

## Avelut: A Year of Mourning

By Gila S. Silverman

There is a photograph, framed and prominently displayed in my home for years: my nineteenth birthday in Tsfat, a small town in the north of Israel; Mara, Barbara, Rachel, Karen and I sit close together, deeply tanned and glowing, smiling with an assurance from deep inside, comfortable and secure in ourselves and in each other, confident that that security will always accompany us.

And then, there is another image, frozen forever in my mind: six summers later in Oregon, we hold each other close at Mara's funeral, shaking, barely able to stand, unable to comprehend that she is gone, knowing that our world has shattered, but not understanding how or why. We stand in the front row with her family, primary mourners of this tragedy, and we stay long after the others leave, not willing to let her go, not willing to accept that this is real.

At the age of 24, she has taken her own life. Mara, who lived more fully than any of us, decided that she could not go on. After struggling with an unknown mental illness for over a year, after losing faith that the doctors could help her, she decided that this was not living, if she could not take full advantage of the world, then she could not be a part of it.

Her parents ask us to speak at the funeral. It seems strange to speak of her in the past tense, impossible to believe that she is really gone. After the funeral, her parents open their home and their hearts to us, and together we grieve her. For nearly a week, we sit *shiva*. Separated from the rest of the world, we immerse ourselves in the loss. We sit in Mara's childhood home, lounge on the porch with cigarettes and gin and tonic, doing as she would have done if she was with us, as if she still is. We exchange stories with her parents. Together we weave a portrait of this woman who has left us, and the tremendous impact she has had on our lives. We re-create for them the years after she left home, filling in the details of the woman she became. They re-create for me the last, terrible year, the year I cannot reconcile with the woman I knew, the year that I knew almost nothing about.

I had been living in Israel and the news reached me in bits and pieces. A letter, ten months earlier: "Mara was hospitalized, but she is better now." It made no sense; she was always the vital, energetic one. But she was better, so there was no need to ask questions. Six months later, another letter: "Things with Mara are not good, she seems to be depressed again..." And then, the phone call, a week before I was to leave for a two-month vacation in the States: "She is threatening to kill herself, we thought you should know how bad it really is..." I flew home with mixed emotions: excited and happy about Rachel's and Karen's upcoming weddings, and terrified that I would arrive too late, that I would not be able to speak to Mara, that I would have to fly straight to a funeral. I never did speak to her, but my first week home the news had seemed a bit more stable. Rachel's wedding day came, and we celebrated joy-



(L to r) Rachel Goldner, Karen Nayhouse, Gila Silverman, Mara Safier (2"1) and Barbara Rosen.

ously. Mara's presence was missed, but I thought we had avoided the worst. I was wrong.

The news of Mara's suicide had reached Barbara, her closest friend from childhood, the night before the wedding. She and Karen kept it inside all day long, telling only two or three others who helped them through the day. They kept it from the bride and from me, the maid of honor, dancing as expected, smiling on demand for the photo-

graphs, and ensuring that Rachel had her day. Only after the celebration, when we had returned to the privacy of home, did they tell us the awful truth. Rachel still in her wedding dress, the faces we had painted on for the occasion streaking down our cheeks with the tears, we made plane reservations. The next morning, in shock, Barbara, Karen and I flew to Oregon for the funeral, and Rachel left for her honeymoon.

After the *shiva* week, I leave her parents and return to mine on the other coast. Shaken to my very core, I begin to realize what else she has taken with her. The security and confidence of that first photo are gone, my trust in the world destroyed. I am numb with the shock of it. If Mara can become sick like this, so suddenly and tragically losing her self, anything can happen. I try to piece together her illness, make some sense of the story, understand how she reached a point where she could see no other solution. I try to understand what this friendship meant, why it stayed so important, so central to me, despite the distance and the separate paths our lives had taken. It has been nearly two years since I last saw Mara, but this does not seem to matter. I stare at old photos, looking for signs, as if they can provide answers to some unspoken question. There are no answers, yet somehow the photos comfort me, stabilize the world.

