

Grieving during a Pandemic

Yizkor 5781

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Everybody grieves differently. There's no "right" or "wrong" way. Some people are most comforted by *doing*—by making arrangements, by filling the grave, or by an act of *zedakah*, charitable giving that would have been meaningful to the person we are mourning. Others, by contrast, find solace in silence. In tears. In soft music or quiet words of remembrance. Some find comfort in throngs of extended family and friends, a large community assembled in support of a grieving family. Solace for others comes in private, alone or surrounded only by intimates.

During this global pandemic, then, some people are able to grieve exactly as they would choose. Others, by contrast, are robbed of the hugs and hubbub that would be meaningful to them at their time of loss. They grieve not only their departed loved one, but also the inability to mourn as we are accustomed.

Jewish death and mourning rituals emphasize honesty, a quality that is helpful to every kind of mourner, particularly at this most challenging time.

When a person dies, our first obligation is *k'vod ha-met*, honoring the dead. The body of the deceased is treated with respect as the vessel of the holy soul it housed. Our tradition urges us to regard death as natural, not to prepare the dead to look as though living, merely asleep. Watching the coffin descend into the grave is not easy, and neither is hearing the thud of the earth on the casket. It is, however, **real**. Honest. Our tradition aims to combat denial, which is a natural stage of grief.

When a person dies during this pandemic, whatever the cause of death, we do well to acknowledge the truth: We will not be able to grieve as we would in "normal" times. We may not be permitted at our loved one's side as death approaches. Even immediate family may not be able to gather. In order to prevent additional deaths and added sorrow, friends and extended family cannot surround us in person. Enforced mask-wearing at the graveside, however necessary, may distract our focus. The mourners may partake of a meal of consolation after the service, but they will do so alone.

We do well to acknowledge the added loss. We are aggrieved by the inability to engage in our accustomed patterns of grieving.

The second *mitzvah*, our Jewish obligation, after a death is *nichum aveilim*, comforting mourners. When the grieving family is out of town, we know how to reach out by telephone, with a handwritten note, or with a sympathy card. Up close and local, though, we offer hugs. We gather in tight at a *shiva minyan*. We bring

and share food together with our memories and warm words about the person who has died. So much of that is impossible now.

All the same, comfort remains available, even at this most difficult time.

Six weeks ago, I attended the out-of-state funeral of a person who meant a great deal to me and many others. The funeral was held in an enormous sanctuary, but only the children and grandchildren were in the room with the officiating rabbis and cantors. On the livestream, I could not see the names or faces of others attending, but only the number in attendance, which exceeded even the capacity of that gigantic sacred space.

I admired the family and the clergy. They were honest about the reality of the empty room, but also about the comfort available from knowing that a tremendous community was with them from a distance. They fully discharged the *mitzvah* of honoring their father and mentor, with moving eulogies from the rabbi, all three daughters, and a grandson. And then, in private, they proceeded to the graveside.

The officiating rabbi had last seen the deceased only weeks earlier. The older man, aware that his health was failing, had said, “If I were to die now, I would be sad; but I would not feel cheated.” I suspect that his family—and indeed, all in attendance via livestream—would say the same about the funeral from the almost-empty Sanctuary: We felt sad to be unable to hug one another, but we did not feel cheated.

Experiencing these High Holy Days, streamed from this almost-empty sacred space, we may honestly acknowledge our sadness not to be together, but we need not feel cheated. Even at this hour of *Yizkor*, when the presence of friends and community would be especially comforting, we know that we are not alone: Scores of others are watching and weeping with us. None of us is alone, and our departed loved ones are not alone, for God is with every human soul, uniting us when we are parted, in life as in death.

Let us be honest about death, and let us be frank about the losses of this pandemic. We have good reason to be sad, but I pray that none of us feels cheated.

Amen.