

Two Shiva Stories

Friday a bit after noon

From the funeral I returned to my mother's house. For about a year, no one had tended the house. Since my mother had been hospitalized, the iron gate had remained locked, the light never turned on, the shutters were all closed. The old house was desolate—two rooms, hall, kitchen, bathroom and porch. A moldy smell greeted me when I opened the door. On the chest at the entrance was a box of matches; next to it, as always, a memorial candle that was destined for one of mother's dead. I lit the wick and opened the shutter. The dark house was illumined by a pale light.

The candle light revealed to me the erev Shabbat of my childhood: Shiny silver candlesticks, a white table cloth—on it little turrets of wax droppings. In the center of the old table, red kiddush wine, two old cups, two porcelain plates and at the table only mother and daughter. My mother filled the rooms of the house. For the moment her voice resounded, for a moment her dark eyes shone, and from the kitchen wafted the aroma of soup and of cake.

I recalled Friday afternoons, when she spread her hands over the Shabbat candles, pursed her lips, shut her eyes and stood silently. She always stood just this way in front of the candles: neither blessing nor praying. Her legs swollen and heavy, her face anguish-etched with many wrinkles—old age had pounced upon her before her time. Only her hands over the small flames testify to the beauty that she might have been. Delicate hands smooth and ruddy with long thin fingers—hers were the hands of a lady. Only one finger—her little one, was bent under and motionless. Why does she have a finger like that, I asked myself when I was very little. I asked her out loud: Mom, where is your pinky? It's hiding in the palm of my hand, she would answer, and I cried terribly. When I grew up I got up the nerve to ask again: Mom what happened to your pinky? This is a souvenir from *there*, she answered me; from the days when our God disappeared from the world. So she said, but never explained it. From then on, I stopped asking.

On this evening I saw my mother's beautiful, sheltering hands. I recalled how people's gazes were drawn to her disfigured finger and how the children would whisper: Look, look, that's the lady with no pinky, and how she would say with pride: I, by myself, with nine fingers, built a family here.

Loud rapping at the door cut short my reminiscences. Before me stood two elderly ladies. One was thin and small, only bones and wrinkles, the second was large and heavy. They stood in the doorway, as straight and tall as they could with their fingers interlaced. The candle light illumined the numbers on their arms. The little old lady seemed familiar to me, but the intervening years made me forget her name. The second, the large one, I was ready to swear that I had never met, except that her voice was familiar.

Why didn't you invite us to the funeral? The two of them asked in unison. Yentas, two yentas, I said to myself and searched for a reasonable answer but the two of them, not expecting a response, continued to ask: Why are you not sitting shiva in a normal way? And where, they asked looking around the house, where is all the family? My husband is at home with the children, and outside of them there is no one. I am all the family that she had, I answered them politely. We are also her family, said the larger one. This whole neighborhood is one big family. Two old ladies, I mused, this is family. I heard another light knock at the door. Who is it, I asked, surprised. Who else could possibly come to a shiva when there is no family?

I remained alone in the house. Cover the table with the white Pesah cloth, just like always whenever important guests come. Put butter cookies in the crystal bowl, serve coffee just in the porcelain cups and from Chava Lipshitz buy a bouquet of roses. Today you can do it, she added and smiled, today you can no longer give me an evil eye. I found myself arranging the house for shiva, just as mother wanted.

Are you dead or not? I asked her in my heart while I was covering the table with the white cloth and I took out of the kitchen cabinet the large crystal bowl. I heard my mother saying, as always: You know, I am an old hand at being dead.

From, Once There Was a Family Here. Lizzie Doron. Translated by Rabbi Steven Sager

I should have found some opportunity to cry. If not for the loss of a beloved father, at any rate for the loss of a father. And if not in grief, at least in anger, pity, and loss. If not for being orphaned by father's death, then for being orphaned by the death of a non-father. And if his death was no cause for tears, his wasted life certainly was. And if not for him, I could have wept for the civilization of my childhood, whose cracking, rusting remnants lay scattered all over the place. I had been a child of a dream, of a laboratory. To this day I wake some mornings with a melody from those dreams echoing in my mind, as if I were a music box, an old dream box. If I couldn't tap into the tears at the cemetery, before the watchful eyes of the gathering, I could have wept in private, in Mom's place, or in the apartment that the kibbutz had given us for the week of shiva. I should have found some opportunity to cry, and I didn't.

From, Mourning a Father Lost. Avraham Balaban, translated by Yael Lotan

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