

The Bereavement Process - One Member's Perspective

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My father died unexpectedly near the end of April. For various reasons my parents had not made any arrangements with respect to funerals and burial. There had been general discussions, but because my parents had moved to Boston from another city where all my grandparents were buried, and because the synagogue where I grew up had changed, no decisions had been finalized. So, on the morning my father died and while still in the hospital "bereavement" room, my Mom, brother, and I were faced with planning a funeral. I'm grateful that this was the first time I ever had to make such plans. In the hours and days that followed I learned a lot about what must be done with respect to the funeral and Shiva. There were lessons that surprised me and recommendations I'd like to pass on. So, the purpose of this memo is to do just that in the hope it might benefit others when their time inevitably comes to deal with similar issues.

Day 1, Morning

Our first decisions involved when and where to have the service, which funeral home to use, and where to bury my father. My father died on a Tuesday morning. We opted for a Thursday funeral to allow time for notification and for out of town family to travel. We discussed the various service location options but in the end chose Temple Emanuel (vs. my parent's synagogue, a funeral home, or a graveside service). The decision was linked to our thoughts about where to sit Shiva, the impact on my children (the only grandchildren), and the location of those most likely to attend the service. We collectively chose Temple Emanuel based on my personal confidence in our clergy, the beauty of our facility, the location and convenience for my immediate family, and our desire that my father receive a fitting and dignified tribute. We felt that these goals would most likely be achieved in our synagogue and we now know that we made a wonderful decision. The clergy, staff, and bereavement committee volunteers were each superb. Given the situation we couldn't have been more pleased.

We also had to choose a cemetery and a funeral director. Although my brother and I had never been to Sharon Memorial Park we made the decision to bury my father there based on a recent visit I had made to my Grandparents' graves at a cemetery near Hartford (a possible choice for my parents), the realization that metropolitan Boston is now our home, and input from my mother who has been to Sharon numerous times for other burials. The visit to my Grandparents' graves had alarmed me in that their synagogue's cemetery was not as well maintained as it once was and I was concerned over what might happen as more time passed. In contrast Sharon is a beautiful and well-managed facility that services the entire Boston Jewish community and seems likely to be very well looked after for as long as Jews remain in this area. My brother and I were

clueless as to which funeral director to use. My Mother had a preliminary choice but no strong preference.

So, while we were still at the hospital I placed a call to the synagogue and specifically the Rabbis' assistant, Joan Mael. As part of her job and with years of experience Joan represents a wealth of helpful and practical knowledge all wrapped up in a caring and compassionate professional. At my request Joan gave very specific guidance with names and numbers to call both for the funeral director and the cemetery (and at my request sent me an e-mail with the names and phone numbers enclosed). With respect to the funeral director Joan was careful not to recommend one over another but guided us to a choice where she knew other members' experiences had been uniformly excellent. She also helped us set a preliminary schedule for the funeral and Shiva, made arrangements for Rabbi Gardenswartz to meet with us later in the day, and also began a tutorial that continued over several phone calls about how to organize our house for the Shiva period (and this was later complemented by a volunteer from the Bereavement Committee). Joan's advice and guidance were invaluable. She made sure that we made good choices and the right choices for us. She was our Most Valuable Player and was always available to answer any question, no matter how trivial.

At this point it was an hour or so after we knew that my Dad was gone. My brother took my Mother home. I stayed a bit longer and placed a call to the funeral director we chose (Levine/David Decter). This is their business, and they were compassionate but extremely efficient. They took all of the information they needed from me with respect to which hospital we were at, our synagogue affiliation, and some detailed information about my Dad. I then informed the hospital staff of our choice of funeral director and left for my home to be with my wife and children. As I was leaving the hospital I took a call from Rabbi Gardenswartz. I only remember a couple parts of our conversation. One dealt with the choice between our (large) sanctuary and (smaller) chapel for the funeral service and the pros and cons of each. I stated my view that while I was uncertain about the likely turnout that I felt there was a good chance it would be large (which is what happened). Despite not remembering most of the rest of the phone call I can tell you that it was filled with compassion for my Mom and the rest of the family and that I was grateful to hear from him.

