

The *Mitzvah* of Attending a Funeral

Yizkor 5784

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By the spring of 2021, most adults in our congregation were “fully vaccinated.” We thought: It might be safe to gather at Temple once again. We returned in fits and starts, as new variants would crop up, with hospital numbers rising and falling. When we did hold Shabbat services in person, our attendance rivaled pre-pandemic levels, but only when we included Zoom participation. Sometimes, the gathering in the Sanctuary was uncomfortably sparse.

There was, however, a notable exception: funerals. The Sanctuary would fill when we gathered to mourn and to comfort a grieving family. Streaming funerals became more important, too, as more people wanted to be present, whether at home in Little Rock or across the country and around the world.

Social worker, researcher, storyteller, and best-selling author Brene Brown helps us understand why people were drawn to funerals, and why attending those gatherings was critically important, even or perhaps especially at a time when many of us were still somewhat uncomfortable congregating indoors. She writes, “Funeral matter. Showing up to them matters. And funerals matter not just to the people grieving, but to everyone who is there. The collective pain (and sometimes joy) we experience when gathering in any way to celebrate the end of a life is [a] powerful experience... of inextricable connection. Death, loss, and grief are the great equalizers.”ⁱ

Our Jewish tradition, too, suggests that we need to attend funerals. In our daily prayers, we affirm that *l’vayat ha-met*, “accompanying the dead for burial,” constitutes *g’milut chasadim*, an act of lovingkindness incumbent upon us all.ⁱⁱ Our Talmudic sages required that a *minyan*, a quorum of at least ten Jewish adults, be in attendance for several key elements of a funeral. Two rabbis add that the mourners themselves are not counted in the *minyan*,ⁱⁱⁱ assuring that the mourners are not alone.

The two principal *mitzvot*, religious obligations, associated with death are *k’vod ha-met*, honoring the person who has died, which is the principal role of the funeral; and *nichum aveilim*, comforting the mourners. Our sages teach that we cannot begin comforting mourners until their dead are buried.^{iv} My observation, though, after officiating hundreds of funerals, is that, in the days after a loved one’s death, nothing is more comforting to mourners than kind and laudatory words about the person who has died. When we show up to share our happy memories and what we admired about the person who has died, we fulfill both *mitzvot*.

Our U.S. Surgeon General has put forward another reason, and an urgent one, for us to be present for one another. America suffers from a loneliness epidemic. “Even before the...pandemic, approximately half of U.S. adults reported experiencing measurable levels of loneliness.” The mental health impact is devastating, of course, but the physical health consequences are also shocking: “a 29% increased risk of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke, and a 50% increased risk of developing dementia for older adults.” All told, “lacking social connection increases risk of premature death by more than 60%.”^v

The pandemic worsened this loneliness epidemic, as does the divisiveness that political leaders stoke for their own benefit. And mourners often feel particularly lonely when a person who was central to their lives has died.

A congregation, **our** congregation, is uniquely suited to combat this contemporary scourge. We need community, especially at an hour of loss, but also week-in-week-out. Here, we can find human love as an expression of God’s, and we may experience God’s love in the presence of a community where we both give and receive. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks expressed it beautifully: “Community is the human expression of Divine love. It is where I am valued simply for who I am, how I live, and what I give to others. It is the place where they know my name.”^{vi}

Often, a mourner will tell me how they were touched by a story shared with them during the reception after the service. Sometimes, the mourners didn’t even know the storyteller, or they found out for the first time that this person knew their now-deceased loved one. What did they hear? That people knew their beloved dead. That people cared. That people valued that person in their own lives. That their loved one’s name was known and will be remembered. And this, too: The mourners heard that people know **them**, **see** them, and share their loss. They see that people care.

Brene Brown writes, “An experience of collective pain does not deliver us from grief and sadness; it is a ministry of presence. These moments remind us that we are not alone in our darkness and that our broken heart is connected to every heart that has known pain since the beginning of time.”^{vii}

Dr. Brown’s words evoke our funeral prayer, “May their soul be bound up with those of all who have gone before.” Those words link the person who has died with their loved ones who predeceased them. Dr. Brown adds meaning: The community of mourners includes all who are present at the service—and with them, all who have **ever** been bereaved.

Coming to Yizkor today, each of us may imagine ourselves to be alone, remembering our own beloved dead. But we come together as a community of

mourners. We remember so many more than our **own** loved ones. We look around this Sanctuary. We see our friends and fellow congregants. With a smile, we are reminded of **their** loved ones, alongside our own.

So, we must confess, we were wrong. We did **not** come here alone today. We came **together**, to mourn and to remember, as a community. And **that**, my friends, is a *mitzvah*.

Amen.

ⁱ Brene Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*, New York: Random House, 2017, p. 132. (Kindle edition)

ⁱⁱ *Elu D'varim*, see for example *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur*, New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2007, p. 44.

ⁱⁱⁱ Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 23b.

^{iv} *Pirkei Avot* 4.18.

^v "New Surgeon General Advisory Raises Alarm about the Devastating Impact of the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, May 3, 2023, <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html#:~:text=Disconnection%20fundamentally%20affects%20our%20mental,levels%20comparable%20to%20smoking%20daily>.

^{vi} Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Celebrating Life: Finding Happiness in Unexpected Places*, Continuum, 2004, quotation provided by Rabbi Laura Abramsley.

^{vii} Brown, p. 133.