

## Modim *by Linda K. Wertheimer*

MY ARMS FELT HEAVY, MY MOUTH PARCHED AS I DREW THE FLUTE CLOSE TO MY LIPS.

It was a regular Friday night service at temple, and only 50 people sat in the sanctuary. I was about to accompany the cantor on a song, something I had done many times. Yet I was petrified and feared collapsing into tears.

I was 43, and three weeks before, was diagnosed with postpartum depression. I was anxious about my health, anxious about my baby boy's welfare, anxious that my husband of two years would think he married a fraud rather than a competent, upbeat, successful journalist. Around the time our son was six weeks old, irrational fears and thoughts overtook me. I could not sleep when the baby slept. I was often nauseous. One night, I lay in bed thinking I was having a stroke. Every limb tingled. I did not want to be left alone. I would not let my sleep-deprived husband rest.

But there was so much to be thankful for in my life even as it unraveled. A decade ago, I had no husband, no child. Faith was a bit player. I lingered on the sidelines of Judaism, singing in a temple chorus but never taking the step that would make the music mean more than a string of notes. Five years in a row, I sang in High Holy Day services, rejoicing in the harmony but rarely understanding enough to find a way to connect to God. It was as if I were performing in a concert rather than participating in a spiritual moment.

Perhaps a dozen years ago, I first encountered Robbie Solomon, the cantor who now stood to the left of me. But our meeting was superficial, a brief conversation between a star and fan. It was the mid-1990s and Robbie was performing with Safam, a folk group famed in Jewish circles since the 1970s. He led us in his signature song, "Leaving Mother Russia," and moved many of us to tears with the song's famous line, "When they come for us, we'll be gone." It was a tribute to the Jewish refuseniks who tried to leave Russia so they could finally be free to be Jews. After the concert, Robbie signed the Safam music book I bought. I loved his voice. I loved the sentiment of his songs. But that was not a spiritual moment. Back then, I never would have imagined that one day I would stand next to Robbie on the bimah in such a show of faith and connection to the Jewish community.

Not until my 30s did I try to make Judaism more than a social vehicle. I had joined choirs as a way to mix singing with socializing with Jews. I camped and biked in Jewish outdoors groups in search of a beau. But when I moved to Boston in 2004 at age 39, I started attending services for more reasons than to sing in a chorus. A rabbi at a temple I frequented sensed in me what I found so difficult to express, a yearning to know more about my faith and a yearning to understand Hebrew so I could sing the prayers infused with spirituality rather than just enthusiasm. I had quit Hebrew school at age 12, disinterested in liturgy and disconnected from Jews in general because I lived in a small Ohio town with few Jews and came from a non-religious family. This soft-spoken rabbi at a suburban Boston temple invited me to join an adult bat mitzvah class, and for the next two years, I studied Hebrew, learned how to chant lines in the Torah, read the Old Testament, and received an education on what the prayers in our tradition meant. I finally learned the meaning of the Kaddish, the Mourner's Prayer, which I had heard many times but never understood. Each line praises God. The prayer was both simple and complex in my view. Don't you need to believe in God for the prayer to help heal? At my adult bat mitzvah, my mother draped a prayer shawl, a tallit, around my shoulders, and I blessed

it with a few lines of Hebrew. An image of the biblical Miriam was painted on the cloth, the figure dancing on yellow sand, shaking a timbrel and guiding women through prayer and song. Like Miriam, I led others in prayer and song during the ceremony. I was center stage, but this was not a performance. At age 41, I was starting to find faith's place in my life. But two years later, could my growing attachment to my religion act as my savior?

Unbeknownst to me during my nearly blissful pregnancy, I was a prime target for postpartum depression. Fertility drugs, past episodes of depression, complicated pregnancy, recent major life changes. I could check off those boxes on lists of risk factors for the disorder. I had just married and bought a house for the first time. I was dealing with a newly discovered health issue that affected the pregnancy. At age 40, after minor knee surgery, I developed two blood clots. The clots were partly caused because I was genetically prone to blood clotting, something I had never known. Daily, through the pregnancy, I injected a medication into the fatty part of my stomach to prevent clotting and knew I had to continue the shots for a short period after my baby was born. It was another stress, though at the time, I saw it as just another step en route to motherhood. After giving birth, I made another huge life shift. I took a year's leave from *The Boston Globe* and stepped off the career path for the first time in two decades. Around the same time, my husband was laid off.

