

Saying Goodbye in the Time of Corona

There have been a lot of “goodbyes” these past two years. We said goodbye to normalcy. We said goodbye to how we worked. We said goodbye to how we gathered. We said goodbye to how we celebrate and we said “goodbye” to how we say our goodbyes.

The danger and/or fear of the virus has permeated all of our lives. Over the past two years simchas have been postponed. And many a funeral was reduced to a zoom memorial. Things have improved somewhat and gatherings have become a bit larger but uneven when it comes to who feels comfortable coming because of COVID concerns.

My family is no different. Although we did a “zoom memorial” which allowed so many people to virtually celebrate Mom’s life, the funeral itself was a small family gathering to say goodbye to our mother. If she were younger (she died at 93) and there was no COVID the gathering could have been infinitely larger but even before COVID she insisted she did not want a big funeral as we did for my dad. Too much stress. Too much work. Too much, “too much”. *“Promise me you will keep it simple”*. And so, we did.

The words of my sisters, of the grandchildren, my cousin Cantor Alisa Fineman singing along with the gentle, kind presence of my colleague Rabbi Sarah Weissman helped get us all through a difficult time. As for me I know there is a time to officiate, and a time to mourn. This was a time to mourn. To say *my* goodbye.

Dementia is a terrible disease. It strips away dignity and memory. It is like watching a loved one die one day at a time. I have some solace in knowing that a few weeks ago she still recognized me. She still asked me how the Temple was doing. How my family was doing, even if she couldn’t recall everyone’s name. As I said, it is a terrible disease.

My sisters have been incredible on this journey. All three of them, Audrey, Deena and Lisa played a part in insuring that our mother was taken care of with loving care. Every detail was attended to. Every worry heard and attended to as well. I can’t thank them enough. I am a rabbi who sees this every day. But as a son, it

was something too hard for me to bear. I did my part, but nothing compared to their daily attention to our mother.

And so, at the age of 64, I feel blessed to have had parents with me for so many years. And even though my mother has been ill for quite some time, I still feel a bit untethered knowing that she is gone. The mind knows what it knows, and the heart knows what it knows. And they are not the same.

In her more lucid moments, my mother would say, "*sometimes you can live too long*". My heart still wants her here one more day. But my mind understands what she meant. She did not want to live as a burden to her family (and we hope she knows that she was never a burden-my sisters acted always out of pure love). But mostly she did not want to live a life which was not living. We would visit and watch for moments when she would laugh and smile and sing and we had hope in our hearts. But our mind understood that each day was a goodbye.

And then it happened; the final day. The final goodbye. January 31st. 2022.

We have a word for goodbye; Shalom. Imbedded in this simple word is a beautiful concept. Shalom means "hello" and "goodbye". Is it because Jews don't know whether we are coming or going?! Or perhaps it is something a bit deeper. With every "hello" there is the potential for "goodbye". Relationships begin and they end. People enter our lives and they leave. But tradition also says that love is stronger than death. In this thought I feel that with death, there is no real final goodbye. There is only another moment waiting, when sometime, somewhere, somehow, we will say "hello" again. Until then, I find comfort in knowing in my heart and my mind, that Mom is at peace.

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