

SAYING GOODBYE TO MICHELE

It was another dreary and cold day in April – the wind was howling against the windows of my office and, like most days, everyone else was working from home; I was alone in the building.

It was a hard month.

People were sick. More and more people were dying as the virus was spreading through Massachusetts especially among our most vulnerable population: the elderly.

I was doing my best to hold everything, and everyone together, including myself.

The *shul* had moved onto Zoom, our *B'nei Mitzvah* were on Zoom. There was lots of disappointment, lots of tears, lots of changes, lots of rehearsals, lots of work.

Our preschool was trying to engage three to five-year-olds on Zoom (not an easy task), the religious school was on Zoom, our adult classes were working well on Zoom.

There was a lot going on; at times it was frankly exhausting.

My cell phone rang.

I looked at the phone.

It was Sue Stering.

I knew it was not good.

I picked it up.

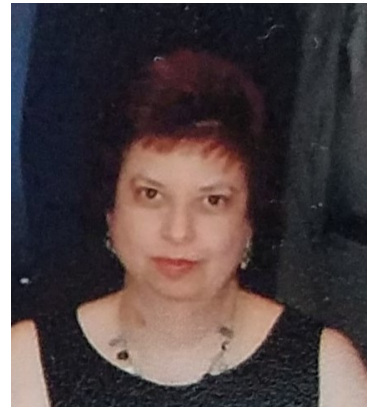


She told me that Michele, Michele Karmazin, was close to death. Sue has been a most amazing friend to her for years; she was like a sister to Michelle; she had lovingly cared for Michele for years as she battled various illnesses.

I stared at the phone, knowing I had to say the *Vidui*, the final confession that one recites before death for Michele. I knew I had to say goodbye.

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Since many of you did not get to meet or get to know Michele, *zikhronah livrakhah* – may her memory be for a blessing, well, let me share a little about her. Over the last decade she struggled with cancer and was unable to come to *shul* often.



Her parents Jack and Lillian, may their memories be for a blessing, were quite active at Emunah. Her mother died when Michele was in her 30s, long before I arrived at Emunah. Her parents joined in 1955 when we were the [Arlington-Lexington-Bedford Jewish Community Center](#) making them founding members of [Temple Emunah](#) in 1959.



Michele's brother, Mark, who survives her, had special needs which put great pressure on Michele to be perfect. She was a bright student who worked hard in school, placing her in the college track in Arlington High.

While she endured a number of set-backs in her life, she earned a degree from Bay State Jr. College of Business in 1972 and a Business Management degree in 1983. She worked as a secretary and a receptionist for a hospital and later on for a lawyer and then for many years for a company that made robotic parts.

After her mother died, she cared for her father and her brother. I can still see her father, Jack, whom I am sure many of you remember, wearing his Navy cap, captaining the *shul* kitchen on Sunday morning, slicing tomatoes and onions for the Brotherhood breakfasts. While he was a die-hard New Yorker and a Yankee fan, Michele and Mark adopted our hometown teams.

They cared for their parents with love and concern. I'll never forget the pride that Michele felt when her father was awarded the Brotherhood's highest honor: the [Keeper of the Flame Award](#) back in 2008.



Over the years, I visited Michele at her home in Arlington as she struggled with cancer and other ailments. After her father's death five years ago, things became more challenging for her. She was alone; it was a lot to manage her own care as well as Mark's.

Our community meant a lot to Michele, supporting her so many times. Nancy Lefkowitz and Marcia Camac played key roles at various junctures. And Sue's loving support was a constant throughout the years. Eventually, when the house on Albemarle St. became too much for Michele, she moved into an assisted living residence in Winchester. This proved to be a fairly good arrangement for her.



But in the fall, as her cancer progressed, I saw her a few times at the Brigham.

But when COVID came, we were not allowed to visit her AT ALL.

We could call, but over time, she struggled to speak on the phone, more and more.

As things worsened, Sue and I would call the nurse's station, and the devoted nurses would simply hold the phone to her ear.

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When Sue called that day, I was just so tired that I simply forgot that we were in the middle of a pandemic.

I just forgot.

Or maybe I wanted to forget.

Some part of me wanted to forget.

For about five minutes, I simply did. I got into my car, drove down Piper Road, turned onto Route 2 and headed off to the Brigham.

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For rabbis, it's kind of an instinct.

When someone is dying, we just go to recite the *Vidui*, the final prayer with her or him. It could be to someone's house, a hospice, MGH, Lahey, the Brigham, Children's, wherever.

Sometimes, there's no time and it has to be recited over the phone. Sometimes, it's over Facetime or Skype with the family in another city or even across the globe.

But if you can be there in person, then you go.

As fast as you can.

Sometimes, it's right before or right after Shabbat. Sometimes, it's on Shabbat. When someone is dying, it's like a different muscle memory kicks in.

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I must have driven about two miles on Route 2 before my brain clicked back into gear. I pulled over. I called the Brigham.