But it was my past that put me most at risk: In 1986, my 23-year-old brother was killed when he fell asleep at the wheel, and his jeep rolled down a cliff in rural Utah. I was 21, finishing my last year of college. Kevin, my big brother and best friend, was gone. Grief bit back. I had episodes of depression near the first and second anniversaries of my brother's death. In my 20s, I kept a distance from my Jewish faith. Religion could offer no solace. The depression that struck near the second anniversary came with scant warning. Though if I thought back, the signs were there, especially in February 1988 when I went to a funeral home to implore relatives to talk to me about the loved ones they had just lost. A new reporter for the Cincinnati Enquirer, I walked into the funeral home. They loomed large, four dark rectangular coffins. I edged closer. An 18-year-old had set fire to an apartment killing three children and two adults. The survivor was a 13-year-old girl, who escaped when she heard her mother shouting, "Everyone, get out!" The funeral was for the girl's brothers, ages 2 and 10, and her parents. The fifth victim was the girl's best friend. Hushed voices and sobs echoed around me. I expected mourners to push me away, but few did. They seemed intent on wanting the world to know their anger and pain. The arsonist set fire to the apartment's curtains after a spat with his girlfriend.

"This morning, we realize a family stopped short," the minister said, adding that it was impossible to know why such things happen. "We pray for the daughter and the healing she needs at this time."

The girl was a younger reflection of me at my brother's funeral. She appeared sad, alone. She had lost much more, and yet when I approached her after the burial service, the girl smiled. She held up roses she clutched and said she took them from her parents' caskets. Her pain was at its raw beginning. My grief, I thought, should be long over, yet hearing the minister took me back to my brother's funeral and the rabbi's words about death: "There is nothing more certain than death, nothing more uncertain than the time of dying. Thus, we are always surprised by death, always overwhelmed by death, always fearful of death."

As March beckoned, grief again stretched out its powerful arms and clasped me too tight. Images of the four coffins at the funeral home disturbed my sleep. My brother Kevin rolling down that cliff in his jeep then supplanted the coffins. I envisioned him dying and then saw him dead with that bump on his forehead in the coffin, a memory of my last view of him the day of his funeral. That invisible fist reappeared, grinding,

jabbing, poking my gut. Why did I suddenly feel like I was dying inside? My symptoms were physical as much as psychological, and I sought an easy fix. My head, back, and stomach hurt, but a doctor found nothing wrong in a physical. I began losing touch with reality and became obsessed with my age. How, I wondered, could I be 23 if my brother Kevin were only 23? He was two years older, and now I was overtaking him in age. In a sleep-deprived, angst-ridden state, I became unsure of the year. I was in a time warp, stuck in 1986, not 1988. I started to refuse to believe that I was 23, the same age Kevin was when he died. If I were 23, he could not be 23. He had to be 25. But I knew he died five months before his 24th birthday. Death made him forever the same age. Now, for the first time, we were the same age, and it was too much to comprehend. If I believed it, I had to accept that Kevin was gone.

I saw a counselor, but found no comfort from him. As March progressed, I called my parents frequently but never could describe what was wrong. A cousin came to visit in late March, early April 1988. She saw my empty refrigerator, listened to my sometimes incoherent thoughts, and called my parents and told them they should see me in person. Despite the timing, neither my parents nor I directly connected my state to the second anniversary of my brother's death. How could this be the effect of a two-year-old loss? None of us knew anniversary reactions to a loss could sink a mourner into deep depression. My parents and I met with the counselor I previously saw, and he referred me to a psychiatrist who recommended that I be admitted to a hospital psychiatric ward for depression. At the same age Kevin died in a car accident, I was sure that I was about to die. How could anyone feel this bad and live? I was sad, furious, embarrassed. I was mad at the counselor, at the psychiatrist, at my parents, and myself. This was wrong. I was not crazy. I was not suicidal. I was just lost.

Alcohol and disinfectant permeated the air in the long corridor of the Cincinnati hospital. I fought back tears as I was led to a room with two twin beds; the other bed was occupied by a woman in her 60s who mumbled nonsensically. She looked at me as I walked in, then kept talking to herself. A nurse walked in and gave me a shot of lithium. I asked what for? She said it was for depression. Shortly afterward, it was as if I were in a haze. My tongue felt thick, double its size. My life went into slow-motion. I was on anti-depressants a short time after the first anniversary of my brother's death but did not feel like this. Every day, I sat in a room with a psychiatrist, a round-faced, spectacled man who did little more than nod to whatever I said. "How do you feel today?" he asked. I said little, except, "Ok." How did I feel? Terrible. This psychiatrist never mentioned grief. He asked about my childhood and probed for a deep-rooted cause to my depression when the answer was closer to the surface. My brother died in a car accident, and in one moment, life changed. The drugs numbed me into nothingness. My parents soon believed that the hospitalization was the wrong move. They consulted a psychiatrist who had seen me briefly at her office after my much smaller bout of depression more than a year before. She told my parents that she believed it was wise to get me discharged, bring me home with them and let me see her. She did not buy that after 21 years of normalcy, I had something chronic that required long hospitalization.

