

Ellie's mother, Julia Helfman, was determined to reach her 95th birthday, and she did!

Always a demon of determination, she made grown-up kind of decisions before she was one, chose some of the paths of her life, and adapted to those that were not necessarily her first choice.

She had some pithy epithets. The one I remember best is: If you'd go to the funeral, go to the wedding. In other words, if you care about someone so much that you would do what you can to be at the funeral or shiva **for** that person, do more to celebrate a simcha **with** that person.

What Julia, Momma, modeled more than anything in her last several years was how to die with dignity. She was blessed with a mind that was intact to the end. And even when just about any movement caused her pain, she insisted upon a dignified presentation in dress and appearance.

At Yizkor, we offer a memorial prayer in a communal service, and on a *yahrzeit* we annually mark the date of death> These are among our most observed customs.

When did we start memorializing the dead?

Rabbi Linda Hirschhorn cites her colleague Dr. Simcha Raphael for research on this question:

According to Dr. Raphael, some form of liturgical practice of memorializing the dead dates back to the Rhineland at the end of the 11th century (c. 1096 CE) following the First Crusade, when thousands of Jews were slaughtered and no one was left to mourn them. Over the next two centuries, Jewish communities in Germany began to include in these prayers the names of benefactors and community leaders who had died. Then, at the time of the Black Death in 1348, 6,000 Jews were slaughtered throughout Europe when they were accused of poisoning the wells, and

more prayers were written honoring those who died.

Soon every family wanted to mention by name even their deceased relatives who were neither martyrs nor benefactors. Thus emerged the liturgy which became the paradigm of our present-day service.

The pieces of Yizkor — public recitations, private meditations — developed over time. For each of us, the central part of a yizkor service may be different:

eil malei rachamim

The traditional memorial prayer, *eil malei rachamim*, beseeches Adonai our God to shelter the soul of our loved one under the Divine's figurative wings. What a beautiful metaphor!

We could ask, Why? From what could a soul need "shelter"? Is the afterlife turbulent or unsettling (God forbid!)?

Our tradition has it that the soul is eternal, and allows that souls may keep an eye on (so to speak) what happens among us mortals. If that's our supposition going into the *eil malei rachamim*, perhaps we are asking Adonai to calm their soulful anxiety aroused by troubles in the lives of their loved ones. That soul may be manifest in a sweet image: Our loved ones worrying about us, maybe looking for ways to intervene — through a dream, an inexplicable occurrence, a familiar mannerism manifest in a child two generations later...

Mourner's kaddish, *kaddish yatom*:

If we translate from the English back to the Hebrew, the title of this prayer should be *kaddish avvel*. The Hebrew, *kaddish yatom*, is "the orphan's kaddish." Perhaps it is so named in the expectation, the hope that one would be reciting this prayer in memory of parents, not for one's children; the natural order of things, as it should be.

In matters of life and death, there may not be a “should be,” maybe a “could be,” since we have no control over the timing or order of dying.

A curiosity of *kaddish yatom* is that throughout the prayer, we praise and uplift God’s name ... **without using God’s name!** As I have suggested at many funerals, this intentional omission may remind us that we cannot know exactly when life begins, nor can we predict when death will overtake us. Similarly, we can get only **so close** to knowing Adonai our God.

The Yizkor formula

Yizkor Elohim et nishmat... May God remember the soul of our loved one... and, as we’re able, we insert the deceased’s first name and his/her parents’ first names, in Hebrew or Yiddish, if we know them; If we don’t, English names are appropriate.

As it should be when one atones for wrongdoing by “**rightdoing**” something, the yizkor formula includes our pledge that **we will do something** as a memorial. The standard wording is to pledge “*tzedaka*,” literally justice, though most often associated with charity.

Our machzor teaches that “offering charitable gifts and performing acts of justice, love and care in memory of those who have died provide us with ways of honoring their memory... and influence.”

Another phrase in the Yizkor prayer of remembrance mirrors a text that is commonly used on grave stones: *TNTsBH: May their souls be bound up in the bond of life*. It is really up to us to bind their souls to ours through action and by telling their stories and sharing their wisdom.

Psalm 23

The rich text of Psalm 23, “Adonai is my shepherd...” has become associated with mourning rituals. As Rabbi Harold Kushner taught, the Psalm “acknowledges the emotional darkness” that enfolds us when a loved one

is dying or has died, when we find ourselves in “the valley of the shadow of death.”

Note that it is not “the valley of death.” Perhaps this reflects the psalmist’s view that the darkness, the sorrow, will pass, as does a shadow.

“Most of all,” continues Kushner, if we feel alone and adrift in a friendless world, [the Psalmist] offers us the priceless reassurance that “You [God] are with me.”

Even though the funeral process focuses on the dead, I feel that the sages, time, developed our memorial rites — from *tahara*, ritual washing of the dead body, to covering the lowered casket with earth, from washing hands between the cemetery and the next gathering place to the community’s support of the bereaved — for us, the living.

Our tradition includes an expectation that the soul lingers, hovers, hangs around, for a few days after burial. One practical — and wise — teaching from that belief is to refrain from saying anything negative about the deceased at graveside or in the shiva house, lest it discomfit the deceased’s soul.

The rabbinic framework of support from death through burial into shiva and beyond is, in my view, a work of genius. For the mourners, it supplies structure in a time of grief, it frees them to focus on their needs, it galvanizes community to hold their hands and, of course, to feed them — not those who come to console them — and gives the mourners time to adjust to their new normal.

When Julia Helfman decided that she’d had enough (even though it was weeks before her 95th birthday), she railed against the governing bodies of Pennsylvania for not allowing medically-assisted dying. Then she’d take a breath and fill out the food service menu for the next day’s lunch. Wishful thinking on one hand, practicality on the other.

She was among the luckier ones, having lived and died essentially on her own terms. She breathed her last on her 95th birthday.

Rabbi Richard Hirsch writes:

Judaism celebrates life as a blessing and a gift, and occasions of loss can make us aware — as perhaps no other occasion can — of the need to cherish each moment of life that we are given.

He continues: Whenever parting comes, it comes too soon, and we do not want to have to say goodbye. And may we so lead our lives that when the time comes for others to memorialize us, they will do so with affection, respect and love.

I came across this poem some months back. I find it lyrical, realistic and moving; I have taken to sharing it at some funerals.

When Will I Be Myself Again
by Rabbi Lewis John Eron

To Alyssa, Whose Mother's Funeral Was Yesterday

“When will I be myself again?”
Some Tuesday, perhaps,
In the late afternoon,
Sitting quietly with a cup of tea
And a cookie;
Or Wednesday, same time or later,
You will stir from a nap and see her;
You will pick up the phone to call her;
You will hear her voice — unexpected advice —
And maybe argue.
And you will not be frightened,
And you will not be sad,
And you will not be alone,
Not alone at all,
And your tears will warm you.
But not today,
And not tomorrow,
And not tomorrow's tomorrow,
But some day,
Some Tuesday, late in the afternoon,
Sitting quietly with a cup of tea
And a cookie
And you will be yourself again.

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