

Yikzor 5787

In our tradition, when we experience or first learn of someone's death, we are encouraged to recite the following blessing: *Baruch Dayan Ha-emet*. While often translated loosely, it literally reads: Blessed be the Judge of Truth. Like the Kaddish prayer, which never mentions death, but is rather a heaping of praise upon God, this immediate response to the news of a passing is strange and enigmatic.

What could our tradition be asking of us to respond to such loss and the grief that it evokes with the words: Blessed be the Judge of Truth? The rabbis see this as part of our appreciation for all aspects of life. If we are eager to offer blessings of gratitude for simchas and celebrations, we must also be willing to bless God for the trials and challenges in our lives. It is all part of the wholeness of living.

But perhaps there is something even deeper in this unusual blessing upon encountering death. We are affirming God as both a Righteous Judge and a Source of Truth. On the most literal level, this is troubling. I don't believe in a God who decides our fate so simply, so transactionally—exchanging outcome for action.

But God does stand in a kind of judgment that is more an assessment than a decree—more an affirmation of the sum total of a lifetime rather than a proclamation of punishment. And in our uttering of those words—Blessed be the Judge of Truth—we are embracing the truth of all living—with its triumphs and its celebrations—its dangers and its vulnerabilities—its timeless values and its subtle complexities.

These holidays and this service of Yizkor is particularly hard for me this year. As many of you know, I lost my mother a few weeks ago, and I am still in the shloshim/30 day period of mourning. Aside from the challenge of segmenting my professional responsibilities from my personal struggles, this is a profoundly difficult loss for many reasons. The complexities and tensions of my feelings—the trials and struggles of my mother's circumstance—fill me with a sense of uncertainty, ambiguity, and mixed emotions beyond an expected sense of sorrow alone.

Yes, I acutely feel a deep grief and loss. But it's been a kind of anticipatory grief, as my mother has endured 8 years of an Alzheimer's decline that robbed her from us a long time ago. I felt--and continue to feel--a sense of guilt that I literally prayed that pneumonia or another infection would end her suffering sooner. But it was not to be, as she was fated to live to the bitterest of ends of this terrible affliction. In many ways, I grieve the life she was forced to live as much as—or perhaps even more than—the pain of her passing. Relief and grief often intertwine, as length of years without quality of life can feel more like a curse than a blessing.

But my conflicted sense goes even deeper—in ways that I know many of us share. My mother was a proud, determined, highly intelligent, strong, independent, and funny person, whose wit and sarcasm could be as cutting as they were entertaining. My snark and my scholarship—my passions and my playfulness—come from her.

But she also contended with a shadow side—fears and anxieties, obsessions and absorptions in self that were tragic and wasteful. Her celebration of her blessings would often be tainted by a focus on what was wanting. She was lauded by so many in the Jewish and rabbinic community for her leadership, her partnership with my father, and her mentoring of young rabbinic couples. And deservedly so. Yet she could sometimes seem less generous with those she loved and those who loved her most. This is not an uncommon experience, as so many of us ironically bring our lesser selves into our family homes. I'm sure many of you struggle with a similar cleaving of memory. As what we see in those closest to us can offer a glimpse into what we fear most in ourselves.

Our tradition assumes we face the death of a loved one with a pervasive and abiding sense of sadness and loss. Our tradition assumes that we will strive to honor our parents—even—or perhaps especially—when they are less deserving of honor. But we know—and our tradition often teaches—that life and love is not that simple.

We can honor with tinges of regret and resentment. We can love with echoes of frustration and disappointment. For all of it—the good and the bad—the joyful and the jarring—the proud and the painful—we say as I said at my mother's bedside--Baruch Dayan Ha-emet—Blessed be the Judge of Truth. Amen.