

Aveilut

5772. Six years ago my parents stood right here, welcoming in the New Year, second day of Rosh Hashana. They stood right here and said the blessings over the Torah for an aliyah and watched with joy and wonder as Jeremiah Kissel read the Torah. Now both parents, Chasiah bat Pesha v Eliyahu and Shlomo Reuven ben Chanah v Reuven are no longer alive. I humbly offer you reflections on saying the Kaddish and thoughts on mourning with the hope that my words resonate with you.

יתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבא.

Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei raba

I whisper the words. They slip quietly out of my mouth. If I speak them too loudly, it will mean something. It will mean I agree. My parents are dead. Really dead. No. Not that. I know they died, but if I proclaim, like when I lay my hands over my children's head each Friday night to offer them a blessing, with hope and joy in my heart, it will mean I am an accomplice. That I am somehow a partner in this thing that I do not want to be part of. I speak in a whisper.

בעלמא די ברא כרעותה, וימליך מלכותה

b'alma di-v'ra chirutei, v'yamlich malchutei

I try to fill my mind with times of joy. One image I hold in my mind is my parents dancing. They loved to dance and family stories are that they won jitterbug contests in the day. So much dancing in our lives. At bnei mitzvot, parties, weddings. Spontaneously in the family room. My parents. Me and my dad, whose feet I used to climb on and dance around the kitchen. Me and my mom in the

grocery store, in the street, at our house when a favorite song came on. I close my eyes as the words slip from my mouth and I watch my parents dance and dance to the cadence of the ancient sounds.

בחייכון וביומיכון ובחיי דכל בית ישראל

B'chayeichon uvyomeichon uvchayei d'chol beit yisrael,

The words hurt. Stinging nettles in my mouth. Why? Why am I standing here saying these words? Why was mother on that road at that time? Why did my father get cancer of the salivary gland? Who gets cancer of the salivary gland? Why do people get torn from us? Why must we watch cancer eat away at people we love?

בעגלא ובזמן קריב, ואמרו אמן.

ba'agala uvizman kariv, v'im'ru: "amen."

Amen. Amen. The words of the Kaddish are my anchor. They are the roots that tie me generation to generation. In the evenings, I stand with two handfuls, maybe three, of my community members and I repeat words said here, two towns over, in neighboring states, across oceans, on the other side of the earth. Generation following generation. The words are the trunks I hold onto as I stumble this terrain of grief, trying to find a foothold. Amen. Amen.

יהא שמה רבא מברך לעלם ולעלמי עלמיאן

Y'hei sh'mei raba m'varach l'alam ul'almei almaya.

I've invited G-d and Death for a visit. We're in a simple kitchen around a humble wooden table. I turn to Death first. *Go ahead*, I say. *Let's talk about why you are*

here. Or, I ask them if they'd like tea, perhaps something a little stronger? We hold our cups. Sip. Words flow between us. More color, shapes, than intelligible sounds. Words. Silence. Presence. Here I am. Have I become a messenger? I am certainly wandering a wilderness. And yes, I am looking for signs. Rocks. Water. Flames. Bushes bursting with light. Anything to help me understand.

יתברך וישתבח ויתפאר ויתרומם ויתנשא, ויהדר ויתעלה ויתהלל שמה דקדשא

Yitbarach v'yishtabach, v'yitpa'ar v'yitromamv'yitnaseh, v'yithadar v'yit'aleh v'yit'halal sh'mei d'kud'sha,

His name. Her name. Our name. Your name. G-d. Mostly I hold light in my heart. That spark that connects us. That neir tamid swallowed at conception, glowing, guiding. That light I look for when I look into your eyes. That light that embraces me. That shimmers off Vermont river rock as my son and I immerse ourselves during a quiet moment while observing shiva for my father. The light that guides me when all else feels dark and hazy. The light I seek morning, noon and eve.

ברוך הוא

b'rich hu,

Blessings. My father would hold a glass of water before us and ask, *What do you see? Is this half empty? Half full? In life kids, you have to look at each glass of water as if it is half full. Always.* My mother claimed she could devour a pie with her eyes. Standing next to her, watching her peer at the warm, oozing pie with it's apple cinnamon smells filling our noses, I completely believed her. Blessings. I know my parents would want me to find the blessings in my life, as I live on

without them here. And I do. I stand to say Kaddish with my ten and sixteen year-old sons and my husband beside me. Friends join me. And you, my loving community as well. I feel your support as I take each step forward with as much courage as I can muster on this very individual journey.

לעלא מן כל ברכתא ושירתא תשבחתא ונחמתא דאמירן בעלמא ואמרו אמן

l'eila min-kol-birchata v'shirata, tushb'chata v'nechemata da'amiran b'alma, v'im'ru: "amen."

Memories. Moe Shelansky, my dear friend and surrogate grandfather with his chapeau and twinkling eyes. My Nanny and Papa. My Grandmother and Grandfather. Rabbi Max B Wall, my mentor and teacher. Lillian Gladstone. Buzzy Samuelson. Emory, my poet friend who always encouraged me to keep writing. The words of the Kaddish tumble from my mouth as a film plays in my mind. People inextricably bound to the tapestry of my life who have gone on to the olam haba. So many. I remember. I hold their gifts in my heart and cherish them.

יהא שלמא רבא מן שמיא וחיים עלינו ועל כל ישראל ואמרו אמן

Y'hei shlama raba min-sh'maya v'chayim aleinu v'al-kol-yisrael, v'im'ru: "amen."

Voices. Israel. Peace. Life.

Families, communities, countries are fragile units. People stop speaking to each other. A slight becomes a fissure. A network gets hacked. A door opens and what was once a sacred place becomes a scene of violence. Let my recitations bring us

all higher, G-d. Let these words bring only blessings. And hopefully healing. Repairs to the tears in our hearts and in our world.

עשה שלום במרומינו הוא יעשה שלום עלינו ועל כל ישראל ואמרו אמן

Oseh shalom bimromav, hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu v'al kol-yisrael, v'imru: "amen."

Saying goodbye hurts. Even if you don't know it will be goodbye. I see my father in his last days, waving his arms in the air saying *daiyenu, daiyenu*. And when words left him, we had only our eyes staring into each others. *I love you*, I'd whisper. He'd nod his head. My mother, framed in the doorway looking back at me. *I love you. Safe travels.*

During the 11 months of aveilut for my mother, I could not bring myself to back away and bow with these final words of the Kaddish. I think it was all I could do to stand up and whisper the words. Perhaps it was defiance and anger. I am not sure. But now, six years later, three fourths of the way through my 11 months of aveilut for my father, I join you, my fellow community members, with my boys and husband by my side, *May G-d bring us peace*, I take three steps back, *for us and all of Israel*, I bow and bow. *And let us say Amen.* And bow.