

HEALING THE LOSS OF A PARENT  
THROUGH JEWISH RITUAL

N E C E S S A R Y

M O U R N I N G

DAHLIA ABRAHAM-KLEIN

Necessary Mourning

Healing the Loss of a Parent through Jewish Ritual

By Dahlia Abraham-Klein

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Presented to

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by

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In loving memory of

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on

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TO MY SON,

Jonah

*May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe*

*May God bless you and watch over you*

*May God shine His face on you and show you favor*

*May God be favorably disposed toward you,*

*And may He grant you peace.*

-Genesis 48:20

*I should like to call attention to the following facts. During the past thirty years, people from all civilized countries of earth have consulted me. I have treated many hundreds of patients.... Protestants...Jews (and a small number of Catholics). Among all my patients...there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not the finding of a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost that which the living religions of every age have given to their followers, and none of them has really been healed who did not have a religious outlook on life.*

-Carl Jung

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## **PROLOGUE**

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## ***The Soul Slowly Seeps Out***

My entire childhood, my parents staunchly refused to let any of us to have an animal in the house, particularly a dog, and I really wanted a dog. My siblings were much older than I. They moved out when I was young and I grew up as an only child. I needed company. So as a gift when I was eight years old, my brother Gideon broke the house rule and brought home a cute and rambunctious blond mutt that I named Ashi. I had no idea how to care for little Ashi or how to housebreak him. My brother returned to university and I was left with an untrained dog. That did not last long, especially when Ashi peed and pooped all over the house, particularly on my parents' expensive Persian carpets. My mother quickly demanded that Gideon return home and remove this dog. Gideon found a new home for Ashi and I never saw him again.

Many years later, well into my adult married life, when my father was dying of cancer, he finally shared with us that he did like dogs, but had hid that fact from us to avoid the responsibility of taking care of one. When I adopted my cocker spaniel after my marriage, my dad came clean about his own childhood pet dog, Ursik. I think the name I chose, Ashi, a Persian-sounding name that I had never heard before, was just as comical as Ursik. I can only imagine that somehow my dad and I were subliminally connected through the funny names we chose for our dogs—I was linked to my Dad in more ways than I realized. It was sweet, I thought, and it humanized my dad for me. As my father was slowly dying, he would easily share his life stories with me. There were no filters between his ego and thoughts; he just let everything flow. On the one hand, I felt like it was his way of making peace with himself and with me, and on the other it was if he wanted me to be a witness to his life. He wanted me to remember, cherish and learn his life so that I could share it.

This was a far contrast from the man I knew when I was growing up, whom I viewed as a stuffed shirt. My father was an emotionally distant man, who wore only suits (even on Sundays!) and seemed to view his children as a fulfillment of duties to

be fruitful and multiply. My siblings and I felt like we were born for the family portrait. Behind the facade was terrible dysfunction.

My relationship with my father in my formative years was nearly non-existent. He was the patriarch, a mover and shaker in the illustrious gemstone business with offices worldwide, and a benefactor to many Jewish organizations. This led him to live six months of the year in New York and the remaining six months in Thailand. Being raised in a traditional, loud Sephardi home where entertaining family and guests was the norm, I felt like part of the landscape—lost to the opulent background of grand marble halls and spiral staircase. Since I was the last child of four and there was a large age difference between me and my older siblings, I did not have any toys to play with. My parents had given them all away and were not interested in starting over again. I was left to my own devices to self-entertain. A typical example of this is the one time I took a cardboard box and cut out windows and a door to make a dollhouse. I used the leftover cardboard to carve out the furniture and family for the dollhouse, while drawing in the rest of the details. I was usually left in a corner by myself with little interaction. I don't regret any of this today, because I believe these solo experiences cultivated my creativity, but at the time I did feel very neglected.

I grew closer to my father when he developed multiple myeloma, a cancer of the white blood cells that eats away at the bones. I watched him living in tremendous pain, regularly taking oxycodone. As the disease progressed, like the main character from the movie *Benjamin Button*, he became infantilized due to his lack of independence. Something about his vulnerability and his suffering made me see him as a sweet old man, not the father who was too busy to show up for my high school graduation.

