Welcome to the Shiva House, Where Grief Is in Full Bloom

by Darcy Grabenstein

It was fitting that I participated in Welcome to the Shiva House on September 11. In this “Zoom theater” production, Benjamin Behrend and Logan Gabriel Schulman invite you to a shiva, the seven-day period of mourning traditional Jews observe following the death of a family member. Being Jewish is not required; the emotions explored—sadness, denial, anger—are universal.

Schulman began by mourning Sam Bloom, aka “Pop-Pop.” We all lit candles, just as Jews light a memorial candle during shiva. He again mourned Sam Bloom, this time using the name to represent a young woman friend who had moved to Israel. We did a responsive reading, using the companion reader provided digitally. We tore a piece of cloth or paper, just as Jews tear their clothes as a sign of mourning. He then mourned Sam Bloom, the name now signifying his father who died of cancer. Schulman recited kaddish, the Jewish prayer for those in mourning. We were asked to say the names of those we’d lost in the past year; I uttered the names of two COVID victims I knew.

It was bashert (Yiddish for “fate”) that I reviewed Welcome to the Shiva House. After the Zoom portion ended, participants were instructed to continue with an immersive audio experience. We walked outside, mimicking a Jewish tradition that ends shiva: walking around the block and returning home, symbolizing one’s return to normal life after the mourning period. I stopped in my tracks as the haunting melody, one of my all-time favorites, played through my headphones. It was a version of “La Rose Enflorece,” a haunting Ladino (Judaeo-Spanish) melody that means “The Rose Flowers.”

I stopped in my tracks once again. Blowing in the gusty ocean breeze was a supersized American flag, flying half-mast to honor those who died in on this date in 2001. That’s when the tears came. I wondered whether others were having similar experiences as they strolled around their own neighborhoods. During the Zoom portion, I had glanced at the faces in the gallery, looking for tear-filled eyes. I saw pensive, sad expressions, and I wondered whether we would have been freer with our emotions if we had been sitting in the safety
of a darkened theater.

Each of us in the audience today did our own delicate dance, teetering between letting go, fully grieving, and holding back our emotions.


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