

Shloshim Journal

Susan P. Fendrick

MY BROTHER ALAN ז"ל DIED NEAR MIDNIGHT ONE night in June 2012, at home, after a nearly four-year battle with cancer. My great-aunt Adele, in hospice care on the opposite coast, also died early that morning — just hours after my brother — and they were buried on the same day. She was in her late 90s and was a complete spitfire; he was 48, the most spirited, humor-driven person I have known.

I did not know what the mourning process would be like. I knew I would want to record it somehow, to share it with people, and to not be pressured to write well — just to write. And so I did, on Facebook. This is a slightly edited journal of what I wrote there, from the end of shiva until the end of shloshim, the intensive month-long mourning period for a close relative.

DAY 7: As I get up from shiva, I am so grateful for all of the people who have been such a comfort in these past few days. The opportunity to talk about both my brother's life, and what has been especially difficult about his illness and death, has been a real blessing. And the overflowing nurturing, and delicious food that has come our way, both scheduled and unscheduled, sustains us on many levels.

I don't know how people do this without shiva. And I definitely don't know how people do this without community.

Each day is a gift. On some level the current moment is truly all we have. I'm so grateful for how people have shepherded me through these past few days with their gentle presence, their generosity, and their notes — both the closest of friends and people we don't know so well who just came to be with us and listen, or offered words of comfort.

May you never know such a loss. But if you do, may you feel sustained as I have felt, and continue to feel.

DAY 7-8: Traditional end-of-shiva walk around block and lunch with Susie (what a blessing that she happened to be flying here from Israel just as shiva was beginning). Connect electronically with parents and nephews. All the wonderful shiva leftovers sorted, properly containered, frozen if necessary, etc. First time saying kaddish at shul instead of with a minyan at home; did so at Congregation Shaarei Tefillah and was warmly welcomed by Rabbi Benjamin Samuels. A fellow day school parent who had come to shiva told me he later googled Alan z”l and discovered the YouTube video of him in “Stupid Human Tricks” on *Letterman*, and loved it. So many people have said just how delightful they found it. It’s such a fun, sweet clip.

My heart is broken.

DAY 8-9: Enjoying R. Benjamin Samuels’ teaching between *minchah* and *maariv*/afternoon and evening services on the subject of which blessings to make, and in what order, when eating different foods together — Jewish geek stuff. And the invitation to say Alan’s name, with the idea that the learning in his honor should help his soul’s journey. (One of those things that I like and get into even though I don’t “believe” it in any meaningful theological sense.) Making a note to myself to cook food for shiva homes that does not spoil super quickly and/or that freezes well, because as wonderful as it was to have food during shiva, the leftovers continue to feed us and nurture us as I get back to “normal” and find my way. I am experiencing what a wise and unfortunately experienced friend called “an inner landscape that has been devastated, like a forest that’s been clear-cut.” It’s a space that is full of emptiness, but this sadness somehow connects me to my brother.

DAY 9-10: In Jewish tradition, one mourns formally only 30 days for a sibling, rather than 12 months for a parent; since it is so short, I am doing my best to be strict about observances. For example, I am avoiding recorded music and all live entertainment. I understand in a way that I never did before how this serves the purpose not of forcing you to be sad, but of eliminating some of the things that might fill up mental and emotional space and that would distract from the feelings just below the surface. There are so many things pulling us back to “normal,” to routine, to busy-ness and fun — it is worth making a little space for feelings of sadness, tenderness, loss...

However, I made an exception tonight (filing it under the rubric of “parenting” rather than “entertainment”) when my son M brought in 6-8 puppets and stuffed animals for an impromptu pre-bedtime puppet show, including a dog character called Justin Retriever. Honestly, the whole thing was oddly brilliant and completely charming. The kind of entertainment that does not distract from tenderness, but fosters it.

DAY 10-11: First day that seems in any way normal. I am going mostly to an Orthodox synagogue, because their service times work best for me. Obviously the men’s section is where the action is, and while that wouldn’t work for me as a long-term arrangement, I like the relative calm and privacy in the smaller women’s section. Shloshim hovers over all my planning — finding someone else to accompany my husband Ben to an event for which we have two tickets, figuring out where I’ll say kaddish in Chicago, seeing if a going-away party I’m hoping to throw for a dear friend can take place on the one day I could actually attend, i.e., the day after shloshim ends...

