

Is the “art” of Jewish mourning a “dying” art? I have noted with some sadness how, over the last couple decades, *shiva*—the seven-day Jewish period of mourning an immediate relative—has dwindled to three days and now, even sometimes, one day. I have witnessed houses of mourning mimic social parties, with the “guests” speaking more about baseball and politics than of the deceased. Fewer Jews are coming to *shul* to say *kaddish* for their loved ones—both to daily *minyan* and on the anniversary of a loved one’s passing (called *Yahrzeit*). Nationally, even the numbers of those commemorating *Yizkor*, the Jewish day of memory that occurs four times during the year, are somewhat down. Is the art of Jewish mourning a dying art?

We certainly can look to societal trends to note that, across all religions, people are engaging less in religious rituals. We certainly can also look to years of failure in Jewish education: today’s adults simply were never taught how to “do” *shiva*, *sheloshim* or many of the other customs and laws of Jewish mourning. We can also note that we live in an era of the short-attention-span: we are so quick to move from one thing to the next.

The customs and laws of Jewish mourning are quite powerful for those who allow themselves to be immersed in the experience of loss. My wife was published recently in a powerful book of memories entitled, *Kaddish: Women’s Voices* (Urim Publications, 2013, available on Amazon). In the book, Rebecca speaks about grappling with the loss of her mother one month prior to the birth of our first child, and how impactful the traditional mourning process was for her. She also writes of coming to Shaarey Zedek, well before I was a rabbi here, to say *Kaddish*, and the meaning and sense of community that provided her. In fact, it was through Rebecca saying *Kaddish* at Shaarey Zedek that we learned of the amazing community—the warm family—we have here at CSZ. When Rebecca’s mom died, the customs of Jewish mourning provided us comfort. Our community, through the mourning rituals, provided us strength. And through this comfort and strength, we found healing.

In our Torah, *Parashat Chukat*, two of the three great Israelite leaders that led our people through the Exodus die. “Miriam died [in Kadesh] and was buried there,” the Torah tells us, “[And] The community was without water ...” (Numbers 20:1-2). In a famous *midrash*, the rabbis connect these two verses to explain that Miriam was the provider of wells for drinking water during journey toward Israel. When she died, our ancestors noticed immediately the profound loss that life without her would entail. Similarly, later in our *parashah*, we read, “When Moses and Eleazar (Aaron’s son) came down from [Mt. Hor], the whole community knew that Aaron had breathed his last. All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron thirty days” (Numbers 20:28-29). Our ancestors were so heartbroken at Aaron’s death that they mourned for thirty days. And in their mourning, they gave birth to our thirty-day period of mourning called *sheloshim*. The Israelites knew they needed time to heal—and they took the time they needed to mourn.

In our own day and age, we are constantly in a rush to move on to the next thing. But when we lose a loved one, we must take the time we need to emerge from our sadness, from our grief and even, sometimes, from our anger. And, sometimes, we as friends of mourners simply do not know how to respond. The customs and laws of the Jewish mourning period are profound, offering the mourner comfort and strength ... and healing. Let us utilize the traditions of our people to regain strength, to provide comfort, and to achieve—for all of us—a sense of healing.