

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Better Late than Never

Periodically, I receive a call from a local funeral home about a Jewish person who has passed away and had no connection to a rabbi or a synagogue. I'm asked if I would be available to preside over a memorial service or funeral. If I am available, I contact the family of the deceased and arrange a visit so I can learn about the loved one who just died. I consider it a great honor to visit with a grieving family and hear their stories. I feel as if I am able to get to know the person who died just through the stories, and I have "met" some fascinating people this way.

There are countless reasons why a Jewish person may not stay connected (or ever become connected) to a formal Jewish community. Sometimes, I find out that the person had a strong Jewish identity but simply wasn't active in a formal religious community. Other times, I learn that the person was an active member of a synagogue at some point in life but went along a different path later. There are even times when I'm asked to prepare a Jewish ceremony for someone who never did anything actively as a Jew and whose family also does not have a connection to the Jewish community; the family has decided that, because their loved one was born Jewish, a Jewish ceremony is essential at the end of life.

I strive to provide the most attentive and compassionate care possible during such difficult times; and yet I admit that sometimes I wonder, "Why am I here?" If Judaism was not terribly important during this person's lifetime, why is it important at the end of life? I would never pose this question to the family, and I often discover the answer if I just listen well enough. It seems that, for some, I provide a unique kind of comfort precisely *because* I represent the Jewish community... even if the family remains distant from that community. Maybe I remind family members of their link to a tradition that was born before them and will long outlive them. Maybe the words I say trigger specific memories from younger days when life wasn't quite so complex and the listener's relationship to Judaism was more straightforward.

When family members — Jewish or non-Jewish — have limited experiences with Jewish customs, I make sure to explain each ritual and the meaning behind it. I have seen many family members visibly moved by religious rituals that they had a vague memory of or had never before experienced. Do such experiences inspire them to invite Judaism to be a more active part of their lives? I rarely learn the answer to that question, but that won't stop me from responding when my phone rings. I have come to accept that it is not my responsibility to push Judaism; rather it is my opportunity to offer it.

The term "Klal Yisrael" refers to the *whole* community of Israel. I find a great sense of peace if my presence provides comfort at a most difficult, emotional time. If family members choose to use this time to re-establish their bond with Judaism, I'll help them on that path. At the same time I will continue to accept that *when* and *why* people decide to connect to Judaism is their own, private decision. I personally value the importance of being part of a formal Jewish community and will continue to encourage active participation; but for those who choose a different path, I hope to serve as a reminder that the Jewish community is always there for them.

L'shalom,

Dan Gordon