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and that I will be figuring out our relationship
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I feel like this is how I make sure I maintain a relationship with my sadness, but I have no clue how to make sure I maintain a relationship with my brother. Two things are true: that he is absolutely gone, and that I will be figuring out our relationship for the rest of my life.

DAY 11: Maybe later I will read about others’ kaddish experiences and interpretations; for now, I’m just interpreting my own experience. In some ways, the specific language of kaddish is secondary. It is a prescribed and familiar prayer, said in different formulations at many points throughout each service. It is a florid punctuation mark, describing God as the Be All and End All, beyond language, “above all blessing and song, words of praise and words of consolation” — which beyondness we express, of course, with language. We mourners recite this in a mixture of energetic and somber tones, faking it

until we make it (or don't). But the end — the end is where we talk honestly to God: *Oseh shalom bim'romav, hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu v'al kol yisrael, v'imru amen* / “Hey, You — the One who generates peace in your lofty realm. Could you send us some of that peace right here, in this messy earthly realm?” Because, seriously, you may be All That — but all we need, for now, is a little simple human peace, to carry us through the loss, the numbness and the tears, the emptiness and the wondering — and to bless our memories with meaning and comfort.

DAY 12: Made it to shul this morning just in time for the two kaddishes at the end of the service. It is still odd to listen to myself saying kaddish as a mourner; the words nearly as familiar as breathing (from leading services), but the experience of standing and knowing that others are taking in the sound of my voice as that of a mourner make me feel like saying, “Wait, there’s something wrong with this picture...”

Then there is the dissonance of engaging in the relatively somber practices of kaddish and shloshim in memory of my incredibly life-affirming, funny, irreverent brother — who would likely have been touched but also kind of bemused at this piety and discipline. For now, for me, kaddish is a boat, keeping me on the river, but also making sure I keep moving forward.

DAY 13-14: Today is 17 Tammuz on the Jewish calendar, a minor fast day. The Jerusalem Talmud explains Jeremiah’s dating of the breach of the Temple walls at 9 Tammuz (rather than 17 Tammuz) as *kilkul heshbonot* — literally, corrupted calculations. Rabbi Benjamin Samuels says in the name of Rabbi J. J. Schachter in the name of the Rav (Joseph B. Soloveitchik) that it was more than that: *kilkul heshbonot* refers to the confused state of mind when one suffers a terrible loss — one doesn’t know which end is up, one’s sense of time is off-kilter.

We Jews are a counting people: we count the days from Passover to Shavuot. We count up eight days to a bris, we count the seven days after a wedding. We count people for a minyan, although some of us do that in clever ways that avoid actually numbering people, for various superstitious and historical reasons. We call the first, most intense week-long period of mourning “shiva” — literally, seven. The next phase, the one I’m in, is called “shloshim”

— thirty. It is a number. It grounds the time. It is a counterbalance to *kilkul heshbonot*, to the feeling of “Where am I? When am I?” For a variety of reasons, it feels both like I lost my brother some time long ago and like it can’t possibly have happened at all. The numbering of the days tells me how long it has been — that long, and no longer — and also that it is true.

DAY 14-15: *Ki b'yadkha nafshot ha-hayyim v'ha-meitim / For in your hand are the souls of the living and the dead.* I notice these words (from the Book of Job) in the evening liturgy every evening; each time they hit me with a slightly different shade of meaning. Today, I observe the way that, even as death represents a limit, an end, a finality, the death of those who matter to us also brings close the realm of those who have died (whatever that realm is or isn't), and makes the boundary between the world of life and the world of beyond-life a little fuzzier. We are all somehow held, across time and space, in the divine hand.

We say of a deceased person, “May their soul be bound up in the bond of life,” the *tzror ha-hayyim* — an image that comes from the ancient world, in which shepherds would keep count of their flock by having one stone for each animal, wrapped in a cloth to be reviewed as the animals returned from pasturing. I’m pretty sure this phrase is intended to point towards eternal life, but I now understand it in the context of what I wrote above — may this soul which has departed this earth nevertheless remain somehow connected to, a part of, the world of the living, and we to that soul. I think all this has something to do with the idea that a person’s life may end but our relationship with them does not. It is both comforting and complicated.