"No, Rabbi Lerner, you cannot come in. We are very sorry. There are no visitors. No family. No clergy. Not even in this case. No one. But we will bring the phone to her and hold it up to her ear and you can speak with her."

I took a deep breath, resigned to this reality.

I was not going to see Michele. I could not go, I could not even Facetime her. The nurse was helpful, she held the phone for a good ten

minutes, I recited the *Vidui*, the final prayer before one dies in Hebrew and English, spoke whatever words of love and support I could muster and just breathed over the phone with Michele.

She never spoke.

She was no longer able.

I could hear her breathing. At the end of the prayer, her breathing changed perceptibly which is how I could tell she was acknowledging my words.

I cried.

I said goodbye to her.

I knew I would never speak with her again.

I called Sue.

We felt cheated.

We knew Michele was being cheated. Robbed of a last visit. Her life ebbing away at the age of 68 without even an in-person goodbye from the people she knew.

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April was a tough month here at Emunah. There were many funerals – most with just a handful of people present. There were deaths due to Covid, deaths due to other causes, but all were Covid-impacted.

There was one week when there were five funerals in three days. In my 22 years in the rabbinate, I have had to officiate at two funerals on the same day only once; but in that one week, I had it happen twice.

Covid changed all the rituals. We couldn't say good-bye. Almost no mourners. Rituals cut short, or taken away entirely. The inability to mourn.

Wives who could not even attend the funerals of their husbands, husbands who could not attend the funeral of their wives.

The loss of closure.

It took its toll on the mourners, on the families, on their friends.

It literally took a toll on the funeral workers who back in March had caught Covid from people who came to funerals without masks and in numbers too large.

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One of the most sacred elements of Jewish burial is the preparation for burial. This ritual is called *tohorah* – or purification or the sacred washing of the body. In Massachusetts, you can have the funeral director wash the deceased body as required by law or you can have a group of loving and caring people, members of the *hevra kadisha*, literally, the holy friends, come together and slowly, with great care, with great modesty, wash each part of the body slowly, tenderly and then dress the body in the white shrouds, the *takhrikhin*, the white garments – similar to what the *Kohein Gadol* – the High Priest wore, as we read about in this morning's Torah reading. This is one of the most beautiful and sacred, and least well-known rituals, in our entire tradition.



And I am so proud that our members founded [Boston's community-wide, pluralistic, Hevra Kadisha](#) almost a decade ago, thanks to Hal Miller-Jacobs and Judith Himber, now led by Barbara Neustadt; its ranks are filled with dozens and dozens of Emunah volunteers.



But, of course, there was a major problem with the *tohorah* ritual when Covid hit. We could not do it anymore. It was far too dangerous. We cannot risk the lives of the living for the sake of the dead.

As I said on *Rosh Hashanah*, the principle is: “*v’hai bahem* – you shall live by them.” (Lev 18:5)

Because some of the deceased actually had Covid, the fear was multiplied, those bodies were simply double wrapped in body bags and placed in the coffins. No rites were afforded them. What could we do?

I called Nathan, a Jewish funeral director at the [Brezniak Funeral Home](#), the only funeral home that works with our *Hevra*. We came up with a plan.

He would wear full PPE as he does when he places the body in the coffin. I would recite the prayers of the *tohorah* over the phone and together, we would perform a modified *tohorah*.

And that’s what we did.

I want to share some of the liturgy with you so we can all feel that love and holiness that is that moment, and so we can give the many people who did not receive those final acts of honor, the final acts of *hesed* – what is called in the tradition: the *hesed shel emet*, that they deserved, the true *hesed* the dead can never repay.

We, as a community, this morning on *Yom Kippur*, will give that to all the people who did not receive their full rites and honor at the end of their lives.

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My friend and colleague, Rabbi Victor Reinstein, who recently retired from his pulpit as the founding rabbi of [Congregation Nehar Shalom in Jamaica Plain](#), has written this explanation of the reworking of this ritual that is meant to be performed in person.



His beautiful *neshamah*, his beautiful soul, can be sensed radiating forth from his words.

“The following *seder* emphasizes what we can in reality accomplish in serving our beloved dead. It is not meant, therefore, as a “virtual *tohorah*,” but is focused instead on *halbashah* (dressing), approximated in the placing of the *takhrikhim* by the funeral directors upon the dead, and on *halanah* (placing the deceased) as sheltering the dead in the *aron* (in the coffin.)

“Reciting sacred words through electronic presence, volunteers will work in coordination with the funeral directors who are on site, serving selflessly in ways above and beyond their usual roles.

“As a guide, this *seder* is meant to be fluid, volunteers invited to bring their own *kavanah* (their own words of intention) as we find our way in this difficult time.

“Deeds of true loving-kindness are never virtual. They are made real in whatever way circumstance allows, even as we pray for the time when once again we shall be able to offer full *tohorah*. May our way of *hesed shel emet* (the truest act of loving kindness) help to bring *shleimut*, wholeness, to the dead and be for the living its own way of healing. May we soon emerge from the scourge of this time.”