A month after her death, we mark the *Shloshim* of Jewish tradition. Thirty days have passed and it is time to move into the next stage of our mourning. We are meant to move from the intense isolation of the initial mourning and ease ourselves back into the world. We decide to hold a memorial service, so that friends who could not attend her funeral can publicly acknowledge the loss. Rachel and I escape to Maine and try to plan the service. We sit quietly on the porch, watching the tides flow into and out of the bay, struggling with this task that we do not know how to complete. At 25, we should not be planning a memorial service for a friend. There is little in our experiences to guide us, and little in other sources for us to follow. There are no rituals for mourning friends, no ready-made readings that say what we need to say. We find women poets, Jewish sources, prayers for the dead, reflections on friendship. Nothing is quite right. Somehow, we find the right words: a piece of this poem, a section of that prayer, symbols that are meaningful to us—the multicolored Jerusalem candle, the ethnic

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foods she loved. Friends gather from across the east coast for the *Shloshim* service. We try to support each other, searching for the words that none of us have. These old friends, whom I have not really spent time with in years, provide comfort and solace I cannot find elsewhere.

The day of the service, I awake in tears. I have dreamed of her. She is saying good-bye, giving away her books, wanting me to recognize that she is finally happy and calm, and wanting me, as her friend, to support her decision. My dream is full of pain, but it is no longer hers. It is ours now, the pain of all those she has left behind. I cry for an hour, the finality of her death sinking in, recognizing the fact that I will never see her again, never hear her voice except in my dreams.

We mark the *Shloshim* and a week later, we reenter the world at Karen's wedding. We will make it joyous, just as they made Rachel's wedding joyous. Once again, we face this strange mix of emotions. We leave aside the sorrow that is permeating our lives and celebrate life. We dance and laugh and remember what it feels like to be completely happy and carefree, even for just a few hours. We leave unspoken until late that night the fact that Mara should have been there, that she should have seen how beautiful Karen looked, that our dance was incomplete without her.

In the fall, three months after Mara's death, I return to Israel, to my life there, not understanding how I can leave behind the only people who can relate to what is happening in my life, but knowing that I must leave them. I need to go back to at least a façade of "normalcy." But nothing is normal. The world feels scary and unknown. On *Yom Kippur*, I go to services, and resist the prayers. I cannot accept that this has been decreed; I protest a powerful being who would make her suffer such an illness, who would cause so much pain to those who loved her.

I am flooded by memories. I relive the times of "us," recreating them in my mind. We were 18 when it began, in Israel for the year. Together we were whole: intelligent, creative, successful, crazy, beautiful women; we took chances, we were strong in ourselves yet dependent on others. We built our own world, with rituals, foods, jokes, words; we accepted each other completely and with no hesitations. And then we returned to the States. We spread out across the country, each looking for what suited her best. It was a confusing and difficult time, as we tried to transfer the selves we had found in Tsfat to our American college campuses. At first, we would come together as often as we could, reinforcing each other, strengthening the inner core so we could go back to our daily lives. Slowly, we got busier, and the phone calls and visits became less frequent. The time we had shared was special; it allowed us to become who we did, defining our expectations and the range of possibilities we allowed ourselves, but now it had become a piece of the past.

Yet now I see Mara on every corner; I return to the places that she loved and that cemented our friendship, feel her presence in every aspect of my life. The upcoming Jerusalem winter reminds me of the winter of our junior year in college. Mara and I had both taken time off from our studies. We shared a cold Jerusalem apart-

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ment, trying to figure out who we wanted to become, and where we would live our lives. At the end of the year, we had both left, embittered by the difficulties of life in Israel, both of us certain

that we would not look back. She had stuck to that decision, while I had returned and found a world that suited me and that I could make my own. I had wanted her to come and see it, but now I know that my life here, like so much else, will remain unknown to her. Never again will we meet for lunch for the six-month updates that had become routine during college, the conversation jumping from applied anthropology and medical programs to dancing and the latest gossip.

I go to Tsfat, unsure what I am looking for. I do not find her there, only crystal-clear images of us then, of our confidence and our plans, our assurance in what the future would bring us. The abandoned mosque we had taken as our own, the site of our picnics and parties, has been padlocked shut, a concrete reminder that those days are gone forever. Our long-ago carefree days feel like an illusion, and I wonder how everything has gone so wrong.

Often, late at night, I find myself in tears. I cry for Mara, and I cry for us, for our world that will never be the same, for how fragile and scared I feel, for the self that has slipped away from me, and that I cannot seem to find again. I weep for all the plans that will not come about, for the secure place deep inside that no longer exists. Nothing I am doing feels right anymore. It is no longer only about processing her death, and I am not even sure she would understand the path to which her death has led me. It is about how I am going to live my life. I fight to understand her legacy, try to find the meaning, search for the lessons she tried to teach me in her life.

