VIRTUAL MOURNING

It’s 5:52 a.m. I click on the link and enter the waiting room. Messages fly back and forth on a group chat in WhatsApp. “We are here,” says one. “So are we.” “When does it begin?” asks a third. I type, “I am here too,” and wait.

Promptly at six, I hear the now familiar tone as the Zoom window opens, announcing “Joining the Meeting of Rabbi Shmuelson.” In London it is 11:00 a.m. I peer at my laptop and see the rabbi standing in the foreground. Along the top of the screen, there are thirty or so tiny boxes that I scroll through, looking at the images of family members and friends, also on standby.

I know from my cousin in London that it was very hard to schedule this time slot. They were able to sandwich us in only by pleading for a weekend morning, explaining that there was family in America as well as England. The funeral—from beginning to end—would take no more than thirty minutes.

The day looks cold and windy. The rabbi is wearing a black coat, dark glasses resting on the bridge of his nose, coattails whipping in the wind, kippah askew. His hands, reddened with cold, grip a leather-bound prayer book that he holds open with one hand, ready to turn the pages with the other. I can see a gold ring on his right pinky finger. Yellow and pink sticky notes sprout from the pages like tiny daffodils. Standing behind him and to his right is a gravedigger all in black—black face mask, black gloves, black pants, a black fleece jacket. Another gravedigger is posted behind him, to the left. Beside the rabbi I see the wooden box, elevated on a bier above the freshly dug grave. Inside the coffin lies the body of my mother’s sister, who has died not from coronavirus but in the time of

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coronavirus. Her death will be forever linked in my mind to this eerie and unsettling time.

The cemetery is deserted, save for the dead whose graves are marked by tombstones lined up in rows stretching endlessly behind him.

The rabbi looks out for a moment toward the faces of the mourners who have joined the Zoom call. “We are here to mourn the death of Lily on behalf of her beloved family and friends,” he shouts above the wind. He seems to imply, If you’re not here for this funeral, you’re in the wrong Zoom meeting. It brings to mind the moment before a plane takes off, when the pilot announces where the plane is headed—one last chance to deplane if that’s not where you intended to go.

Indeed, I had met my aunt only once, as a young child. She and my mother had had a rift decades ago that persisted until my mother’s own death a couple of years ago. Yet I wanted to participate, to connect with my far-flung family, to honor the death of my mother’s sister.

Still wrestling to be heard above the blustery weather, the rabbi recites the funeral prayers, bowing and rocking according to custom—yet it is as if the wind is the force for his davening. He begins to read the eulogy as the camera shakes from a strong gust.

The gravediggers step forward, straighten their masks, and lower the coffin into the grave. Then they step away into the background and disappear from the screen. The rabbi stands alone once more at the graveside, intoning the Hebrew prayers. Occasionally he glances toward us, the mourners on the other side of the screen, me on the other side of the ocean. He peers, as if trying to make out the tiny faces that stare back at him, watching expectantly. We are all supposed to be on mute, but a couple of us have forgotten, and the screen occasionally flips to the image of a tearful relative. One person seems to be having a conversation with someone in another room, but then the tiny red bar goes on above his microphone icon.

The wind blows the rabbi’s coat open and he grabs hold of it, tightening it around him, readjusting his kippah on top of his head.

One of the gravediggers leans forward and says something to the rabbi. The rabbi turns around and grabs the shovel planted in a mound of dirt beside the grave. As he bends down to lift it, papers fly out of his book, blowing about in the wind. Momentarily he loses his balance as he tries to retrieve them. It is hard to hold a shovel and a prayer book at the same time. Squeezing the book under his arm, he lifts the shovel and digs down
deep into the mound of earth, heaping the dirt over the coffin. With each shovelful, he calls out the names of the deceased’s daughters and family members. The K’vorah—to return the body to the earth—is a mitzvah the living perform for the dead. Occasionally he stops to wipe his nose—I assume from the cold but have the fleeting worry: I hope he is not sick. From time to time, the screen flashes on the image of one of my cousins, who has not put her screen on mute and has murmured a prayer.

At last the rabbi lays down the shovel and hitches up the back of his pants. He turns toward my aunt’s coffin and begins to recite the Mourners’ Kaddish and the El Malei Rachamim, the memorial prayer. As he reads, he wipes his nose one last time and buries his hand—the one not holding the prayer book—deep inside his pocket. He looks like he is freezing. He looks desolate.

The service concludes. We all unmute.

“May her memory be a blessing to you,” he intones.

“Amen,” we all repeat into our devices.

He signs off. The screen reads, “The host has ended this meeting.”

My sister and I, along with one of my cousins who lives in the States, exchange wry, sarcastic texts invoking Monty Python—I’m not dead yet!—and jokes about medieval plagues. None of us know how to spell “medieval.” We find this amusing and would keep going with our slightly hysterical conversation except that it is six-thirty in the morning and we all want to go back to sleep before we start the day.

The view of my aunt’s solitary coffin suspended above the grave disturbs me in a way I cannot express. The rabbi had never met my aunt when she was alive, yet there he stood, alone at her graveside, reciting the familiar prayers heard at every Jewish funeral the world over.

Although my aunt was nearly as much a stranger to me as she was to the rabbi, I was here today to bear witness to her death and to bring some closure, both on my mother’s behalf and that of the upcoming generations. And yet, ironically, she was perhaps more alone than she had ever been in life, buried in an empty cemetery because Covid-19 prevailed across the globe. At the same time, I wonder whether, in the absence of a pandemic, I would have attended at all. Would I have made a hasty trip to London for the funeral of an aunt I barely knew? Perhaps the pandemic had given me a chance to be present when otherwise I may not have been.

As I watched the rabbi go through the Jewish rituals, from time to time lifting his head to acknowledge the virtual mourners, I wondered
about the meaning of these rituals. In the face of tragedy, loss, and fear, what remain are the basic elements of the human spirit: faith, fortitude, connections with one another, and, perhaps, with something greater than ourselves. I am not a religious person, but I was moved by what I witnessed. Jewish custom mandates respect for the dead—the funeral service itself honors and confers dignity on the dead, marking through ritual the undeniable passage from life to death.

Here we were, members of a family scattered by distance, by history, by conflict and grief, determined to put a painful past to rest. The bleak landscape, and indeed this bleak moment in our history, starkly contrasts with the remarkable resilience of the human spirit, with its great capacity to adapt with honesty, ingenuity, and compassion. Death in the time of Covid-19 has been taken to a new level—Zoom allowed a temporary disavowal of our solitude, summoning up extraordinary reserves to combat our fear that we are more alone than we can bear. Social distancing and the donning of masks, efforts to escape the fearful fate of the virus, serve as concrete symbols of the ultimate solitude we each will one day face. On some level, don’t we all deny and undo our knowledge that, in the end, death must be encountered in solitude?

I cannot help but wonder, once the pandemic is over, what will change about humankind, and what will endure.