

On Erev Rosh Hashanah many of our family dinners and online streaming of services were disrupted by the painful news of the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Justice Ginsburg was a Jewish role model, a popular icon, and a woman whose life was deeply devoted to the pursuit of the Jewish value of Justice. Regardless of our personal political views, most people feel a sense of respect for Justice Ginsburg and what she accomplished in her lifetime and the legacy she has left.

Yet, in the midst of our communal reverence I have noticed a lot of criticism and questioning over the decision to have her body lay in repose at the Supreme Court for two days and delay her burial at Arlington National Cemetery. In the Torah we are taught, specifically in Deuteronomy that one's burial should happen as swiftly as possible.

RBG's death is a reminder that there is no singular Jewish way to mourn or grieve.

In the Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law it is explained that "It is forbidden to allow the body of the deceased to lay unburied **unless** it is being left unburied for the honor of the deceased such as to procure a casket, burial shrouds, or to hire professional female mourners (women who would chant dirges), or for the relatives of the deceased to arrive, or to announce the death in the various municipalities." (Yoreh Deah 357:1)

While it is true that in general that we do not encourage delaying burial in Jewish practice, there are instances when we make exceptions. When Nobel Prize winning visionary and former Israeli Prime Minister and President Shimon Peres died in 2016, his funeral was delayed 48 hours. Peres' body laid in state at the Knesset (Israel's congress equivalent) for one day in order to allow the Israeli public to pay their respects. So, too, was the funeral of Yitzhak Rabin, who was murdered in 1995. His body also laid in state and then was slowly taken through the streets of Jerusalem to allow the public to pay respect. There was also a two-day delay in his burial in order to allow for the arrival for dignitaries around the world. Golda Meir, the only female Prime Minister of Israel, who died in 1978 was buried four days later. Tens of thousands of Israelis paid respects to her coffin while it lay in state.

In my opinion, this two-day delay that provides opportunities for Americans to mourn Justice Ginsburg is very consistent with Jewish values. But truth be told, it doesn't really matter what I think or what anyone else feels—this was a personal choice for Justice Ginsburg's family.

Funeral and mourning choices are extremely personal and really should be made by the family with their own religious guides or clergy.

Sitting here watching Yizkor today, each of us experiences different emotions—for some the period of mourning is still fresh and the pain unbearable, for others it may be a relief after a prolonged illness, for some over time it may have turned from sharp pain to a duller ache. For some of us we are also mourning the hugs we did not receive at shiva this year or even the painful fact that we didn't get to see our loved one's personally before they died because of the pandemic. We may be mourning collectively for the 200,000 lives lost to Covid on American soul. We may sit here today remembering our love ones who raised us or those whose death we still coming to grips with.

When I meet with families that are grieving over the loss of a loved one, I always make it clear that there is no one way to mourn—no proper way to feel. Grief comes in waves and hits us at unexpected times. We each make personal decisions—burial or cremation, public or private, immediate or delayed, in a Jewish cemetery or in a National one that honors our veterans and public figures.

Justice Ginsburg had many identities—she was personally a proud Jew, a mother, and a grandmother, and a widow who had a great love for her husband Marty. She was also professionally a Supreme Court Justice—the second woman ever to be named to this high position. There were so many expectations placed upon her and upon her family.

We all experience grief in different ways—and can be made to feel guilty if the way we grieve is not traditional. Maybe this year we didn't hold a formal shiva because zoom shiva wasn't comforting to us. Maybe we would like to postpone an unveiling until we have a vaccine for the pandemic. Perhaps we want to celebrate a holiday in an untraditional way which brings us comfort or would have made those we lost happy. I often have congregants come to me apologetically for doing things differently after a loss. But I am always quick to counter—that there is nothing to feel guilty about or to apologize for—the Jewish rituals around death and mourning serve two purposes—first to offer respect and reverence for our loved ones who have died and also to give us the tools to cope with our grief—to provide us with a structure to follow. They are there to offer us comfort and guidance not to cause us more pain.

Burial is for our loved ones and Yizkor is both for us to remember our loved ones and also for us to have a safe space to process that loss.

Rabbi David Glickman suggests, “If there was one theme that ran through all of Justice Ginsburg's work as an attorney, legal scholar and justice, it was shaping legal precedent to protect human dignity in all areas of the law. If we want to fulfill the ideas that undergird Deuteronomy 21:23, we ought not question the family's decision to delay her burial. A better fulfillment of this Biblical verse would be studying Justice Ginsburg's writing that protected human dignity and reflecting on how this was the modern and American method of actualizing the Jewish idea that every human being is created in God's image.”

Our lives are not defined by our death nor by our burials but rather by the lives we lived—the way we used our precious time on this earth.

Like each of us, Justice Ginsberg had a personal life –and she had a public life and because of her political role many of us feel this loss personally, as if a family member has died. We want to grieve with her family, but we also know that our grief will be a different grief. The grief we feel for a cultural icon is also different from the sadness we feel over own personal losses—and yet, Justice Ginsburg’s death reminds us that even the strongest and most determined individuals ultimately have no control over when they are called to their eternal rest.

Let us focus not on their death but on their lives—all they taught us—and the ways they influenced and shaped us into the people we are today. As we live, they too shall live. May they be remembered for blessing.