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## Yizkor, Yom Kippur 1998

*John Spiegel*

**T**his past year I led the Yizkor service on Yom Kippur at my synagogue. My year of mourning for my father was almost completed, and I felt ready to speak to my fellow mourners. I guessed that we had been through many of the same experiences during the past year: waking during the night, finding ourselves without our usual energy, sometimes feeling desperate to be around other people and at other times demanding solitude. I hoped that my comments the fruits of my pain would be useful to them.

For me, the year of mourning for my father, George Spiegel z"l, was a time of new awareness. Looking back, I am touched to realize that many of the people who acted with special kindness and thoughtfulness during the periods of *shiva* and *sheloshim* [thirty-day mourning period] were people who had not previously been among my closest friends. Now I feel a special bond with them that comes from knowing that they took time out, for example, to serve as *shomrim*, watching my father's body during the middle of the night, or that they came directly from the funeral to my home to arrange the house for mourning and prepare the meal of consolation that followed the burial.

During the first weeks of mourning, I was especially appreciative of visitors who could stay relaxed when I began to cry, and not try to cheer me up or distract me. I found crying to be healing. I also found that laughter was an important part of my mourning, that my feelings of grief were not always somber and serious. In fact, I frequently thought about some of the absurd things my father used to do and, in the company of close friends and family, I often laughed about those memories. That too seemed healing.

There was an unpredictable quality to my mourning. Some days and some activities were surprisingly easy like giving the eulogy at the funeral while other days and activities were surprisingly hard like, a few weeks after the funeral, listening to a Shabbat Torah reading which described the death of one of the patriarchs. Like every mourner, I learned how to focus on day-to-day tasks so as to be functional and effective, but I quickly realized that seemingly insignificant things could punch through my veneer of calm: for example, hearing one of my father's favorite songs on the radio, coming across one of his belongings, or celebrating a holiday for the first time without him. Over time, I tried to achieve a balance between remembering and not remembering, between busy activity and reflection.

As the year went on, one particular memory began to stand out from among the others. It was the memory of the first time I can recall going to a synagogue. I recounted this memory at the Yizkor service.

I was five or six years old at the time I know this because we still lived in an apartment on New Hampshire Avenue in Silver Spring, Maryland. On a Saturday afternoon my father came out to the playground and asked me: "John, would you like to come with me to say Kaddish for Grandpa?" (My father's father had died a few months earlier.)

I said: "Dad, what's Kaddish?"

"It's a way of saying good-bye to someone you love," he answered.

After thinking it over for a moment, I responded in a carefree voice, "OK, I'll go with you," and I went back to playing on the monkey bars.

"Afterwards we'll do something fun," my father said, and he walked back across the lawn to our apartment.

An hour later we got into the old Buick and drove down New Hampshire Avenue, which was then just a two-lane road, and continued into town, across Rock Creek Park, and finally up a long hill, which (I now know) was Porter Street. We parked next to a large building, which I now know was Adas Israel Congregation. As we approached the side door, the thing that impressed me, as a five- or six-year-old, was that here was this "big big" building with a "little little" door. I didn't realize that the sanctuary and the main entrance were around the other side.

When we entered the side door, we found ourselves in a small chapel room. There were about twenty men standing around only men and

many of them were "older guys." One of the older guys, who seemed to be in charge, came over to welcome us. "Good Shabbos," he said to my father, and then, looking down at me with a kind face, he asked me: "Would you like to carry the spice box for us?"

"What's a spice box?" I replied.

He answered, "I will show you."

A few minutes later, one of the men lit a large candle and began chanting a prayer. The old man in charge came over to me, bent down, and gave me the spice box. In reality, it probably was the size of a standard spice box, but in my eyes it was gigantic and shiny and beautiful, all silver, with bells ringing on each corner and bright metal flag on the top that I could make spin round and round. As the man put it into my hands, he leaned over and whispered into my ear: "This is the last sweetness of Shabbos. Take it around to each of the men and let them smell it."

For some reason perhaps because I didn't want the old men to have to bend over I held the spice box high over my head, as I walked solemnly from one man to next, stopping to let each one smell the spices. They smiled as I passed by. To me the spice box smelled like cinnamon toast, one of my favorite breakfast foods.

After the Havdalah ceremony was over, the main evening service began. What interested me was the way the men would suddenly stand up, all together, and then suddenly sit down again. Up and down, time after time, all together. I was especially surprised to see that my father knew just when to stand up and when to sit down. I wanted to ask him, "Dad, how do you know these things?" But instead I just sat close to him on the polished wooden pew and kept my eyes fixed on him. When he stood up, I would stand up. And when he sat down, I would sit down. Over and over again.

Toward the end of the service, the old man in charge said those now-familiar words, "Will the mourners please rise for the Mourner's Kaddish?"

My father stood up. So I stood up. But when my father saw that I was standing, he turned toward me and quietly said, "John, you should sit down."

Surprised, I answered, "But Dad, you're standing."

"It's my turn to stand," he replied and then, shaking his head

slowly, he added, "It's not your turn yet. You should sit down."

"But, Dad, when will it be *my* turn?" I asked.

He paused for a moment and then said, "Hopefully, not for a long, long time."

As it turned out, God blessed our family: Over forty years went by, and it still wasn't my turn. In fact, last year on Yom Kippur my father and I attended services together at my synagogue. We stood up and sat down together, over and over again. And when we reached the Yizkor service, he stood up and I still remained seated. It still wasn't my turn.

But this year it was my turn. I had become a mourner. I had joined the group of people who stand each year at Yizkor.

I know that I will never again have the opportunity to sit with my father at shul or to talk with him. But I am comforted to realize that I will always have my memories of him. They are vivid. They sustain me and guide me. They are my daily Yizkor.



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