And a few excerpts from ritual that I and many of our volunteers have now performed dozens of times during this pandemic over the phone.

I said to Michele’s body over the phone:

“You are not alone, words across distance joining us to you as loving hands place the sacred garments upon you, bringing you to sleep with your ancestors in the ancient way of our people.

“We ask your forgiveness for any distress caused to you, most of all through the ways by which we have had to modify the ritual preparation of your body for its final journey. During this time of plague that besets and endangers all, the changes we make are an affirmation of the life you have lived and the lives of those who care for you now.

“Let physical distance not be mistaken for a lack of love and may our verbal presence be a source of peace to your *neshamah*. Our tears shall be as the living waters meant to bathe your body, in silent witness declaring that you are pure. Everything we do is for the sake of your honor.

“God, have compassion for *Mina Velvel bat Ya’akov V’Leah*, a descendant of Sarah, Rebecca, *Rahel* and Leah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. May her soul and spirit rest with her ancestors, for You revive the dead and bring death to the living, affirming the cycle of life. Blessed are

You who hears the prayers of Your people and pardons and forgives in life and in death.

“Therefore, may it be your will, *Adonai*, our God and God of our ancestors to encircle the deceased with angels of mercy. Blessed is God, *Ha-Oseh Shalom Bim’romav*, the One who makes peace in the heavens and brings peace to the body and soul. Through your mercy hide and ignore the transgressions of the deceased. Blessed are You who gives great mercy and abundant grace to the deceased of Your people Israel. Amen. May such be God’s will.

“Ruler of the universe! Have compassion for Michele Karmazin, daughter of Jack and Lillian, this deceased, for she is a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rahel, and Leah, Your servants. May her soul and spirit rest with the righteous, for You revive the dead and bring death to the living. Blessed are You who hears the prayers of Your people and pardons and forgives the sins and trespasses of their dead.”

After the sacred garments are placed one by one, on top of the *meyt*, the deceased, and additional prayers are recited, a liturgy related these moment to the dressing of the High Priest, by the *Kohanim* in the Book of Leviticus is recited followed by sheltering the *meyt* in the *aron*, in the coffin, surrounded by a *tallit* and earth from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.

The *aron* is closed.



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I did this for Michele, adding, *L'khi B'shalom* – Michele, may you go unto God in peace.

The day of her funeral arrived.

It was a Monday afternoon and a major thunderstorm was coming. Warnings were flashing on my phone every hour. I had a horrible funeral on the North Shore first. I met with the two families who were bereaved for the sudden loss of their grandfather. Their mother could not even attend her father's funeral. Luckily, she could participate through Facetime. We wore our masks and performed all the rituals as best as we could.

I then drove the hour to [Sharon Memorial Park](#), where I met Sue and her husband, Ron Stering, Mary Ruhl, Michele's social worker from [JFCS \(Jewish Family and Children's Service of Greater Boston\)](#), and Joe Nissenbaum and the five of us held a small service.

The skies howled and the wind ripped through the covering the cemetery had provided. Limbs of trees started to fall around us as the storm picked up. It was as if the heavens were going to cry for Michele since she was not being given all the proper rites and ceremonies. I was actually afraid that we were going to get hurt.

I spoke about Michele, but everything was shortened due to the situation. Although we could not see each other's faces behind our masks, the tears flowed behind our masks.

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In the weeks that followed, Sue and I spoke about how we would hold a memorial service at the *shul* in the summer and people would come and we would honor her then.

Those were the same conversations that I had with so many other families.



But, of course, we all know that the summer was not safe and so, we still have dozens and dozens of families who had no closure. We never said goodbye to so many members. You will hear their names in a few minutes during *Yizkor*, but it pains me to

think of them: Alvin Wolfe, whom I had seen in Florida a couple of months before he died, and our beloved Dick Wissoker.

Hopefully, next year, we will hold a number of gatherings.

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Michele's death has been particularly eating away at my soul. Neither Sue nor I ever got that last visit. She wanted us to come and see her. We wanted to go and see her.

And it could not be.



As the months wore on and I knew a great injustice had occurred, I tried to think of how I could remedy the situation.

And then I thought of this. I would speak of her in front of the entire congregation. Though only five had come to her funeral, now the whole *shul* would lift up her memory and that felt like the most appropriate *kiddush hashem* – sanctification of God's name.

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When Sue and I spoke to discuss this sermon last week, she told me an amazing postlogue that I want to share. Apparently, Michele had a friend from high school, Susan Blum, who moved to the West Coast. Michele and her Jewish convictions made a big impression such that her friend, under Michele's influence, converted to Judaism, and even gave one of her daughters the middle name Michele to honor her.

As it turned out that daughter married a rabbi and just had a baby. The circle of life continues and now I feel that Michele's memory has been lifted.

Yehi zikra barukh – may Michele's memory be for a blessing.

May all those whom we have lost during this time of Covid be for a blessing.

And may the memories of all those we remember as we approach *Yizkor* be for a blessing and let us all say: Amen.