Day 1, Afternoon

My afternoon was spent making preliminary arrangements with, and getting information for the cemetery staff and funeral director that would be confirmed the next day in personal visits with my Mom and brother. Everyone I dealt with was compassionate and professional. When matters of cost arose there was great sensitivity about explaining the reasons for choices so that I wouldn't feel that I was being pressured or "up sold".

The representative from Sharon Memorial explained how the cemetery was structured and the cost and availability in different sections. She was patient and took the time to tell me why different families end up making different choices and what the differentiators tend to be. I learned that many families end up purchasing plots over the phone without actually seeing them. It was important to us that we see our choice and we made an appointment for early the next day. This had to be in order to leave time to open the gravesite in time for the funeral. I also learned that there were separate charges for the actual plots and the opening of the grave.

When I called the funeral director around mid afternoon I learned that my father had already been taken from the hospital and was at their facility in Brookline. We covered many items. The most time sensitive were giving biographical information for the newspaper death notices and in providing my father's social security number and other information for the death certificate (we had to get the SSN off of his tax returns, I didn't know it). Basically, the funeral director was a true professional and I followed his advice, even on things I had never thought of before...like a police escort from the synagogue to the cemetery. We chose to have shomrim (guards) stay with my father and to recite psalms. We covered many, many items – everything from chairs for Shiva to reminders that I bring my father's tallit and kippah when we visited the next day.

Later in the afternoon I received a call from a member of the Bereavement Committee to learn how they could help us. We had decided to have evening services in our house the first night of Shiva and the committee helped us find a leader and offered to help us find a minyan if needed. Later, a committee member brought us mirror coverings and a briefcase full of prayer books and kippot for the service. We were very appreciative. I also prepared and sent my own e-mail announcement of my Dad's death for family and friends. From that point on the telephones never stopped ringing....

By late afternoon my brother had brought my Mother to my house where she would stay for the next several days. Around dinnertime Rabbi Gardenswartz came to visit with us. Before anything else he met with my children, and most importantly my older daughter, to discuss what had happened and to explain with the greatest of sensitivity how her grandfather's body had died but how his soul would go to heaven. I can't possibly do justice to how wonderful Rabbi Gardenswartz was with my daughter. In the days that followed she frequently referred to what the Rabbi had taught her as she worked through what had happened. After meeting with my daughter the family convened with the Rabbi around our dining room table and we each took turns telling stories from my father's life and the many ways his life had impacted others and us. While the Rabbi had met my father he didn't know him and the notes from this session formed the basis of the eulogy. When we were finished the Rabbi led all of us, including the children, in a prayer to honor my father's memory. It was a wonderful moment that ended a horrible and exhausting day.

Day 2:

We had a 9AM appointment at the cemetery to be followed with an appointment at the funeral home. The staff at the cemetery took us to see the various sections that were available, and helped us locate where important family friends were buried. In the end my Mom chose a location adjacent to where a friend and professional mentor of my father had been buried a few years earlier. The staff was sensitive and efficient and the visit wasn't long.

When we arrived at the funeral home the Director met with us and reviewed each of the choices I had discussed with him the day before. We confirmed details for the death certificate, my Mother selected an appropriate casket, and we made various other choices, everything from the material of the burial shroud to acknowledgement stationery. I was able to ask questions about the procedures at the funeral home and we were able to talk through some of the details for the next day, the funeral itself. We discussed pick-up times from our home, providing printed directions for attendees to the cemetery, even the need to allow for a rest stop when we arrived at the cemetery but before we proceeded to the burial.

We were grateful to have friends who took our daughters (8 and 5) for a "playdate" with their children. We followed the Rabbi's good advice and didn't shelter the girls from what was happening (indeed, they had been present at my parent's house when my father died). All the same, a playdate broke up the day for them and helped us have more time to focus on making arrangements. For those wondering how to help a family with young children after a death providing an outlet for the kids is a true mitzvah and was much appreciated.