DAY 15-16: I am halfway through shloshim. I am starting to think about what will and should characterize the end of it. If one “gets up” from shiva, what does one do from/to/with shloshim — especially in the case of a sibling, where there is no year of mourning customs, no transitioning to “just” kaddish? What might serve the equivalent of the end-of-shiva walk around the block? These are general questions, but I am looking at them through the lens of my own mourning, my own relationships, my own observance, my own psyche, my own spirituality. Presumably I will figure out what is right when the time arrives, and if not, I will make it up, and then see if that works. As wise as Jewish mourning practices

may be, they still comprise a uniform, smooth-seeming template for a path that is jagged, individual, and full of topographic obstacles and surprises.

DAY 16-17: Little time to write; had to go to NJ to be with my mother-in-law, who is having cascading complications from valve replacement surgery, which we are trying to get a handle on. My first time going to minyan for kaddish while traveling, and grateful for the chance to find acknowledgment while away from home of being on the mourner's path, and the opportunity to join in temporary community with strangers.

DAY 17-18: Today, I davened minchah/maariv and said kaddish at an Orthodox synagogue in West Orange, and in a group of about 30-40 men and four women saw no one I knew, to my surprise...until I recognized a colleague and acquaintance who actually lives in Toronto but was visiting his father. Somehow that was grounding even though I hardly know him. Not a particularly remarkable evening but I think that's what I liked about it — that finding a shul when you're out of town and need to say kaddish is A Known Thing.

Ah, I just thought of something it reminds me of:

12-step meetings.

I don't know of anything quite like it. Of course people find worship communities of their preference when they travel if they choose to. But this idea that an individual needs a community in order to fulfill a particular obligation, and may find strangers at that meeting place with that same requirement (also walking that mourner's path for a month or year, or perhaps marking the anniversary or a death) — this is what stands out to me right now. My daily (and thus rhythmic) personal practice intersects with those of neighbors and strangers, as we come together in focused, temporary community, to meet our individual needs.

Ah, I just thought of something it reminds me of: 12-step meetings. People in 12-step programs — Alcoholics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, etc. — seek out meetings when they travel if they feel they need immediate support, or if their life rhythm requires that they attend a meeting or meetings

while they are away from home. It is something that assists their own recovery, but a cornerstone of 12-step programs is also the idea that part of recovery is listening to others tell their story as well as telling your own, both giving and receiving support. *You* need the community for a meeting to take place, but each individual showing up for their own need is what calls the community into existence. A connection worth pondering....

DAY 19: It is amazing how much the simplest things can matter — like kind eyes and a gentle “I haven’t had a chance to tell you in person how sorry I am for your loss,” without any expectation that I will talk, but openness if I do. And how much the most complicated things — such as someone going on about what a terrible loss I have had and how they really understand what I’m going through and how it’s just so tragic, *without my saying a word or providing any encouragement* — can be so, wow, off-base. A friend offered a new term: “aggressive empathy.”

DAY 20-22: Catching up with music, *mechitzah*/divider, and *mentshlichkeit*/interpersonal kindness and decency, in three parts:

Music

I’ve been following as best I can the custom of not listening to music during shloshim. Live music I avoid completely (although I’ll be making an exception for my kids’ theater camp performance of Aladdin — file under parenting, not entertainment); recorded music I avoid but if it’s playing somewhere (e.g., in a store), I don’t leave as if I’m allergic.

What’s been very weird and unexpected is how, when it’s occurred to me to put on music and I remember I’m in shloshim, I’ve been fine skipping it. Haven’t really missed it or wanted it. The other time I remember something like this was when I gave birth to my twins 9.5 years ago. We’d packed a big bag for the hospital, but during labor — all night — I surprised myself by wanting lots of quiet. Didn’t pull out one CD. It was like I just needed to focus on what was happening right then, right there.

Mechitzah

When I’m in town, I mostly go to a local Orthodox shul for weekday minyan. It is a comfortable place for me in many ways — the rabbi is a

friend; the atmosphere is informal but smooth; and there are always a few familiar faces on the other side of the mechitzah. But yes, there is the mechitzah — the divider between the men’s and the women’s section. I sometimes have to keep myself from jocularly volunteering when they’re deciding who will lead a given service (since in Orthodox synagogues only men lead prayers).

But it turns out the mechitzah is working for me, although not for the usual reasons.

My brother and I were not as close as I would have liked, and his illness, dying, and death have been accompanied by some complicated feelings connected with that distance. Being at a bit of a remove physically from the “main action” (but still very much there) mirrors my inner reality. And rather than causing me pain, that mirroring — an outer echo — of the veil between us quietly names what is true.

