

YOM KIPPUR YIZKOR 5787

September 21, 2026

On May 9, 2025 at 11:00 pm, just one hour before her 95th birthday, my beloved mother Anne Pernick stopped breathing. It was a peaceful death which we knew was imminent. By contrast, more than twenty-seven years earlier, my father Larry Pernick died suddenly, without warning.

The topic of death is simultaneously mystifying, fascinating and terrifying. There is so much to say, both on a personal level and on a Jewish level. We all have our unique approaches to death. There are those who regularly visit the graves of their loved ones and there are others who do not visit at all, not out of a lack of love, but rather because they don't believe that their loved one is there.

To me, Reform Judaism is the perfect expression of Judaism as it relates to death. Even in the most Orthodox communities, the rituals may be set, but the feelings people actually have differ as strongly as they do in more liberal Jewish communities.

When my dad died late in 1997, I followed tradition and recited kaddish for him for eleven months, though I did it in my own way. There are Jews who find a public minyan three times a day, once a day or maybe once a week. I am not a

fan of paying someone else to take on our responsibility of saying kaddish.

However, I know that there is no way in the world, even if we gathered a minyan right here in the Sanctuary every day, that I would be able to do this.

So, I usually said my prayers at home. Occasionally, I ran through the morning service in about twenty minutes, but more often it was about ten minutes for the afternoon service or fifteen for the evening service. Yes, when praying alone, I can go faster than when leading public worship. However, I have always taken seriously the rabbinic directive to focus on the words of the prayers. So, while I may read more quickly than during our Sanctuary services, I don't just zip through the prayers. I find it important to feel each word.

Fifty years ago, around the time that gas prices suddenly shot up from 29 cents a gallon to 42 cents a gallon, Transcendental Meditation became very popular in America. Millions of people took up the practice and I was one of them. The overwhelming majority stopped within a couple of years and the fad largely faded into the background. However, I have stuck with it, almost every day, twice a day, since 1976.

The teacher I had gave me a mantra and said that while meditating, it is normal to wander away from it. However, once we realize that we have stopped repeating the mantra, we should gently return to it.

It is very much the same with prayer. It isn't easy to absorb the meaning of all of the words of all of the prayers all of the time. Prayer is not expected to be perfect. And so, when I became aware that I was saying the words without absorbing the content, I paused to review where I had been before moving forward.

My prayer was traditional in language, using an older version of our Reform prayer book. However, most of the time I prayed was at home, without a minyan. Truth be told, however, I had managed to memorize the short minkha or afternoon service and I sometimes recited it by heart in the strangest circumstances. Once, I was getting a root canal, another time a haircut. I even prayed while driving on the highway. It's not ideal, but it was what I was able to do and of course, I was not looking at a book while praying.

As I went through the services, I became more and more comfortable with them. I connected more than ever with the words. My goal was to do one of the three services each day, but as I moved through the months, I sometimes chose to do two and occasionally three services a day. It was a spiritual moment that I had which connected me with my mom.

Of course, there were many public moments of worship, most of them right here, as I silently remembered my mom before reciting kaddish with the congregation thru last April 11. That date marked the end of eleven months of saying kaddish. Jewish tradition teaches that the souls of good people can be fully repaired over the course of twelve months. Of course, none of us want to believe that our loved one needs all twelve months. However, the rabbis of old did not feel it was proper to let people decide how many months their loved one's soul needed. As a result, the time period was standardized: eleven months for a parent and one month for all other relatives.

While I have often related that the most frequently asked question I have been asked as a rabbi is "can Jews be buried in a Jewish cemetery if they have a tattoo?", the most frequent comment I get from people is probably "rabbi, I'm not religious."

The truth is that many terms have become loaded with meanings that should not be the exclusive domain of any one group, including "patriotic" and "religious." When I engage these "not religious" people in a short conversation, the vast majority are comfortable saying that they are "spiritual Jews," but not "religious Jews." That certainly works for me.

Whatever your beliefs, I encourage you during this new year to become more religious or spiritual in one very specific way: remembering your loved ones during Yizkor services and on their yahrzeits.

While we traditionally recite kaddish for loved ones more frequently shortly after their death, after a year, we say kaddish five times: during the Yizkor services for Yom Kippur, Simkhat Torah, the last day of Passover and on Shavuot, as well as on our loved one's yahrzeit or anniversary of their death.

The High Holy Days are a time of committing to self-improvement and Yizkor is a time to remember our loved ones. In this new year of 5787, I encourage you to up your game when it comes to remembering your loved ones via these services. It's just five times a year, but I think that you will feel a great sense of fulfillment for having made the effort.

It isn't about praying in Hebrew or in English as much as it is making the effort. Though many of us lead busy lives, setting aside a little time to remember and to recite and to feel touched by the prayers, songs and words of remembrance is a good thing. And should you experience a death in your family and have interest in saying kaddish for your loved ones, please do not hesitate to speak with me about the options you may wish to consider.

Death may be mystifying, fascinating and terrifying, but remembering our loved ones is, for most of us, a precious source of comfort. We are here today to remember together. May we continue to come together to remember and to support one another in our journeys towards healing and carrying on the legacy which our loved ones have bequeathed to us. AMEN