Once the arrangements were complete we spent the rest of the day as a family trying to rest after a stressful day and a half. Of course this was impossible. Many family friends trying to reach my mother called our home and cell phones and it seemed the phone would never stop ringing. My uncle (my father's brother) arrived from out of town with my cousin and we had a good visit reviewing all that had happened and discussing the schedule for the next day. We were grateful to receive food platters from several friends and neighbors. At first it seemed overwhelming, but in the end it made our lives much easier and for the most part it was all gone before the end of Shiva.

Day 3 – the Funeral and start of Shiva

The funeral was scheduled for 11AM with the car scheduled to pick up our family at 10:20. We were very busy before we left preparing the house for Shiva and the visitors who would come to see us after the burial. Although we were taught that the Shiva was for us and that we shouldn't need to worry about feeding our guests, our choice was to ensure that we had ample food and beverage so that

those returning from the burial, and later those who visited with us would be able to eat and have refreshments. Just as it was important that the service and burial arrangements be a suitable tribute to my Dad, we wanted those who came to honor him and to visit with us to be well treated (and fed). So, in addition to the food we had already been sent we ordered more, along with getting beverages of all types. My wife Debbie worked incredibly hard despite the help of some wonderful friends. As a result of this it was a hectic morning, but we were ready when it was time to go.

As a side note we chose not to have someone stay in our house during the service, but we did have a sitter after the service while we traveled to and from the burial. Our arrangements also included a packed lunch for our kids (and for us) that we loaded in the car when we left. As is often the case in major life cycle events the “hosts” don’t always have the time to eat and look after themselves. This was true on this day as well. Having some food available was really helpful.

When we got to the synagogue many people had already arrived. I had never attended a funeral at our synagogue and I was impressed with the thoughtfulness behind the physical arrangements. The casket containing my father had been placed in the chapel so we could visit prior to the service, which was in the sanctuary. The sanctuary had been set up with curtains (as for Shabbat Alive on Friday nights) to separate the last few rows and to encourage those in attendance to sit together and closer to the front. A separate space (in the Vestry) had been left as a place for my family to gather immediately prior to the service. This is where the Rabbis, Cantor, and Ritual Director came to meet and pray with us before we were escorted into the sanctuary for the service. Many in attendance saw we were in the Vestry and came in to speak with us. While we were very pleased to see those who had come to honor my Dad this was also a time where we needed to be alone with the clergy and for some privacy. While the performance of the staff from the funeral home was nothing less than outstanding, in hindsight I wish that more attention had been paid to our personal needs at that moment.

I’ll say little about the service itself except to say how wonderful our clergy was and how dignified a tribute they put together on our behalf. The Cantor set a beautiful tone for the service and Rabbi Gardenswartz’s remarks completely captured all of our comments to him about my father. I remarked to him that despite not knowing my father personally how he delivered a eulogy that made everyone in attendance believe that he did. Of course none of us wanted to be there, but my Mom and the rest of my family could not have been more pleased with how this turned out. We are grateful and will never forget.

The ride from Newton to Sharon is roughly 20 miles and takes about ½ an hour. For those not familiar with the area the trip is complex. When the funeral director had recommended a police escort we were somewhat skeptical, but as it turned out the advice was excellent and we think money well spent. The police (3 cars)

blocked traffic from side streets, escorted us through traffic signals and intersections, and kept to procession together. It was similar to the treatment received by a Presidential motorcade. While I think my Dad would have been embarrassed with all the attention, everyone in the procession commented and marveled at how efficient the transit to the cemetery was. I would highly recommend using the escort under similar situations with a longer transit (vs. those going to closer cemeteries like those in West Roxbury).

For me, the burial was surreal. If I had harbored any doubts about whether my Dad's death was real or merely a horrible dream the burial service erased any doubts. We had not discussed the details of the burial with the Rabbi and weren't quite sure what to expect with respect to lowering the casket into the grave or covering the casket with soil. We had concerns about how the children would react. I think our lesson learned was to trust in our traditions and the Rabbi's experience. The casket was lowered completely into the grave and each of us participated in completely covering it with soil. There were shovels for the adults, and trowels for the children. We all participated, said our first Kaddish as mourners, and left my father to return home for the start of our Shiva observance.

