

Talk for Temple Emunah Shabbat July 31, 2010
What have I learned after 45 years Studying Bereavement Issues
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As I talk about what I have done these many years, I want to emphasize that although technically retired I flunked retirement. I don't go to the office every day, I don't have a paying job but the subject I have worked on, in the past, is still a very important part of my life. I still do research, largely at the Children's Room, the Center for Grieving Children and Adolescents, in Arlington, at which I am a founding board member. I am still trying to see where what I have learned over the years fits into the world of the bereaved. There is still so much new to learn.

What did I learn and why am I talking about it this morning? In today's Parsha we are listening to Moses preparing to die. He is reviewing his life and his accomplishments. He is establishing his legacy for all time. His message is – we take what we can from the past into the future. Not all of his message, might be relevant today, but what he is saying, that death is part of living, is very relevant. In preparation for this talk, I've been going over some of what I have been doing all these years. In the context of the parsha, it seemed appropriate to share a bit of it this morning. Moses was ready to die, he knew that this was part of life. For me that was one of my first lessons– death is part of living. I went to my first funeral when I was 25. My grandmother had died. My mother called from NY and asked if I felt I should come home. Children were at all costs, in her world, protected from death. As I grew and moved about in the world, I used to close my eyes when I went by a cemetery. One lesson from my work: I don't do that anymore.

What else did I learn that is most relevant today? My first job was developing a program for the widowed. A group of widows were working for me on what was later called the Widow-to-Widow program. They were reaching out to the newly widowed in Dorchester, using their own experience to help the newly widowed in that community. In 1965 it was thought that the bereaved could cope with the crisis caused by the death in 6 weeks and then would be back to normal. I shared this with these women. When they heard 6 weeks, they started to laugh. They said that if in 2 years you can turn your head around and see a future you are lucky. This view of time is still important

to keep in mind. We need to respect the time tables of people who are mourning. There is no quick fix, as much as we would like there to be. What I learned from these women was that my best teachers were people who had been there; who could understand what they each were feeling and learn from their experience. When they said they understood they meant it. A colleague called this experiential knowledge. I don't think we appreciate this source of information enough. As a result of working with these women, I had to rethink my role as the professional. They didn't depend on me as a helper but as a partner with them in creating a setting where they were the helpers. My job was putting together what we were learning to make it available to others.

I also learned that how we grieve is effected by many aspects of our lives. I was hearing from many women who we reached out to, that when they were married they were someone but now, as widows they are nothing. In 1969-1970 women were not comfortable going out alone. They were defined by their community and this made a big difference in how they saw themselves and in how they lived their lives. This always reminds me of a visit I made to a small city in Wisconsin, about 1975, to talk about what I had learned about widowhood. I took out my knitting when I finished talking and was listening to other speakers. Women in the audience were shocked. At their first opportunity, they shared with me what they had been told by the women's liberation organization in their community: "When we knit at a meeting it is disrespectful to the speaker and demeaning to ourselves as well". I told them that I didn't agree: "It simply makes it easier for me to listen". That afternoon half the women in the audience were knitting. When I got home a few weeks later my husband got a letter from the funeral directors who had invited me, to thank him for letting me come. I wish I could find this letter. I see it as an heirloom of a time gone by, thank goodness. In the context of the widow to widow program these women developed a new community. Even before there were major changes in our society, this new community helped them move out in the world in a different way and to know themselves in a different way, appropriate to their new situation.

What we were doing in the widow-to-widow program was our own version- if you will, of Alcoholics Anonymous. Some call it self help, I prefer the term mutual help because it is really people helping each other; exchanging knowledge, friendship and care. To some extent this is what the

bereavement committee here at Temple Emunah does for those of our members who experience a death in the family. I remember when that committee was formed in Golda Dockser's (ז"ל) living room about 20 years ago. It was there that we started work on the booklet Measure of Mourning which provides and still, in its new edition, our members with details of what to do when a death occurs, and details the Conservative Movement's funeral practice.

I also learned that grief does not go in a straight line. There are no stages or steps. People would ask –am I in the right place—there is no right place. In a sense the right place is where you are as you live through mourning the death of someone you care about. I stopped using the word recover. Grief is not an illness that you get over. It is a normal life cycle event, a time of change and transition, that we will all at one time or another experience. It may involve many kinds of pain all of which are normal. We all need to become experts on how to cope, how to live with our grief, that is, to accept our helplessness, that there are things we can't fix, and that we need to accept the pain, the sadness, the emptiness, and learn to make the changes we need to make to find new ways of being in this changed world. We each have our own time table. There is no recovery, that is, of going back to where you were before. Our life is changed as we would expect when we are without the person we cared about, especially if the person who died was a spouse or a child. I think, however, this is true no matter what your relationship was with the deceased. What matters is the part this person, who played a key role in your life, is gone and you now have to learn to live life differently with feelings you never wanted to experience, and that you are not sure what to do with; and that most others would rather not see or hear about.

