



In Memory of Victor Hember
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I write to you four days after the death of my stepfather. This is the period of shiva, the seven days of mourning, a week suspended in time, a blur of memory and emotion.

Among the memories that surround me now is the sound of the kriyah ribbon tearing, the ribbon worn over the hearts of sons and daughters who have lost a parent. We say before tearing: “baruch dayan ha’emet, blessed are you, the judge of truth... the true judge. Blessed are you God who sees the truth of our lives.” These seven days of sitting still, of listening, is for me a sustained meditation on the meaning, the truth of my stepfather’s life.

Vic said to a close friend several weeks before his death, “Now, it is my turn to learn how to die.” For vic, it was all about learning.

Experiencing shiva, I realize that when it comes to death, I am a beginner and that I have only just begun to learn how to grieve. Each hour of this long week has brought with it a gift, an unexpected teaching.

I have learned how hard it is to disconnect from the pull of e-mail, of work commitments, of the gym—all the things that tether me to normalcy. I have learned the untold power of showing up. Never will I forget the faces: faces of those who circled Vic’s open grave, faces of those who crowd our living room night after night, faces of those who come for quiet afternoon visits. There are Vic’s colleagues whom I never knew, neighbors from 20 years ago. “Do we ring the doorbell or not?” “Should we leave our boots at the door?” Overcoming the awkwardness, they arrive — orchids in hand and carefully wrapped cookies, walking tentatively up the stairs. I am learning the quiet power of showing up.

“We are putting a blanket on Grandpa,” Meir said, and so Gavi took the shovel in his small hands to cover his grandfather’s plain pine box with earth—the man who raised me, cared for bravely and tenderly by my own son. There in a snow-covered New England cemetery, I was cradled in circles of connection. A raw tear in human connection defines the core of grief. Thus, it is human connection that heals.

In our tradition, after a parent dies, his or her child says kaddish every day for a year. Wisely, kaddish is a communal prayer, meant to be said in the context of a minyan. In this spirit, every Tuesday and Thursday for the coming year, you will find me either in the chapel or in the main sanctuary from 9:15–9:45. I would be honored and comforted by the presence of any who wish to join me in prayer, even if only occasionally.

Hamakom yinachem otanu, May the holy one be with us as we teach each other both how to grieve and how to heal.