Within weeks of coming home, I was smiling more again. Weekly, I met with the female psychiatrist whose soft voice with a touch of an Indian accent was comforting. She offered that she had not lost a sibling and did not know what it was like. She put me on anti-depressant medication until we both agreed that the pills were no longer necessary. She concluded what others had missed: anniversary reactions to my brother's death had caused the problem. The first grief reaction showed itself as sleeplessness and anxiety. The second one was a serious clinical depression but the symptoms were not part of a chronic disorder. There were still

dark moments after the return to my parents' home in the summer of 1988. I remained in pain over the loss of my brother and worried that it was a disease without a cure. I let myself feel, the scariest feeling of all when you have lost someone. The anniversary of Kevin's death hung like a specter. I had to learn how to conquer March.

Exactly when and how I never knew, but March once again became a month of hope. Eight years, nine years, a decade passed, and I no longer acted as if a "bereaved sibling" badge was pinned to my chest. I was finding ways to live in peace without my brother and still remember him. I inched toward more Jewish traditions, annually lighting a memorial candle, taking comfort in the light that flickered for 24 hours. As the 11th anniversary of my brother's death neared, I traveled to Israel. The main reason was to take a 250-mile bike trip with a Jewish outdoors group, but before we started biking, we had four days in Jerusalem. Then 33, I was more willing to attend a Shabbat service than in my 20s and more curious about the meaning of the prayers. By this time, I had moved to Orlando to work as an education reporter for The Orlando Sentinel. I gingerly took steps closer to my faith. When I saw an advertisement for the bike trip to Israel, called Biking through the Bible, the timing was perfect. I was searching for all types of personal fulfillment. Would God become more real to me in the Holy Land?

One of my first days in Jerusalem, I strolled down the steps of the Old City toward the Western Wall, humming "Yerushalayim Shel Zahav," or Jerusalem of Gold, a folk song by Israeli singer Naomi Shemer. Just a few months before, I sang the song during a benefit at the Orlando Jewish Community Center. The song, written in the 1960s before the six-day war that led to the liberation of the Old City, was an unofficial anthem of Israel, a haunting, passionate melody. As I walked toward the western wall, the holiest place in the world for Jews, I heard strains of Jerusalem of Gold. Just below me, a toothless man played the tune on an electronic keyboard, and below him, dozens of men and women, separated by a barrier, prayed in front of the western wall. The man smiled as I approached and kept playing the song. Had he heard me humming? I stood for a few moments, listening, then walked down a series of steps toward the praying Jews. I slipped a piece of paper in a crack in the wall, a small note I wrote in memory of Kevin. Nearby the golden Dome of the Rock on Temple Mount glistened from the sun. I composed a silent prayer: "Let me remember my brother always. Let me, though, have a full life without him. Make my life not about death, but about living." For one of the first times in my life, something spiritual and serene swept through me as I stood side by side with women who beseeched God to hear their prayers.

The cantor, Robbie, a tallit wrapped around his shoulders and his guitar cradled in his slender arms, gave me the slightest of nods. We began playing the introduction to music he composed for Modim Anachnu Lach, a prayer that asks us to "learn to live in gratitude." As I played, Robbie strummed his guitar and sang in his rich tenor voice: "For the gifts of beauty, joy and light, modim anachnu lach. For the laughter and the tears besides, modim anachnu lach. For all that's kind and good and true, modim anachnu lach."

Joy over the birth of my son mixed with sadness at the eeriest time. My son was born just weeks before the 22nd anniversary of my brother Kevin's death. The post-partum depression episode began so close to that period, too. It hit me hard at the onset, but the anxiety, moments of irrationality, and sleeplessness disappeared in less than a month. Anti-depressants helped. So did the savvy counselor who was able to connect the dots between my long-ago grief episodes and the present. So did my husband. But maybe too there was something else helping me, something I could not quite explain.

"Mo-oh-dim," Robbie sang. On the flute, I parroted back the same tune. The tone of the silver flute I

had owned since eighth grade was breathy on the first notes. But with each line of music, the notes sounded clearer, stronger like the realizations I now had about the past and present. The melody was pure, sweet. My stomach, taut with the stress of the past weeks, began to settle.

“For the chance to learn and love and give... modim anachnu lach...”

A mother. A wife. An increasingly observant Jew. I was in a place I once thought impossible. It was as if my life were beginning anew. My husband Pavlik sat in the second row in the sanctuary. He, like I, was terrified when I seemed to lose touch with reality for a spell after being so grounded and happy during the first weeks of our son’s life. Perched against Pavlik’s broad chest was our baby, Simon Kevin, who watched me with eyes the same shade of blue as mine and who in the darkest moments gave me reason to smile. Gifts were all around. The music flew easily from my fingers and lips as the song glided to its gentle close. Maybe my gratitude was for what I finally had—faith.