Mentshlichkeit

I have felt ambivalent in complaining about someone’s talking *at* me about what I was going through, and how that was the opposite of what I needed. This is not the most generous of responses, and doesn’t necessarily model the kind of *mentshlichkeit* to which I aspire. (Stephen Covey, who my mother tells me just died, once said: “Be a light, not a judge. Be a model, not a critic.”) And yet, it also felt important to name not just the sweetness and light of receiving expressions of comfort, but the, well, discomfort of some forms of comfort.

Last night between *minchah* and *maariv*, during our learning about blessings over food, the rabbi had occasion to mention how someone once brought to his seder table, for gluten-free guests, potato “matzah” (over which one couldn’t really say the blessing for eating matzah, one of the central *mitzvot*/sacred practices of the Passover seder). He said off-hand as he concluded, “You can say amen to someone else’s *brachah*.” I still don’t know if he was saying that someone who can’t eat real matzah can at least say “amen” to someone else’s blessing...or that if someone did make the blessing over the faux-matzah, others might nevertheless say “amen” in affirmation of the implicit declaration: for me, this is matzah.

But it did remind me of an earlier discussion a week or two ago at shul. The rabbi taught that there is a minority position that someone who has had a meal but has not eaten (and cannot eat) any grain products may nevertheless join in the recitation of the full Grace after Meals. The full *bentshing* of Birkat HaMazon is long and is usually said only if one eats bread with the meal (or other items made with grains). Why would someone want or need to bentsh if they are not required to? Well, bentshing is one of those things that observant Jews do. To never be able to do it because of an inability to eat certain foods is to feel oneself outside the orbit of a very basic Jewish practice, a communal table ritual.

It makes me wonder whether those of us who are grieving and finding our way on the mourner's path might find ways to say "amen" to words of comfort that are not so comforting, and to welcome those who say those words at the "table" of the central Jewish practice of offering comfort. How much generosity is called for even in our darkest days.

DAY 22-23: I feel wordless tonight, and full of tears hiding just behind my eyes. For now, both of those will have to be enough.

DAY 23-24: For the past few weeks, I've been chiefly focused on myself as an individual within a minyan. Tonight, the focus was on the minyan as part of the wider world Jewish community. The bombing of Israeli tourists' buses in Bulgaria — seven so far confirmed dead, many more wounded — weighed heavy on us. We said *tehillim* (Psalms) instead of learning Torah between services. During maariv, my praying as an individual felt so secondary. Even during kaddish, I was suddenly aware of myself as a relatively experienced (!) mourner, so aware of those who have just entered *aninut*, that "in-between" time that is a way station between life before the death and life after the burial.

As I wrote to another friend, ultimately we all swim in the pool of mourning together — some of us dip our toes in earlier, some get thrown into the cold and cruel water against our will (always), but eventually, we all get wet. Never swim alone.

DAY 24-25: The shul's basement level floor (including the smaller chapel) was flooded last night, so we davenned tonight in the main sanctuary, which is a lovely space. The artistic curtain covering the ark was designed in coordination with the frame and doors around it, and the abstract design on the cloth suggests some kind of upward movement, with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet all jumbled up chaotically on the upper part of the wooden frame. I assume this is meant to represent the Hasidic tale about the man who said, God, I am illiterate, I don't know the prayers so well, but here, I will throw the letters of our holy alphabet up to heaven, and you compose the prayers.

I once taught this to a patient of mine when I was a student hospital chaplain — a lovely young man, so thin, dying of AIDS, wanting some connection to Jewish tradition but not knowing a lot. So I gave him this piece of tradition which said, it's okay that you don't know a lot of tradition. And he threw the letters heavenward. Amen.

DAY 26-27: As I've considered ways to mark the end of shloshim, the idea of going to the *mikveh*/ritual bath has floated by and I've easily rejected it; it hasn't worked for me for many reasons. While I was meeting with my spiritual director the other day, a big rainstorm was going on outside, and I found it so appealing and pleasant...and realized that what I was drawn to was not the calm and serene water of the mikveh, but the wild water of storm and ocean. It just seems more connected to where I am. A friend quoted her clinical pastoral education supervisor, Mary Martha, as saying something brilliant: Sometimes, because of the circumstances, you don't get that pure, raw kind of grieving that can just cleanse you, and that can make it, ultimately, harder. That definitely sang to me.