Those around me do not understand my search, and cannot make room for it. Some who are also shocked by her death look to me for answers, seeing my grief only as it connects to their own. Others move on quickly, as they think it should be. My ongoing pain is difficult for them; they have trouble with such deep mourning of a friend. A few surprise me with their efforts to understand, making room as best they can for whatever I need to do. For the most part, meaningful insights arrive by air mail and email; each of us alone in our grief, we are united in recognition of the pain.

Regularly, I go to services, and say the *kaddish*, the prayer for the dead. Officially, *kaddish* is only for immediate family, yet I am in mourning, and I need to make this public statement. Judaism is the only framework in which my continuing pain, this continuing process, is legitimate. Judaism allots me a year of public mourning, and I use it. Week by week, my perspective is changing. I am no longer protesting; I am learning to accept sorrow. I make room for weakness, for pain. I come to believe that things happen for reasons that are beyond me, and I stop resisting the flow of them.

The stages seem to move with the seasons. By springtime, I can feel myself healing. I am piecing my self together again, weaving the threads together into a textured whole, returning to the world. I feel her presence, and I know that she will be leaving us soon. The pain is no longer as acute when I think of her, although the dull ache and the bittersweet memories will never leave me. I am reach-

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ing a point of acceptance. I begin to understand her decision, and to accept it. She chose her death as she lived her life—actively and self-consciously, the only alternative she could find to a future full of depression and uncertainty. I begin to let her go. I must live her legacy, actively choose life and cherish it in the shadow of her death. I plant seeds in my window and watch them slowly come to life.

The words come easier now; I can express what I have lost. I have lost the validation that she provided—the voice that confirmed me to myself, that told me I could; I have lost her presence, her ideas, the new things she brought into my life; I have lost the security of knowing that, no matter how rarely we saw each other, she would be there, and the knowledge that our futures would somehow, sometimes, overlap; I have lost my belief in plans, in our ability to control our lives; I have lost the confidence that we could do anything, that we could conquer the world, change it, make it ours.

Time passes strangely; I do not feel it in an orderly way. Suddenly it seems, it is summer again. In my window box, the flowers bloom in bright color. A year has passed since her death, a year since we stood shaking in the cemetery. By air mail I learn that they have unveiled the gravestone in silence. In my mind, I picture them, a small company of mourners, looking out over the Oregon hills, staring at the stone that bears her name but is not her. With a friend, I go to the Jerusalem hills, and we say goodbye in our own way. I feel her slip away, and I am ready this time. I wish her well, hoping that, at last, she has found the peace she sought. I say the *kaddish* one last time; it no longer belongs to us, the public part of our mourning is over.

Yet it is never really over. She is not really gone. The *yahrzeit* candle I light on the anniversary of her death burns long after it should, just as her light continues to shine bright on my life. In life and in death, she is so much a part of who I have become. The henna in my hair, the way my earrings hang on the wall, her sweaters in my closet, my interdisciplinary academics, the voice inside me that says "I can" with confidence, this new self I have built that has learned to live more fully, all reflect her impact on my life. A piece of her will live on, and a piece of me will always be missing. Mara, I have let you go, but I will miss you always.

### Glossary

**Avelut** – literally, "mourning," also used to refer to the state of mourning during the first year.

**Shiva** – literally, "seven." The initial mourning period, the first week after the funeral. Traditionally, the family stays at home, and community members come to pay respects, also providing food for the mourners.

**Shloshim** – literally "thirty," the second mourning period lasting 30 days after the funeral. During this period, the mourners slowly return to daily activities. In some Jewish communities, the end of the *Shloshim* is marked with a ceremony, sometimes accompanied by the unveiling of the gravestone. In American Jewish communities, the marker is unveiled at the end of one year.

**Kaddish** – the prayer for the dead, recited daily by immediate family members for 11 months after the death. The prayer is a prayer of praise and does not mention the dead.

**Yahrzeit** – the anniversary of the death.

**Yom Kippur** – the Day of Atonement. Traditionally, it is believed that the Book of Life is inscribed on this day, and it is decided who will live and who will die during the upcoming year.

*z"l* – *zichron l'vracha*. May his/her memory be a blessing.

### About the Author

*Gila S. Silverman is completing a Master's degree at the University of Arizona College of Public Health. She edited Never Too Young to Know: Death in Children's Lives, written by her mother, ADEC member, Phyllis R. Silverman. This essay was originally written in the fall of 1993, one year after the death of Mara Safier, z"l.*