so I knew this fantasy was unlikely, but still, the thought crossed my mind. As did stories in the news about funeral homes burying or cremating the wrong body! Should we have waited

there? Would the hospital staff have let us wait there? It seemed strange to sit there with a dead person, but also weird to leave him. “Good-bye, Daddy,” I said aloud as we walked out of the hospital for the last time.

According to Jewish tradition, the funeral was held shortly thereafter, allowing for just enough time for close family to arrive from far away. And after that, the week-long *shiva*, the traditional period of mourning. Though my family wasn’t observant, my mother has many close Modern-Orthodox friends, and so it was a given that the shiva would last the entire week and that every night many people would come to pay their respects. I hadn’t expected the shiva to be so comforting, especially for me because I barely knew my mother’s friends (I lived in Oregon; she lives in Connecticut). And yet it was just that, largely due to the conventions of shiva sitting. Unlike any other time when you have guests visit, during a shiva call, the hosts (the chief mourners) aren’t expected to entertain the guests. People arrived, greeted us, and sat with us silently, speaking only if and when we initiated a conversation.

In the beginning of the week this reversal of the usual guest-host interaction seemed peculiar to me, but I got used to it as the days went by. No one was trying to draw us out, and if we didn’t feel like talking, that was perfectly all right. Sitting shiva gave us a structure to handle our grief, as it is designed to do. Every day for seven days we talked about my father, or not. People visited, they brought us food, and they listened when a story came to mind that we wanted to share. And at a certain point, everyone took a prayer book, and the rabbi led a brief service.

Though I appreciated the ritual that Judaism offered after my father’s death, this story doesn’t end with me becoming more religious or newly acquiring a deep faith in the divine. In fact, moving to New York from Oregon last summer has meant that I no longer go to synagogue at all. In Oregon we had friends who went to services every Friday night, ever since the death of their daughter a year and a half ago. During that first year we typically joined them, along with our circle of friends, to support them in their grief. After we moved to New York to be closer to my mother, I hadn’t felt the urgency to join a synagogue. My kids are grown, and so there’s no longer a need to set a good example or worry about religious school. And there are so many Jews in New York! I can feel a sense of Yiddishkeit everywhere I go, from the gym to the supermarket.

And yet I feel an urge to join a synagogue, if for no other reason than to sustain an institution whose members will know how to support me and one another when we might need it most.

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