My plan for Wednesday is to go somewhere with really good, crashing waves, maybe rocky, where I can go in the water. Going to the ocean is, I think, a way of getting to something more primitive and raw and uncivilized, yet (for me, at least) very healing and soothing.

DAY 27: Okay, I've gone and done it. Given that I'll only be saying kaddish for 30 days, I didn't have much time to get in a Weirdest Story of Saying Kaddish. And I didn't really intend to have one at all. But it chased me down.

We went to the Cheesecake Factory for a family dinner after our youngest kids' wonderful performance in *Aladdin*. My intention was to leave at 7:45 p.m. to get to shul for minchah/maariv.

At 8:30, as we were leaving, I realized in a panic that I had forgotten to go to shul. Given that I committed to saying kaddish at least once a day during shloshim (though most days I've done it twice), and that I only get to *shacharit*/morning services on Shabbat, sundown meant I'd missed a day (as I didn't go to evening services last night either, and now I'd missed the afternoon service today; the Jewish day was ending and beginning again, at sundown). Our older girls started brainstorming how we could pull together a minyan, but I realized it was already basically too late to say kaddish anywhere that would require getting there, and not much time to say it at all.

There is a little leniency in extremis to consider the day as lasting until night actually falls. So, I quickly issued my own creative rabbinic ruling that we could rely on the leniency that it was not by any means dark yet... and with five Jewish adults in our family present, there were surely five other Jewish adults in the restaurant, and I was going to say kaddish right there in the Cheesecake Factory. My stepdaughters, who are usually sensitive to parental embarrassment, especially by me, responded with the communal parts *out loud*. Which made me cry. When I told them this afterwards, they pointed out that this was far from the most embarrassing thing I'd ever done.

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DAY 28-29: As the end of shloshim approaches, I'm looking with renewed practical interest at emails and ads about theater, musical performances, movies. I'm aware of how different this is than the full year of mourning practices for a parent, which changes the rhythm and texture of life profoundly. But I'm ready, I think, to return to the world of "entertainment" — even as I've recognized and valued how much this mourning practice has made space for just being, for the thoughts and feelings and states of mind that needed a

resting place. And for the ability to decline to participate in big social activities without apology, without needing to explain or justify the sense of “I’m not ready” or “I just need something else right now.”

I’m ready now to navigate on my own the waters of remembrance and grieving. But I’m grateful for the time of structure and limitations, even as I move into a time without rules.

DAY 30: On Tuesday night, my last time of saying kaddish regularly, I went to a shiva minyan for the beautiful mother of my friend Heather. She was an incredibly loving person. Just a month before she died, she rearranged her travel plans to attend the 8th grade graduation of the son of her late husband’s late daughter’s ex-husband (and his second wife)! — that is, the sibling of her step-grandchild, whom she simply considered her own grandchild. Family.

Each person we mourn, grieve for, remember, is a collection of stories, choices, experiences, joys and pains. A life, full of texture and dimension.

After I said my final kaddish of shloshim, I remained silent for the second kaddish a minute later, the one reserved for those sitting shiva in that house. And that was that.

Yesterday, I did have my experience of wild water. My friend Heather and I went to Wingersheek Beach, where we’d never been. I initially laughed at my desire for “wildness” when we arrived, because the beach was filled with people (of course). But we walked over to the left, where there were some rocks rising out of the water like graceful, goofy hippos, and many more framing a kind of cove. Many fewer people, and clear clear water. It did not take long for me to walk out far enough that no one else was there, and the water was nearly up to my shoulders. In front of me, the horizon, sprinkled with a few white sailboats. On the right, a lighthouse. On the left, a rock formation.

I looked out towards the sea and sky for a good long time, letting myself think and not-think. I remembered again how some of my happiest (if murkiest) childhood memories were going to the Jersey Shore with my parents and brother, with the roast beef sandwiches my mother had packed for lunch, spending the day on the sand and in the water. I vowed that I would always call my brother to mind when I came to the ocean, and remember him with tenderness.

I had not planned to, but I decided to immerse. I got fully wet, said the blessings, and dunked twice. *Kasher*. It has been my practice at the mikveh to cover my face and briefly call to mind each of my five children, myself, and my husband, with prayers for our wellbeing. This time, I did it for my brother's widow; for each of my nephews; for each of my parents; for myself; and finally, for my brother. It was hard to hold onto how to pray for his wellbeing, what that would mean. I let myself feel the undertow, the pull of the waves back to their source.

And I said, silently, goodbye.



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