Just as attendance at the service exceeded our wildest expectations so did the number of those who came to our home for Shiva visits. I have just a couple of observations on this first afternoon and evening. We arrived home early afternoon, approximately 1-1:30 and had visitors through the evening service which ended at roughly 8PM, and an hour beyond. It was a long and trying day. In hindsight we should have built in a break from late afternoon through dinnertime. My other observation deals with the service itself. When planning the shiva observance we were uncertain about whether or not to hold services in our home, and our "compromise" was to schedule a service for the 1st night, but not beyond. It turned out that the service was very warm and meaningful. We had an excellent volunteer leader sent by the Bereavement Committee. My Mom made some short comments about my father and how honored he would have been by the day's events. Everyone in attendance commented on how much they truly enjoyed the service. So my learning was that having the evening services at home was a very positive experience, and if I were making this choice again I may well have done this each evening we sat Shiva. I didn't expect to feel this way and I feel it important to share my thoughts on this as a result.

Reflections on the remainder of the Shiva:

After my father died on Tuesday with a Thursday funeral, we chose to sit Shiva for Thursday, Friday, and Sunday (with an interruption for Shabbat). This was during April's school vacation week. Our thought in ending Shiva on Sunday was to return our kids to as normal a routine as possible on Monday when school and other activities resumed after the break. I think it's true that "hosting" Shiva was in some ways a burden and on one hand we were happy to have our home "back to ourselves". However, speaking only for myself, I now wish we had "extended"

Shiva and sat for a longer period. My father's death was a profound, life changing experience that I wasn't expecting, at least at this time. Even though I'm not sure whom if anyone else may have visited I think I could have used a bit more time to adjust to what had happened.

I think that the community needs to do more to train individuals on not just what to do when a family member dies, but also in how to behave when making a Shiva call or when contacting a family in mourning. I'm profoundly grateful for the kindness we were shown, the many visits we were paid, and the many calls we received. At the same time I was surprised at the number of people who called repeatedly insisting to speak with my Mom, especially before the funeral itself. Unfortunately, there were other behaviors that I don't think were appropriate. There needs to be recognition that something bad and profound has occurred affecting the Shiva family. The family needs to be allowed to talk and react at their own pace. For the week of Shiva, it really is about the family in mourning, not the needs of the well-intended friends.

On the Shabbat after Shiva ends it is customary that the mourners attend Kabbalat Shabbat services and be welcomed back into the community. Like so many of my other experiences I was surprised by the importance and impact of this simple act. In our case Rabbi Gardenswartz met us and other families who had lost loved ones during the week at the back of the sanctuary and during L'cha Dodi briefly asked each of what we had learned during the week just passed. At the end of L'cha Dodi he escorted back into the service and introduced us as returning mourners. For me, this was one last chance to think back on all that had occurred before I moved on to the inevitable reality of helping my Mom return to a new and profoundly different lifestyle.

Shloshim – the first 30 days:

While the funeral and Shiva had driven home the reality of my father's death, it didn't end the sadness or feeling of loss. I chose to attend evening services each day for the 1st month to recite Kaddish and I found this to be helpful and even enjoyable. Going daily is a significant commitment and impacted my wife and children who were extremely supportive. My plans for after the 30 day period ends are uncertain in that I do not want to stop attending services, since I am not sure I can sustain going daily for the 11 month mourning period for a parent. I am grateful for a strategy suggested by Rabbi Gardenswartz (to choose a consistent schedule for attending services, say 1, 2, or 3 times per week and carve this time out with your family so you can continue to regularly attend and say Kaddish). I'm not yet sure how many days I will go but I'm certain that I will follow this model through the end of the first year.

