

Cantor's Message
Yom Kippur 2009 / Yizkor
By Cantor Deborah Bletstein

The Psalm for the Season of Repentance reads:

Ki Avi v'Imi azavuni, vA-do-nai ya'asfeini
Though my father and my mother leave me, A-do-nai will care for me.

I can't believe it's been over a year since I lost my mother. Time surely does not stand still. There are so many times this past year, when I would pass by a picture of my mother and stare at it for a while—dazed and confused—never fully registering that she's gone. Before Rosh Hashanah, I began making calls to family members to wish them Happy New Year and thought that my mother was surely on the list of people to call. In fact, I went into my cell phone and pulled up her name, because I never found it in my heart to erase her phone number from my contact list.

This past year has been strange for me in so many ways. I know that loss touches everyone's lives, but I still can't help thinking that I'm too young to have lost a mother. As a clergy person, someone who regularly handles life cycle events for the community—I'll admit, I felt unequipped to handle my own. So many of you came up to me in the days following my mother's passing to offer your condolences, a hug, and to ask if there was something you could do. While I so appreciated everyone's gestures, it was very difficult for me. I'm the one that's supposed to comfort all of you during your times of loss—all of a sudden I realized that I didn't know how to be the recipient of that same comfort.

In the B'Rosh Hashanah prayer that we said twice last week and will chant again when we get to the Musaf service, God decides who shall live and who shall die. We are powerless in

those decisions. We are constantly faced with things in life that we do not understand—particularly when it comes to loss. While there are numerous books that have been written on matters of life and death in Judaism—we are still left with so many unanswered questions and more significantly, we are still left drowning in the grief of the absence of our loved ones.

Eleven months is a long time to say Mourner's Kaddish and I extended my Kaddish for another two weeks because of the two-week delay of my mother's funeral. For me, reciting Mourner's Kaddish was a roller coaster ride. There were days when I didn't feel like doing it. There were days when I really needed it. There were days when I felt numb and I guess somehow the words just came out. There were days that I was upset because we didn't have a minyan and I couldn't say it. There were days when I was just upset—period. Although I was never sure of what each day would be like, I found myself even more unprepared for what it would feel like to end my period of mourning. I became so accustomed to chanting the Kaddish day in and day out that it became a part of me—as much as taking a shower and getting dressed every morning. Now what? Now what do I do? We get to that point in the service and many of you in the room are saying it without me. Sometimes, I want to shout, “Wait--wait for me!”

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Edelman-Blank spoke about ways to try and connect to prayer. He said that “not understanding the phrases in the prayer book does not mean that one cannot partake in Jewish prayer. It's not totally about the words.” I agreed with that statement but decided that it works both ways.

I am fortunate to know what the prayers mean. I know what Mourner's Kaddish means. That doesn't mean I found comfort in those words this past year. I did not find comfort in Kedushat HaShem—in praising God's name for taking my mother from this world—from me--

too soon. As a musician, I found comfort in the rhythm of the chanting of the prayer; on most days, I found that soothing. As Rabbi said in his sermon, “When we move our lips to pronounce the words of the prayers we are doing something—just the act of saying them is doing something.” I came to the conclusion that I found comfort in simply doing something. Many of you know I studied Mishna with Rabbi Berg this past year. Knowing I could not say Kaddish three times a day, initially, feeling helpless, just to do something. Little would I comprehend how great the reward would be on so many levels.

Since the end of August when I finished saying Kaddish I’ve been contemplating. For a parent, we have a responsibility to recite Kaddish for eleven months, and for all other relatives, for thirty days. During that time we are working to help elevate the souls our loved ones—to help them reach their eternal home. After that period, I guess God leaves it up to us to work on ourselves. To focus on the relationships that we have here in *olam hazeh*—in this world, to try to improve ourselves, to find love, to find meaning in every day, to make the most out of whatever time we have. When we’ve lost someone so dear to us, there are days when we don’t feel like it. But we have to. Living our best lives, I believe, is how we truly bring honor to their memories.

We have lost so many people dear to us in our community this past year. I have grieved along with you at their funerals. There IS a reason that we need a minyan to say Kaddish. My friend Randy says that “There’s something very interesting about the concept of being required to affirm your faith in God, and your connection to the community and traditions, ESPECIALLY when faced with the most painful things that might make us question our faith and our connection.” And so as Jews, we must surround ourselves with our community during times of loss.

Likewise, our tradition builds Yizkor into our calendar year of holidays for a reason. So that we may come together as a community and remember—remember those who have touched our lives—the people that we loved--the people that helped form our identities—our grandparents, our mothers and fathers, our spouses, our siblings, our children—pieces of all of us. It is only when we come together like this, that we are able to put all of those pieces together. It is only when we come together like this that we can encircle ourselves in the sounds of a roomful of chanting our traditional Mourner's Kaddish, in the hopes of elevating the souls of our loved ones who have left this world, while hopefully at the same time, soothing our hearts—even just a little bit. As we enter the New Year of 5770, may we continue to be blessed by their beloved memories, and may God grant us comfort and peace, now and always. Amen.