

Parent Care: Mom's last caregiver steps forward

by *Marsha_Kay_Seff*

When we realized Mom's end was near, I asked her if she'd send me a sign from the next world to say she was OK. She promised she'd try.

Now, on the anniversary of her death, I think I've received that sign.

This semester I'm teaching a course on Writing Your Life Story for San Diego Community College Continuing Ed. At my first session, I asked the students to share something interesting about themselves. One of the younger students said she is a belly dancer. But it was 65-year-old Doris Jaffe's mitzvah, or sacred obligation, that really intrigued me.

She is a shomer (shomeret for a woman). In simple terms, that's a guardian or watcher of the deceased. Doris explained that under Jewish law, the deceased are not supposed to be left alone until they're buried. Jewish people treat earthly remains with dignity, love and respect, she added. They don't treat the body as an object to be warehoused, but as the vessel that housed the soul.

The shomer's task is considered an honor, the ultimate act of kindness.

"When people are dead, they can't repay you. This is the ultimate good deed."

The tradition dates back to ancient times, but, to be honest, I'd never heard of it. She and her husband, Wilbur, get a small stipend for doing the honors at night at Am Israel Mortuary in San Diego. They've both been shomers for 31 years, sitting with an average of 50 to 60 deceased people a year.

During my second writing class, Doris dared to share more with me. She handed me the sign. My student, who had followed the columns about my mother, Toba Seff, told me she was the one who sat with Mom last August, before the trip back to Miami.

How do you respond to such a revelation?

I hugged Doris. How miraculous that our paths had crossed a year after Mom's passing.

I'm certain the two women shared some peaceful time. My mother was past all the pain, past her need to fight the inevitable, past caring. How wonderful she had company during her last hours in San Diego.

Mom was a people person who loved company. She chatted with her angels from LightBridge Hospice, Rabbi Ralph Dalin, her caregivers, Dorothy and Virginia and the rest, till she could talk no more. She would have liked Doris and Wilbur, who filled in when his wife needed some sleep during the few days Mom waited for her flight.

Always sleep-deprived myself, I wondered what Doris does to pass the time while the rest of the world sleeps. She doesn't worry about missing her zzzs, she said, especially now that she's retired from her full-time job as a senior payroll clerk with the San Diego County District Attorney's Office. In the wee hours she drinks plenty of water and tea. "No TV or music."

Instead, she reads Psalms, 150 of them, in Hebrew.

"You're supposed to be awake watching the body," she said, adding that my mother was covered with a sheet about 6 feet away from her.

When Doris got to Psalm 119, she spelled both my mother's and grandmother's first names by reading the verses beginning with the letters. What a beautiful sign it was learning all this and having the chance to get to know my mother's final friend.

I wish I could share this special story with Mom. But it doesn't matter; she already knows.

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