

How Preparing for My Husband's Unveiling Helped the Grieving Process

aish.com/how-preparing-for-my-husbands-unveiling-helped-the-grieving-process/

November 24, 2024



My husband had received the catastrophic diagnosis of terminal brain cancer. His premature death at the age of 68 was not a surprise but that didn't forestall the magnitude of grief.

Sixteen months ago, I stood in the blazing Colorado heat as my mind absorbed the finality of Ira's burial. Three years earlier, my husband had received the catastrophic diagnosis of glioblastoma, terminal brain cancer. We worked as a team to forestall the inevitable. His premature death at the age of 68 was not a surprise. Anticipatory grief transitioned into grief when my husband's pine casket was lowered into the ground as butterflies and dragonflies darted back and forth over the open grave.

Coping with Firsts

The rollercoaster ride of widowhood was kept in check by lifecycle events— *shiva* followed by *sheloshim*, a short online ceremony to mark the completion of the 30 days, lighting Yizkor and Yahrzeit candles, acknowledging Jewish holidays, attending grandchildren's birthday celebrations, participating in a Yahrzeit service coinciding with the Hebrew anniversary of Ira's death, attending a family wedding, welcoming a granddaughter into the world, and periodically visiting the cemetery.



Kauai, Hawaii on June 20, 2021 our wedding anniversary.

Each "first" created a mixture of emotions. Some events were easier than others. I yearned for Ira's presence. Even though I was lonely, I spent blocks of time in solitude. I avoided crowded places. Ira's 2010 traumatic brain injury followed by a 2020 terminal brain cancer diagnosis had limited my contact with others. It was imperative that I reconnect with people and the Jewish community. Over time, I was able to bring bits and pieces of joy back into my life. Downhill skiing, hiking, and traveling connected me to people as well as the beauty of the world outside my home.



Sandy Kugler and Ira Bornstein shortly after becoming engaged in December 1974

Around his birthday, the High Holidays, our anniversary, and his Yahrzeit, I visited the cemetery. Like other “firsts”, I struggled. My steps were slow and methodically when I stepped out of my car and looked at Boulder’s nearby Flatirons. Upbeat memories of our youthful college days consumed my thoughts. Up until the unveiling, his grave was marked by a small rectangular marker with a Star of David, his name, birth date, and date of his death. Due to several issues beyond my control, it was 16 months after his funeral (instead of the traditional 11 months) before an appropriate monument could be installed. At the cemetery, his vibrant life was reduced to his birth and death statistics.

Selecting a Cemetery

When it was apparent that Ira had only a few months to live, his primary care doctor contacted me. He highly recommended that we acquire cemetery plots immediately. Decades earlier, Ira’s parents had asked if we wanted to purchase plots at Chicago’s Westlawn Cemetery. We declined. Like many of our peers, we didn’t consider cemetery plots a priority. Now, when Ira’s life was dwindling, we had no choice. Our visits to Boulder and Denver cemeteries were unsettling. These sacred spaces were very different from Chicago Jewish cemeteries.

When we relocated to Colorado in 2000, neither one of us thought that the small Boulder Jewish cemetery was a future possibility. But after looking at the other choices, we selected this cemetery for its amazing setting and significance. I fell in love with Ira when I was a freshman at the University of Colorado. Three of our four children attended the same college. While Ira was dying, I published an award-winning travel book about this remarkable college town.

Choosing a Monument

Ira acknowledged that we needed to make decisions but shared few opinions before he slipped into a coma. I know that he was leaning toward purchasing one headstone for the two of us. Even if I am fortunate to find another compatible partner in the future, I can say for certain that I want to be buried next to my *bashert*, the father of our four sons.

Within a couple of weeks of Ira’s death, I was advised that there were longer than usual wait times for Denver Jewish monuments. I visited the monument shop sooner than anticipated since I wanted the unveiling before the end of 2024. I was still experiencing significant brain fog when I reviewed the available stone options. Upon placing the order, I had to pay a sizeable amount of money for the material, the inscription, the delivery, and the installation. After I realized that this was my *first* major purchase without my husband, I couldn’t control my tears. When I arrived home, I was grateful that I could accomplish this task so early in the grieving process.



Later, I sat for hours trying to figure out the concise wording for the headstone. My four sons suggested a few minor changes. Eventually, I forwarded our word choices. I breathed a sigh of relief when I learned that our wording would fit on the allotted space. I felt badly that more details could not be squeezed into the template. Before I put my stamp of approval on the final draft, I had a New York City rabbi and a Chicago cantor proofread the attachment.

Significance of a Headstone

How can a slab of stone and a few words describe anyone's essence? The eulogies recited at Ira's funeral were several pages long and only captured part of his life. At the unveiling, the stone, with just a handful of words, became a permanent testimony to his life. If you previously met Ira, these words could possibly rekindle memories. Strangers, on the other hand, can only guess who he was.

People passing his grave will never know that he was an ardent Zionist who visited Israel four times, a passionate CU Buff fan who braved the elements during college football games, a weekend gardener who loved his yard, an articulate litigator who argued successfully before the U.S. Supreme Court, an amazing skier, an all-around athlete who played football at Chicago's Mather High School, and someone who grew up in a busy household with four brothers. Countless other skills and attributes diminished with his passing and are left unrecorded. Few can recall his courageous battle against the ill effects of his traumatic brain injury and glioblastoma.



When I received digital images of the engraved headstone in advance of the unveiling ceremony, I couldn't stop looking at this object which is half completed. Ira's inscription is written on the left half. Since I remain a work in progress, my side is blank. While I cherish my happy memories, I must resist the temptation to remain stuck in the past. The inscription succinctly represents Ira, and the bottom of the monument symbolizes our past life together. The unveiling of this monument simultaneously represents the necessity to move forward as a single person. The rest of my life has yet to unfold. My focus needs to be on the present as well as the future.

The Unveiling

On the day of the unveiling, a small group of Jews and non-Jews gathered to remember Ira. An Orthodox rabbi who frequently visited Ira during the final months of his life officiated. Even though I am a Conservative Jew and was never affiliated with his congregation, I felt it was important to have someone who had *showed up* for Ira to do the unveiling. The rabbi's ceremony included numerous references to his conversations with Ira.



Bornstein Headstone

With just my four sons and a small number of Jewish acquaintances nearby, it was challenging to find 10 Jewish men for a minyan. I had to call on friends connected to the Boulder Jewish community to find kindhearted people willing to participate in this mitzvah. Having dealt with this same reality during Shiva, I acknowledge what I lost when I moved from Chicago's North Shore with an active Jewish community to non-Jewish neighborhoods between Boulder and Denver. One of my goals during the second year of widowhood is to relocate to a community where I can experience a greater Jewish presence and to become engaged in meaningful activities.

Standing in the vulnerable open space, this engraved indigenous slab of granite will endure an abundance of Front Range snowstorms, hailstorms, and high winds. Future generations will come to this spot to connect with their Jewish heritage and with their ancestors who were fortunate to have found their bashert at the tender ages of 18 and 20 years old.

Featured image by Beth Wedlake

[Click here to comment on this article](#)

Like What You Read? Give Jews around the world the chance to experience engaging Jewish wisdom with more articles and videos on Aish. As a nonprofit organization it's your support that keeps us going. Thanks so much!