

Rabbi Zamore's Message for December, 2014

The Empty Chair

It started at least two months ago with advertisements and news features, preparing us for the advent of “the holidays.” Over the weeks, stress can build as our expectations grow, fueled by unrealistic images of the holidays we are supposed to be enjoying. Last year at this season, I wrote about the pressure to have a perfect holiday while living with the reality of our imperfect lives and imperfect families. I urged all of us to let go of the fairy tale picture which the media pushes upon us and, rather, celebrate what we do have, which is still pretty darn good.

This year I would like to reflect on a particular type of dissonance at our holiday tables – the empty chair - as this category of “imperfection” needs a different approach. For every holiday, we hold a picture in our mind of how we want our festivity to play out. For example, we look forward to the rituals, the foods, and the people who will be gathered as we light the menorah and sit down for a holiday meal together.

But what happens to those expectations when a loved one has died? The anticipation of the holiday becomes painful and stress provoking as we figure out how to navigate the empty chair, a physical reminder of the loss of our loved one. I hope these words will support you, if you, your extended family or a friend has experienced a loss in the last few years.

When a beloved passes at an appropriate ripe old age and your family seems at peace with the loss, sensitivity to the empty chair still needs to be given, as the members of your family may be in different stages of mourning. The sight of a new seating arrangement or rituals may stir up feelings that individual members and your entire family did not know existed. Assuming that every member of your family can plow ahead into the holiday without recognizing the loss would be a mistake. Finding a way at the beginning of holiday meal to recognize the loss is important.

Sharing some words about how your loved one continues to be present in the power of memory can be meaningful, as is incorporating a physical representation of your beloved into the holiday celebration. For example, announcing at the beginning of the meal that you are featuring Grandma’s recipe for latkes, or every man wearing one of Grandpa’s ties, will recognize the loss in an appropriately poignant way that will allow folks to smile and wipe a tear away at the same time. Of course, the literal empty chair has to be dealt with, especially if your family is the type that takes the same seats every year. Talking in advance as a family and deciding together how to

handle it is important. Rearranging everyone is an option, as is designating the right person to take the seat in question. Coming to consensus informally will help.

On the other hand, the premature and/or tragic death of a family member may create a great deal of anxiety about how to celebrate a holiday without your beloved. Again, emotion reactions may vary depending on your stage of mourning. Some family members may be avoiding the topic completely, because it is so painful to face. The moment the rest of the world starts stirring the “What are you doing for the holiday?” conversation you need to be aware of how painful this season can be for you and your family. While long term avoidance is usually not good, temporarily steering clear of the empty chair can be the best way to deal with your loss. Sometimes it is just not possible to go back to the old rituals right away.

This is most likely a temporary stage depending on the type of loss you have, but many folks find comfort in returning to the old rituals or slightly transformed habits after some time has passed. In the meantime, it is fine to seek out other ways of marking holidays like taking a vacation, going out to a restaurant, or letting a friend or relative host. Recognizing your loss and pain to each other is vital; creating a safe space for family members to express what feels comforting and what feels painful is very important. It is OK to avoid confronting very painful memories until a future time when it is more comfortable for everyone. For example, if your beloved always gave a heartfelt prayer or toast at the beginning of holiday meals, create a new pattern of beginning the meal to use for the first few years of your loss until it feels right to return to the old ritual.

Acknowledging that your holiday has changed because of the death of your loved one is an important step in treasuring their memory and mourning their absence. Realistic expectations, open communication, and patience will give you and your family the opportunity to process and mourn your loss. There is no set timeline in mourning, for every family needs to navigate their way around the empty chair together gently, compassionately, and lovingly.

Wishing you a Hanukkah filled with light,

L'Shalom,

Rabbi Mary L. Zamore