



Lessons learned from a beloved woman

• BATYA L. LUDMAN

My very beloved mother-in-law passed away in Florida this past week. I was blessed to know my mother-in-law even longer than I knew my own biological mother, and not for one minute did she feel like anything but my own mother. From day one I called her “Mom” and there were no in-law cards for either of us.

As a young married woman, I never understood all those mother-in-law jokes, as she was simply the best, and when I had an important question, it was she to whom I turned. For 37 years, our only disagreement was over our taking her three grandchildren away from her when we made aliya.

Having recently written about disenfranchised grief with respect to perinatal loss, being a grieving daughter-in-law qualifies as well, given that society, in general, less understands and recognizes this loss.

Judaism, surprisingly however, does recognize this loss and even allows one to rend a garment as an expression of mourning if one should so choose. I opted not to, in spite of having given a eulogy describing my love for my “mom.”

As someone who has done bereavement work for decades, I suddenly saw myself like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*: On the one hand, she felt so much like my mother, I felt the loss in so many ways. On the other hand, if I rend a garment, I would personally want to sit *shiva* (the traditional seven-day mourning period) instead of managing the kitchen and logistics and looking after my father-in-law, husband and other mourners. As a traditionalist, I opted for choice two.

Now, as we conclude shiva, I am reminded of all the very important messages I try to convey to my patients when they come to see me with torn hearts. Loss is

very painful, and while we ultimately heal, we are never the same. How can we be, when someone we love is no longer in our lives? We do move on, and take a little of them with us as we do so.

Over the next weeks and months I will remind myself and my loved ones of the following:

- Grieving hurts. We mourn with our entire body – not just our heads. It is not at all unusual to physically experience reminders of our pain. Attend to your physical as well as your emotional hurt at this time.

- Grieving is harder and takes longer than we may think. Life for many does not “go on as normal” after seven or 30 days. There is no defined “right” amount of time to grieve. We all grieve in our own time. Take the time you need.

- Society’s expectations for the mourner are ridiculously unrealistic. You will need to protect yourself during this very difficult time. Each loss is unique and presents its own set of issues. Accept the support of others but don’t let their expectations define how you grieve. There is no one way to grieve. As individuals, we all grieve in our own way.

- While there may be times when we’re having difficulty focusing and concentrating, when our memory plays tricks on us and we think we perhaps are going crazy, it’s important to recognize that all of this is normal. It is the situation that isn’t. Your expectations for yourself also need to be realistic. Be kind to yourself right now. You need it.

- Grief changes in intensity. Just when we think we are okay, there will be times when we suddenly experience an upsurge in grief – perhaps with reason, as when there is a birthday or special family event, but often just when catching the fragrance of someone whose perfume is similar to your loved one, or even in the aisle of the grocery store when you walk by something that reminds you of your loved one. Grief hits

you sometimes when you least expect it. You can’t really prepare for this, but knowing that it could happen may help you better accept it.

- We grieve for many things – not just the person herself. Roles and relationships within the family may change. You grieve for future events that won’t include your loved one. We grieve for missed opportunities and past regrets.

- Move on with life but acknowledge that the loss will always be a part of you.

I know the gift of time is an important one. Judaism’s rituals, with its shiva, *shloshim* (30-day mourning period) and year-of-mourning proscriptions, make sense. We gradually adjust to our loss and reenter the routines of our lives.

I know, too, that I and the rest of my family will be fine and ultimately move on. I will see in my children and my husband and my “dad” little bits of my “mom.”

After 37 years of hearing my mom tell us to be careful when we do something – be it to drive, exercise or cut up vegetables – instead of wondering why she would think admonishing us might change our behavior, at long last I know: as I do these things I will be blessed to think of her and smile as my behavior will change.

So Mom, as we bid you farewell, I hope that you know that your actions and deeds will forever live on in the hearts of us all. You were a wonderful woman and I will miss you dearly.

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