My other comment would be that friends, neighbors, and even teachers should still try to be sensitive to a family's loss past Shiva. You may return to work, school and other normal activities, but that doesn't mean that things are all back

to normal. It's still not a bad idea to be sensitive about when you call, or when you want to send your kids over for playdates. Where there are children discussions about death or about the lost family member may come out of nowhere, or the child may be very stressed and not able to deal as well with challenging situations at school. Everyone, adult or child, is different. Even teachers need to be aware and report to the parents and work with them on ways to ease a child back into their normal activities.

In the days and weeks following my Dad's death we received amazing volumes of sympathy cards and donations. I was struck by the generosity of people we knew well and those we didn't. A donation stands out and makes a uniquely positive statement. Debbie and I plan to be more timely and to make a much stronger effort in the future to donate to the synagogue or other worthy cause when the parent of a friend or other individual we know dies. While I sincerely appreciate the many cards I received and the good wishes they represent, the donations made in my Dad's memory stand out as a tribute to him and the importance he placed in Jewish continuity and the other charities we designated. I think we all need to consider the importance of making a similar donation when the occasion warrants it.

Addendum:

What did this cost?

A funeral is expensive. Even for families with strong financial means it can sometimes be confusing to know where money is and how best to access it. In our parent's generation it's not uncommon for the husband to have handled most financial issues. In a sudden death recreating the financial architecture, locating accounts, and accessing passwords for online banking can be a real challenge.

Our funeral cost on the order of \$20,000, including the cost of an additional cemetery plot for my Mother's use for (we hope) many, many years from now. The 2 plots cost on the order of \$7000 and the fees with the funeral home were about \$13,000. There are ways to save on this, just as there are ways to spend more. We could have spent considerably more at the cemetery had we opted to purchase a contained family area. We could have spent a bit less at the funeral home had we chosen a somewhat simpler casket (these can be expensive!). Even on a "budget" I think it would be difficult to spend less than \$15,000. Both the cemetery and funeral home take charge cards. The cemetery required all payments up front. The funeral home took a 50% payment up front with the remainder due within 60 days.

Miscellaneous comments and recommendations:

There was very little that could have been improved upon by our synagogue staff. As I mentioned earlier everyone was phenomenal and my entire family was

pleased and profoundly grateful for their support and services. However, there are a small number of items I would like to mention that I think we could do more about as we try to improve our support to mourning families.

- Mourning rules and periods for saying Kaddish. Until I sought out this information no one offered to explain how long you say Kaddish for and how this differs for the death of a parent vs. the death of a spouse. I'd also suggest explaining when the different services meet and how the afternoon and evening service might be used to bridge 2 days if one is trying to say Kaddish daily. Finally, I'm still unclear as to our customs about visiting a grave and unveilings, as well as why acknowledgement cards are not prepared and sent during the first month. Although these can be looked up its sometimes helpful to have someone explain the issues to you directly so you can ask questions. In fairness I want to point out that our Ritual Director, Dan Nesson, has been continuously available to answer any and all of my questions as they arise.

A member of the Bereavement Committee has suggested that these things may not be done so as to not make a family feel that any of this is a requirement. My response is simple. The information should be offered. A family can accept or decline as they see fit.

- 30 day touch point. In my opinion it would be useful for a member of the clergy to contact a mourning family near the end of Shloshim to see how things are going and what questions the family might have. If there are adjustment issues that might suggest counseling or questions like mine about how to continue saying Kaddish beyond the 30 day point, or unveilings, this conversation would give an opportunity to address these.
- My father was brought up in a more traditional setting and I am confident that my Mother's choice to not donate any organs was correct for him. However, our position as a synagogue and movement on organ donation has evolved, and this is discussed in the Bereavement Committees' pamphlet on death and dying. I hadn't realized this until reading and discussing the topic during our Shiva. I'd like to suggest that this might be a topic for more training through columns by our Rabbis or sermons. This might also be an issue for the Rabbi to discuss with the family in an initial call if there is sufficient time to impact this decision.

The most important thought I want to pass on is that one can never be completely prepared for death. We don't choose its timing. Nobody wants to face these issues. But when parents reach a certain age they need to do this as a help to their families and the children who will stand up and take responsibility. To do this is nothing short of an act of love and kindness to your children and sets a wonderful example.