

Sermon: Rabbi Aaron L. Starr
After the Funeral: Now What?

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An inevitable part of life is mourning the loss of some of our closest loved ones – friends and family. Often in the short time leading up to the funeral and then during the *shivah* process, we are overwhelmed by detail management and grief. We are also surrounded at nearly every moment by family and friends.

Then *shivah* ends. The crowds disperse. We are left to the memories. The time we used to spend engaging that loved one is now a void on our daily schedule.

The moment *shivah* ends, the chairs are put away, and the last visitor leaves, we are left with one thought: now what?

In our Torah, *Parashat Acharei Mot*, we come upon the High Priest Aaron after the death of two of his sons. Following the period of mourning, Moses instructs Aaron regarding the Yom Kippur rituals.

What are we to learn from this? Perhaps part of the healing process following a death is the need to atone in some ways; we may wonder, why else would God take a loved one from us?! Of course, death is not a punishment, but don't we often think (however errantly), "If I could have just done this one more thing ..." then our loved one would survive?

Perhaps instructions regarding the Yom Kippur rituals follow Aaron's loss as encouragement, upon the loss of those closest to us, to engage in reflection and prayer. What can we learn from life's finitude? What legacy is our loved one leaving behind that we must continue?

Perhaps Moses instructed Aaron regarding the details of the Yom Kippur service to encourage Aaron to get back to living. After all, serving God "full-time" was Aaron's "job." In answer to "Now what?" perhaps Moses was telling his brother Aaron to get back to living.

Certainly, all of these activities are appropriate upon the death of a loved one. We ought to engage in atonement for mistakes made because we all could have done better by our loved ones. We all ought to engage in a period of contemplation and reflection and, following *shiva*, all of us must – step by step – re-emerge into life.

But when one close to us dies, we are changed and we are not ready to be or, frankly, interested in being the same person we were before the loss.

The Power of Minyan

And that's among the reasons that Judaism offers us ritual: after such a life trauma, we need structure and we need purpose to keep going. There are many who fulfill the *mitzvah* of attending daily prayer services to say *kaddish* following a loved one's passing. They find comfort in their Shaarey Zedek family. They find purpose in having a vehicle every day through which to express their sadness. They find meaning in embracing our tradition and thereby feeling God's embrace in return. No knowledge of the service is required: just come. We'll help you from there.

The Significance of Yahrzeit

On the Hebrew anniversary of a loved one's death, it is customary to engage in certain memorial acts as a sign of respect for those who have departed the earth. The Mourners' *Kaddish* should be recited at evening, morning, and afternoon prayer services. At Congregation Shaarey Zedek, the names of those with a *Yahrzeit* are read aloud at *minyan*, and their loved ones are invited to say *Kaddish*. It is also a tradition to light a *Yahrzeit* candle the night on which a *Yahrzeit* begins, and to let that candle remain for the entire 24 hours of memorial.

In addition, it is customary to make a charitable contribution and to engage in a Jewish ritual act in honor and memory of the one whose *Yahrzeit* it is. It is a custom to request an Aliyah to the Torah on the Shabbat, Monday or Thursday prior to a loved one's *Yahrzeit*. Please contact us if you would like to arrange such an Aliyah. Oftentimes one will sponsor a Kiddush, a Shabbat lunch, or a *minyan* breakfast coinciding with the *Yahrzeit* of a loved one as well. It is a great honor to do a *mitzvah*, such as giving *tzedakah* (charitable contribution) in this way, to memorialize those we love.

The Power of Yizkor

In addition to visiting the grave of loved ones at certain times in the year, it is an important tradition to participate in *Yizkor* services on *Yom Kippur*, *Shemini Atzeret*, *Pesach* and *Shavuot*. Each *Yizkor* service is a meaningful, spiritual memorial experience through which we are inspired to acts of memory, loving-kindness, charity and righteousness on behalf of our loved ones. The next *Yizkor* service will be held on the Second Day of Shavuot: Thursday, June 1, 2017.

It is a tradition to light a *Yahrzeit* candle the night prior to *Yizkor*. At Congregation Shaarey Zedek, we recommend that all who are able attend the *Yizkor* service do so. While there are moments of sadness, of course, our service is designed to be spiritual and uplifting as well. Participating in *Yizkor* is the proper way to honor a loved one's memory, as well as to honor and remember the martyrs of our people, all those who died in the Shoah (Holocaust), and all those who died in defense of the State of Israel.

Visiting the Cemetery

Jewish tradition has long considered visiting a loved one's grave as an important mark of respect. According to the *midrash*, Joseph visited the grave of his mother, Rachel, on his way down into Egypt. There he wept and prayed that she would intercede with God on the Israelites' behalf whenever they passed into or out of the Holy Land. Similarly, during the Exodus, Caleb ben Yefuneh visited the graves of the patriarchs in Hebron, asking them to intercede on his behalf with God in order to grant Caleb the strength to avoid the sins of the other scouts. In our own times, it is a custom to visit the graves of loved ones on their *Yahrzeit* (Hebrew anniversary of death); on *Tishah B'Av*; and before *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur*. Some choose to visit loved ones in times of distress. At the graveside, the *El Malei Rachamim* memorial prayer is recited in Hebrew or English (though Hebrew is preferable), which may be found in the Clover Hill Park memorial booklets available at the cemetery.

Now what? If this is the question you are asking after the death of a love one, Judaism has answers. Your Congregation Shaarey Zedek family is here to support you and your CSZ clergy are here to guide you.

May God grant comfort to the mourners among us, and may God bless us all with *shalom*.