As my father spiraled toward death, he shared more of himself, his childhood in Afghanistan and Pakistan, his married life to my mother in India, and his business life in Thailand. The filters of his thoughts were lifting. The line between consciousness and unconsciousness were blurred. There was something very poignant about this for me. I knew he was dying: He was in hospice and had outlived his doctor's prediction of three to nine more months. I felt that this slow, steady

seeping out of the soul was a natural process. It was God's way of easing my father, and us, into the transition of his death, rather than having it come as an abrupt shock.

A few months prior to his passing, he was lying in agony on the living room sofa. My mother gave him morphine for the pain, but probably too little to help. My father's bones were fragile, and he also suffered terrible tooth pain. He explained that it was a shooting pain that gashed at him to the point where he could not talk. His agony compelled me to do something more than morphine. I ran out to the drug store, purchased a heat pack and applied it to his cheek as I massaged his hands. He perked up a bit and said that he was feeling relieved. Within minutes he fell asleep. This process showed me how in times of deep pain and despair we need tender, loving care. Somehow, being a part of my father's pain and relief redeemed him of all the sadness and disappointment I felt at not having him around in my formative years.

### ***Reflections on my father's Death***

My father passed away on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August, 2014, at his home in New York (13 Av, 5774, in the Jewish calendar; this is the date we memorialize his death every year). He fought multiple myeloma bravely and with dignity, and rarely complained about his pain or his impending death. When my sister reached me in London, where I was traveling, to let me know that my father had died, my initial reaction was shock. That was followed by centering myself to make burial arrangements and to write the eulogy. Although I was in a mental fog, focusing on the burial arrangements felt like I was in a safe container, shielded from the outside world. The next phase was the intense, week-long process of "sitting" *shiva*, first with only family and then with our comforting visitors. Having them surround me was like a warm embrace. At *30 days*, we entered a new phase of the grieving process, and the frame widened with more activities I could participate in—for one; I could cut my unruly hair, an activity that had been off-limits in the immediate aftermath of the death. My family and I arranged to have a large dinner gathering in a hall and memorialize my father with stories and prayers. At the end of the year-long

mourning process, we organized my father's *death anniversary (yahrtzeit)*, in Israel at his graveside with my family members and first cousins from my father's side.

The process of mourning throughout the year was systematic; intense at first and then gradually easing. Every year at the *death anniversary*, we hold a special commemoration for my father, gathering friends and family for a meal, lighting a candle, reciting *The Mourners Prayer* and donating to charity.

I know that my father mourned for his own parents in the most complete way he could. While he did sit the week of intense mourning (*shiva*), observed the customary *30 days*, and even recited *The Mourners Prayer* for his parents for 11 months<sup>1</sup>, he also attended festive parties, which is typically avoided for the year. He probably would not have minded if I had gone to parties during the year of mourning, as he would not have wanted me to miss out on family festivities. Family gatherings meant everything to him. Although he was an absentee father, when it came to family celebrations, he would fly in for them from anywhere in the world.

I decided to opt out of all parties that had live music for the year and follow the traditional way of mourning. Whenever there was a festive event that I could not attend (and there were many that year), that was the time when I had to confront the mourning. I felt separated, quarantined from everyone else, and while it was not pleasant, it was necessary. I knew that my isolation was not designed be a punishment, but more like a "time out" to reflect on how my dad could not participate. We were both consoling each other at a psycho-spiritual level. Through the confinement, I connected and reflected. The time-bound Jewish way of mourning, with all its psychological insight, created a means for me to carry my father within throughout the journey. The laws of mourning freed me from social norms and expectations, allowing me to focus on memories of my father, in order to move forward in life in the most meaningful and holistic way possible.

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<sup>1</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 376:4. The rabbinic 12 months of mourning is actually 12 months; however, *kaddish* is said for 11 months.

One of those ways was through writing. It is a wonderful companion to a loss, when we feel alone. Writing this book has been cathartic. It has clarified my thoughts and deepened my appreciation of the process of mourning.

I share these Jewish ritualistic pearls of wisdom with you, along with my own journey, because they are the birthright of every Jew, no matter what your Jewish affiliation. Even if you are picking up this book and perusing it after the death, there is still a wealth of benefit embedded in these Jewish traditions. I share with you the *necessity* of mourning.

DAHLIA ABRAHAM-KLEIN

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