

FROM THE EPiC DIRECTOR
(Engagement, Programming, and Communication)

Missing My Mom's Yahrzeit

After my mom died my dad got a beautiful blue velvet photo album and filled it with everything about her. Photos, cards, samples of her writing. Drawings of hers. Letters to her. Letters to us after she died. Her obit. A few strands of her inky black hair. Pictures of when they were a young couple. Pictures of when she was sick with a headscarf, too weak to walk. Pictures of me with her, me in a purple winter coat I still remember. Pictures of her in a stunning vintage 1970s blue jacket of hers I still have. It still has some of her make-up on the collar. I always get compliments when I wear it, but the zipper broke last year.

My dad kept the album in our basement, and when I was little I used to sneak down there and flip through it. Not that little. She died when I was 7. I did this a lot the few years after her death.

Once I got into my pre-teens I became ashamed of grief, of not having a mom, and of having no clue how to even be a girl without her. I would study “the pretty girls” and their perfect straight shiny hair, who I now realize were simply well-groomed and cared for by moms who were still alive. I would try to crack the formula. That void colored everything I did, every choice I made, for decades to come.

In my mind she died on Thanksgiving, but I recently fact-checked the memory of my 7-year-old self and in fact she died two days before Thanksgiving. Three days before, my dad burst into the house crying, repeating “her blood pressure’s dropping” and while the words had no meaning to me, I knew what they meant. The night she died, I remember lots of family gathered around our dining room table when we got the call. She was gone. I thought that was Thanksgiving.

Three years ago, I got sick. My daughter, Isa, was 7. I had a pretty serious case of what was later decided was pneumonia. I had a high fever and respiratory problems for three months. I’ve since called it my “COVID-18” which isn’t funny, but being that sick wasn’t funny. There was no help, no diagnosis, no hope. I remember crying every day, not because I was miserable—although I was—but because I was so certain history was repeating itself. That I was going to die and leave Isa motherless in a world full of incomparable gender pressures, and insufferable expectations, with only one parent left to fight for her.

In June my fever started to drop. To my own amazement, I lived to see Isa turn 8.

Losing a parent is hard at any age. Fear of being the parent your child will lose is a special kind of torture no parent should have to endure. It left me churning constantly on my own mortality, my obligations to my child, and on a new kind of sadness for my 7-year-old self that I’d never confronted.

Being the Program Director of a synagogue has a lot of unique challenges, and opportunities as well. Believe it or not, I never belonged to a synagogue as an adult until shortly after my illness. I never thought about that connection until today.

This year, working for OZ, has moved me and changed me in ways I don’t really understand yet. I never really understood *minyan* or *yahrzeit* before. They always struck me as antiquated. Until I got it. It’s about *not* being alone. It’s about not letting anyone slip through the cracks. It all comes back to the same thing: community. Supporting each other.

Sure, we can share great programming together, but coming up with clever programming and promotion is the easy part. What's hard is being there and holding each other when things are difficult. When we're sick, when we're grieving. When we're in pain. When we need to be vulnerable and safe. I see you all, our OZ Family, standing up for each other, supporting each other. Being *literally* there for each other.

I knew my mom's yahrzeit was coming up this week and I so wanted to be there this time to say kaddish for her on Shabbat, at least. The week prior I'd planned to be there, no problem. As the days got closer, though... I felt my resolve wavering. And when it came down to it, I found myself making excuses about why I couldn't even join on Zoom. It was so much easier not to.

I watched the service on the video later that evening. I let the songs wash over me and I heard Basha say my mom's name, and even mention that she was my mother, which was such a sweet and personal touch. I watched our clergy recite the kaddish for my mother. And I felt a bit ashamed that I hadn't been there to stand up for her myself. My mom with the long inky black hair. My mom who was one of the first female computer programmers in the country. My mom who made amazing cakes. My mom who was a research librarian at the New York Public Library—the main branch with the lions out front. I wasn't there.

But I also felt the deepest gratitude to Basha and our clergy for doing what I could not. They honored my mom for me, and I saw clearly—maybe for the first time—what an incredible service they provide to us all. Holding our grief. Holding our memories. Holding our vulnerability. Watching them honor her got me one step closer. And in the meantime, I feel so incredibly lucky to have faith leaders to help us hold our pain and honor our loved ones. Even when we can't.

~ Joanna Grossman
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Susan Ronnie Grossman, librarian, teacher & computer programmer, died on November 22, 1984 in Syracuse, NY. She was 42 years old. She was survived by two children, Joanna Grossman and Michael Grossman, and her loving husband, Zachary Grossman.