For the first years of working with the bereaved I was also guided by the commonly held idea that we should leave the past behind us in order to go on. Remembering, talking about the deceased months or years after the death was taken to mean that the mourner was stuck in the past, not grieving properly. Probably one of the worst things you can say to a new widow for example, 6 months after the death, if she remembers her husband in the context of what she is doing: "Isn't it time you were over this?" .

My most recent research has been with children who lost a parent. As we talked to these children it became very clear that they were not versed in

bereavement theory, they hadn't read the book – and were instead busily finding ways to remember and feel attached to their now dead parent. This helped me confirm what I had known for sometime – mourners don't let go of the past. They find appropriate ways to carry the deceased into the future. I am not talking about living in the past. I am talking about remembering, honoring, and finding a way to keep the deceased in your life. Children spoke about talking to their parent, and dreaming about their parent. Some would go by their local cemetery where their parent was buried, sometimes with a friend and visit the grave. They would tell their parent about their day in school. In time older children talked about becoming their parent's legacy. In a book some years ago we called this Continuing Bonds.

I also learned something about comparative religion in this process. We light memorial candles in our home and go to synagogue to remember. With the community we say prayers for the dead 4 times a year. All this in addition to the prayer on the annual anniversary of the death, again with the community. Remembering and keeping the deceased in our lives is natural for someone from our tradition. No other religion that I know of does this. The Catholics, as I understand it, have a memorial mass once a year but they need to make a reservation and are in competition with other mourners for the time. This could have changed over the years. I think some Protestant Churches are beginning to develop memorial services.

What I am learning from my research at the Children's Room is that the reason this program is so successful is because both the children and their parents who come there find others like themselves. They no longer feel alone and different from others in their larger community. To quote a nine year old, whose father died, at the end of his first year at the children's room, "This place is great. I don't feel so alone and different anymore, like I do at school." They are also learning, from each other ways of coping and finding a way to reorganize their lives, that is to , in sense, create, a different way of living in their world. The teen performance group, at the Children's Room is sharing their grief with each other and using their experience to teach others what it means to grieve and lose a parent or a sibling. These findings support my passion about the value of mutual help. If any of you are interested in visiting the Children's Room let me know. We have tours so people can see where we are and what we do.

This takes me back to a sermon that Rabbi Joel Meyers gave to this congregation in 1973. It became the introduction to the handbook I did that year for Jewish Funeral Directors of America: A guide to the creation of a widowed to widowed service in your community. I want to close with part of his sermon that I think is relevant to us as a community, encouraging what we have started and continue to do to help each other when we are bereaved. I hope that this puts some of what I have learned in a useful context. Rabbi Meyers said:

‘The Bible spelled out clearly several thousand years ago and the Sages made the principle of Gemilut Hasadim, of performing acts of caring and concern for our fellow man, a cornerstone upon which the very foundation of society rests. It is no wonder then, that from the very beginning of our formation as a people we assumed the responsibility of caring for each other. We established charity funds, and burial societies, facilities to care for infirm and the elderly. We went out of our way to share meals and clothing and to care for the young. Our guiding principle was perhaps best expressed by a Hasidic saying: When a man is singing and cannot lift his voice, and another comes and sings along with him, another who can lift his voice, the first will be able to lift his voice too. That is the secret of the bond between spirits.

Over the course of time, however, we found it personally less burdensome to let large institutions perform these deeds which were once seen as incumbent upon each individual. As we moved further way from a personal commitment to care and to give of ourselves, we discovered that the quality of care actually decreased. Fortunately we are beginning to once more to understand what is really needed, if we seek to help others, this involves a personal commitment to care and to give of ourselves on many different levels. Ultimately, a mature understanding of our personal role in the life of the community must indicate to us that a reciprocity of feeling, caring and concern between individuals is essential. In a near mirror-image of our contemporary situation, there stands a legend in which God asked Moses if he had done all he could to work for the well-being of his society. Moses’ response, like so many of our responses, was that he did not think it possible for him to perfect society, but it was only God who could do it. In a pointed comment, God reminded Moses that only when he and others would begin to

exhibit concern and expend effort would society be able to achieve hoped for blessings.

It is precisely through an increased awareness of others' burdens together with a commitment to the principle of Gemilut Hasadim that we will be able to fulfill our roles as partners with God in bringing a measure of blessing to our fellow man. As a Talmudic adage puts it: If you will lift the load I will lift it too....”

Rabbi Joel Meyers, Temple Emunah, Lexington, MA 1973

How to end this talk? I think by reiterating.. “If You Will lift the load I will lift it too”. Only as we share with each other can we grow and learn to cope well with life, with death and with grief.