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REFLECTIONS

By Madeleine Charney
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At home with death

My synagogue recently birthed itself into the 21st century. We have a homepage now. A congregant (or any other person on the planet) is able to zoom into cyberspace to gather written and visual information about our shul: an update on the search for a new rabbi, dates and times for services and events, the history and philosophy of the congregation, and photographs of the building, inside and out, among other tidbits. Plus, for the sake of convenience, one can subscribe to the e-mail list for additional announcements.

Usually these e-mail messages promote a special event to be held in the near future. A familiar subject line chirps, "Coming this Thursday evening…" and the body of the text reveals an invitation to hear a political speaker or participate in a fundraiser for a local charity. But one morning this winter a message arrived with a cryptic subject line: "We regret to inform you…"

What could it be? Was this week's speaker cancelled? Was there an increase in membership dues? I clicked on the blue subject line to reveal the body of the text. It read:

"We regret to inform you of the death of congregant, Murray Kaplan/Mordechai Shmuel ben Yitzchak.

"Funeral tomorrow at 11 a.m. Shiva will be held at the home of his son, Larry Kaplan."

I stared at the pulsing, blue and white screen for a long time as a numbness seeped into me. It was not shock or sadness at the root of this numbness. I did not know this man; his name wasn't even familiar. And yet I could not bring myself to click delete and dispense with the cyber body of Murray Kaplan/Mordechai Shmuel ben Yitzchak, erasing his existence from my screen and my consciousness permanently. I couldn't just delete him. So I sat and stared at his name a while longer. "Murray Kaplan/Mordechai Shmuel ben Yitzchak," I mused, "where are you now?

The high pitched brrrrrrrrr… of the cordless telephone jolted me from my thoughts. I reached over to grasp the receiver, still staring at the screen. "Madeleine? It's Rachael Berman from shul. Do you have a minute?"

"Yes, Rachael, what can I do for you?" I replied thickly.

"Well," she said, "we've had a death in the community. Larry Kaplan's father passed away early this morning."

"Mmm, I just read the e-mail, as a matter of fact," I said.

"The reason I'm calling you'" continued Rachael, in a somber tone, "is to see if you're available to be a shomeret (guardian) at the funeral home later today."

Without thinking, I responded, "Of course. What time do you need me?"

After choosing an unfilled slot and briefly reviewing the duties involved, we said goodbye. I turned back to the computer screen and closed the e-mail. Murray would be safe in my Inbox for a while.

At 4:30 that same afternoon, I ascended the steps of the Douglass Funeral Home, my only other visit to such a place since my grandmother died in 1986. Just as Rachael had said, there was a formal sitting room to the immediate right with two books laid out on a small wooden table. One of them contained the psalms in English, the other in Hebrew. The house was silent except for the dull thrum of appliances from another room. The source, I gathered, were the large refrigerators on the lower level that temporarily house the corpses prior to preparation for burial. I perched on the edge of a stiff, striped settee, grateful for the privacy as I became acclimated to this makeshift living room.

After a while, I was gripped with an impulse to be down on the floor. I wanted to get closer to Murray, to let him know that someone was there. I lowered my head toward the carpet, beaming my intention down through the floorboards and through the chilled, metal enclosure below, "Rest now, Murray. You're on your way home." Then I cradled the well-worn book of psalms in the crook of my elbow and began reciting Psalm 25:1-3:

"The Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me to water in places of repose;

He renews my life; He guides me in right paths…"

Two days later I ascended another set of steps to the home of Larry Kaplan. I had never met this man. His face wasn't even familiar. But as with any other congregant who received the "We regret to inform you…" e-mail, he warmly extended his hand, introduced himself, and led me inside. I set my covered, aluminum tin on the kitchen table among the many casseroles and carefully wrapped meals for the family and found an unoccupied folding chair in the living room alongside the other visitors. Dark cloth had been pinned over the mirrors and would remain there for the seven days of Shiva (loss). For seven days the family and all visitors would erase their self-image, becoming bodiless like Murray.

Larry took his place beside his mother on the other low, wooden crate, the customary seat for mourners, and continued with an animated tale of his father's earlier days. Pictures of Murray had been set out on a table nearby. I bent closer to see Murray swaddled and resting on his mother's shoulder, as a teenager, as a soldier in uniform, at his wedding, holding baby Larry on this knee, with his arm around his father, Yitzchak, and playing four handed piano with his granddaughter. "We meet again, Murray" I said to myself, as I smiled into the eyes of his face for the first time and lightly touched his cheek through the glass with my finger.

Spring in New England bounds into existence. The wooded landscape transforms from a stark and leafless still life into a shimmering green mirage in a week's time. My burgeoning skills as a landscape designer led me to volunteer my insights into a working design for the synagogue's cemetery. Finally the snow had melted enough for me to get my first look at the two-acre property. Although some of the cemetery's plots have already been filled, there was no long-range plan for the best use of the land.

Industriously, I measured the perimeter, snapped photos from every angle, dug a soil sample, considered the orientation of the sun, noted the neighboring properties, inventoried the trees, and compared the patterns of drainage on the ground with the topography map. After hours of exertion I retreated up a short, sloped path on the other half of the property to rest in the shade and sip some water. This area was still forested; a thick carpet of fallen leaves was the bed for old white pines, graceful white birches, and intermingled young sugar maples and beeches. A soft wind rattled the tiny buds of the sugar maples. Spicy pine branches bowed down, the supple needles combing through my hair.

From this vantagepoint I studied the simple, low gravestones in the adjacent clearing. Their narrow tops were dotted with small stones placed there by past visitors. New growth of a patchy lawn poked up through the sandy, well-drained soil. The edge of the tree shadows arched over me and out across the lawn, grazing the nearest row of gravestones. Relaxing my gaze, a square of neatly dug, fresh earth stood out from the mottled green and brown tones. I walked toward it, bending forward to read the small, temporary, metal sign poked into the ground. Stamped into the surface were the words "Murray Kaplan/Mordechai Shmuel ben Yitzchak."

Without thinking, I began to hum the melody of an ancient chant. Then the words rose to my lips:

"Hineni osah et atzmi merkavah l'Shechina, merkavah l'Shechina" (which means "Here I am, turning myself into the chariot of the Divine.")

I closed my eyes and filled my chest with the scent of moist earth, holding the breath until I felt my heart pulse in my throat. Releasing it, I looked up through vapors of thick clouds backlit by streaks of sunlight.

"See you around, Murray. And thank you," I projected in a voice full of wonder and joy.

Then I reached my fingers into the cool soil, pulled out a smooth, egg-shaped stone, and placed it along the top edge of the earth.

Madeleine Charney lives in Northampton.

Reflections is a new column that welcomes submissions of essays, poems, short stories, etc., from Ledger readers. Send your submission via e-mail to tracysullivan @ jewishledger. com, via fax to (860) 231-2428, or mail it Western Massachusetts Jewish Ledger, 740 North Main St., West Hartford, CT 06117.

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