

Brooklyn tragedy reminds us of importance of ritual, community

Jamie Manson | Jul. 18, 2011 Grace on the Margins

Some of those living outside of the New York metro area may have read about last week's shocking murder of Leiby Kletzky, an eight-year old boy from an Hasidic Jewish community in Brooklyn.

Kletzky disappeared while walking home from day camp. It was his first time walking alone and he took a wrong turn. He stopped to ask a man for directions. Cameras show the man bringing Kletzky into his car. It was the last time Kletzky was seen alive.

The details of his death are horrid and the grief suffered by his family is unthinkable. Even the most hard-nosed of local New York journalists struggled to recount the details of this grisly story. But because life and religious belief are so intertwined in Orthodox Judaism, much of Kletzky's story was told through the rituals that his community began to practice soon after his remains were discovered.

Most people in the U.S. know little about Judaism, and even fewer understand the mysteries of Hasidism. Members of this sect of Orthodox Judaism are known not only for their strict fidelity to the teachings of Torah, but also for living in insular communities. Several small sections of Brooklyn are known as enclaves for Hasidic Jews: Crown Heights, Williamsburg, and Borough Park, where Kletzky lived.

When Kletzky first went missing, thousands, many of them not from the Hasidic community, joined search parties. And when the news of Kletzky's tragic end broke, thousands gathered in the streets to mourn at his funeral, which, in keeping with Jewish law, took place on the evening of the day his remains were discovered. Many of the mourners never knew the boy, some were not members of the Orthodox community, and some weren't even Jewish.

Even Hasidic Jews who are used to living in tight-knit communities were struck by how the boy's death had drawn them closer.

One man from Crown Heights reflected: "In the Jewish faith we say everybody is brought down for a reason and to fulfill something, and little Leiby fulfilled his in many ways -- especially bringing everybody not just from the Jewish community but from all faiths close."

One of aspects of Jewish practice that I've always admired is the ritualization of the grieving process. After Kletzky's burial, his family began the practice of sitting Shiva. For Orthodox Jews, this means staying at home for seven days as a way to both honor the dead and to help the mourners deal with their loss. Often mourners will tear their clothes to symbolize the rending of their hearts, and they refrain from grooming or washing their clothes. They can only leave the house to go to the synagogue for Sabbath worship.

During these seven days, friends and family will visit and bring food. They are not to ask how the mourner is doing until three days of the Shiva has passed. After the seventh day, mourners are told to "get up" and end the Shiva. They begin to gradually re-enter normal life and resume the ordinary rituals of washing and grooming.

Kletzky's death has left all of us, his community and strangers alike, struggling to make meaning of this tragedy. It brings me comfort to know that his family has these rituals to guide them through their grief and that their faith had given them a community that would support them through their sorrow.

This ritual, of course, does not give answers to unanswerable questions asked by all those who mourn. It does not quicken or ease the process of finding healing. But it does give those suffering loss a chance to literally 'sit with' their grief, and they guide the community in creating a supportive presence for the grief-stricken.

Shiva, it seems to me, is ritual at its best. It honors the depth and struggle of a person's time of mourning and helps the community commemorate and make meaning of the mystery of death.

Kletzky's funeral took place on Wednesday evening, two days before the Friday evening Sabbath. During the Sabbath, mourners must break with sitting Shiva by washing and putting on clean clothes. Sabbath is a day of rest and peace that allows believers to put aside the pain of the world for one day. It seems a nearly impossible task for a family that faces a lifetime of sorrow.

But the Jewish community, perhaps better than any religious group, shares centuries of memories of horror and unspeakable brutality. Their shared rituals commemorate their sorrowful past and look forward in hope to a peaceful future.

An Orthodox rabbi and his family live on the first floor of my apartment building. Every Friday evening I see him prepare for prayer while his wife cooks the Sabbath dinner and his small children set the table where their ritual meal will take place.

Watching them, I am reminded that these are the very rituals that Jesus and his Jewish followers participated in every week of their lives. I witness with my own eyes the roots of the Eucharistic meal, and I see its true purpose: to make us more present to one another so that we might bring the presence of God more fully into one another's lives.

I observe their Sabbath rituals with admiration, but also with a twinge of sadness, knowing that in my own Catholic faith, rituals are increasingly becoming empty for newer generations.

At the same time, our individualistic culture eats away at what is best about communal living. I wonder whether Catholics who no longer find liturgy life-giving could find their hunger for community and ritual fed through small, shared meals like this.

Hasidism, like Catholicism, is a faith rich with teachings, practices, mysteries, and observances. Ultimately, it is community that will help Kletzky's family and friends find comfort and make sense of an unspeakable tragedy.

Kletzky's murder is a stark reminder that ritual and community are crucial to the spiritual and emotional health of human beings. It calls us all to see the limits of individualistic lives, and shows us that the love and peace of God comes primarily through the communion that we create with one another.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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