

Mourning Geoff

When Rabbi Lerner asked me a couple of weeks ago if I would like to speak about Geoff and my mourning process before the Yizkor service, I said, “ok,” not really thinking about what I would be feeling or saying. I thought that it would be a great way to continue to honor Geoff, and to be able to tell a little of our story. As I sat to write it down, so many thoughts came into my brain. Did I want to talk about how wonderful a life Geoff and I had, or talk about how much I see him every day in our children?

No, I have decided that I want to talk about the mourning process for me, and specifically how amazing our clergy, has been to my family.

In the past four years, our family has had more than its share of loss – my brother-in-law, Ben Zola, my dad, Norton Seltzer, my father-in-law, Joseph Zola, and of course, my beloved husband, Geoffrey David Zola.

In each of the losses, Rabbi Lerner and Rabbi Fel have been a support for our family and I appreciate all that they have done.

But I want to share with all of you a very personal and amazing set of moments that I could not have gotten through without Rabbi Lerner – and I feel

that it prepared me in a small way for the year of mourning that I am still experiencing.

Most of you probably know that Geoff had a terminal illness of glioblastoma multiforme – a deadly form of brain cancer with a life expectancy of 18 months. Geoff, with his amazing positive attitude and love of life, doubled this number, and I am so grateful that he was able to have a tremendous quality of life, up until his last two months.

Throughout Geoff's time in dealing with this illness, Rabbi Lerner checked in with us, and really was a source of strength for Geoff, me and the kids. Yes, Rabbi Lerner is a Rabbi, but for our family, he is more – he is that spiritual leader, AND a mensch.

When Geoff had his first seizure on March 31st, 2011, Rabbi Lerner got off a red-eye flight from California, and met us at Lahey Clinic. He held our hands, cried with us, and created a healing circle for our family.

The first person to visit Geoff after his surgery on April 4th was Rabbi Lerner – we even have the picture to share!

As we had many triumphant moments and our share of setbacks, Rabbi Lerner was there – in person and in words – and it was so helpful to all of us.

But there are two experiences that I want to share with everyone here that really explain why I am still standing, still smiling, and still able to hope, love, and care.

The first is the evening of Tuesday, January 7th, 2014.

Rabbi Lerner came to our home – Geoff was not doing well – he was sleeping most of the time, and we knew that things were coming to a close. Rabbi Lerner spent time with Geoff, with our kids, and with me in asking the tough questions, and more importantly, answering the tough questions from our children. He was kind, honest, human, and caring – and he encouraged our children to spend time alone with Geoff, and then together as a threesome. I know that they had that strength and ability because they had felt the comfort and love from Rabbi Lerner. Together, the six of us had a Viddui prayer and healing and comfort circle that I will never forget.

The second is the day of Geoff's passing – and I use the word passing purposely. Thursday, January, 9th, 2014. We knew that things were happening quickly – the hospice nurse was working with me to make sure Geoff was comfortable. The phone rang – it was Rabbi Lerner. Our conversation went something like this –Judy, it's Rabbi Lerner. I am so sorry that I can not be there with you physically right now – I am stuck in Boston. But I want to help you and

Geoff through this most important moment. Please listen carefully and follow my instructions.

When Geoff has taken his last breath, close his eyes, cover his body, and open the window in the room. You will then be able to have his soul or spirit leave this world and join the other.

I said, ok, thank you.

A circle of us surrounded Geoff, holding his hands, singing to him, speaking to him (since hearing is the last sense to leave one's body). We watched for his last breath, and when it happened, I kissed Geoff, closed his eyes, and opened the window. At that moment, I truly felt Geoff's nishama or soul leave his body and go through that open window. It was so comforting, and it gave me hope – this passing into a realm none of us know.

As I have hobbled through this crazy year, the comfort that I feel knowing that Geoff's spirit is watching out for us is like a warm blanket – keeping me safe and as whole as a broken person can be. Saying kaddish is helpful and going to minyan is also a comfort – our congregation has been amazing to our kids and to me. I understand how important the mourning process is for someone who has experienced loss – but for our family – it is just as important to have a loving guide and mentor – and Rabbi Lerner – I thank you with all of my heart for your

kindness, your love, and your help in showing us the way to mourn and to
continue to live.

Chag Sameach.