Covered Reflections

May 1, 2000 By Liz Galst

When Steven Greenstein died of AIDS at age 46 last year, a Jewish life ended. Steven was one of those people important to those who knew him, but no one famous. A yeshiva bucher, yeshiva boy, he was raised in an observant Jewish home in Brooklyn. At 23, he came out and joined New York's gay and lesbian synagogue, where he served on the board and as treasurer in the mid-'80s. He was an optician and a master player of bridge.

He was buried, per custom, as soon as possible after his death on the Friday before Labor Day, in his family's plot in New Jersey. As is the tradition, mourners shoveled dirt into Steven's grave. David, his boyfriend of nine years, spoke eloquently of Steven's ability to see forgiveness not as something one gave to someone else, but as a gift one gave to oneself. "He was able to forgive completely," David said in the day's downpour, "and that enabled him to fully experience life."

Steven's Orthodox younger brother had long ago rejected him because of his homosexuality. But six months before Steven died, his sister Mira—also Orthodox-ish—decided she hadn't shared his life as fully as she wanted. Only too soon, it became clear she would be sitting shiva, observing the traditional mourning rite of remaining at home and receiving guests for the better part of a week. Mira and her husband decided to join David, at least for a day or two, at David and Steven's Manhattan apartment, rather than hold a separate shiva at their home in Queens.

As is customary, the mirrors in the apartment were covered in black cloth, and David, an olive-skinned man with dark hair, didn't shave; midweek, with reddish circles etched deep beneath his wide brown eyes, he looked haggard and swarthy at the same time. Photos of Steven were everywhere—on the credenza, the coffee table, propped up against the couch. One shows him at the Wailing Wall, Judaism's most sacred site, in 1996. His angular features stand out; a black velvet yarmulke rests on the back of his head. Behind him, in soft focus, the luminous Jerusalem limestone glows.

Throughout the week, Steven's (mostly straight) bridge-playing friends came, as did his former workmates (also mostly straight). Family came to visit Mira and to get to know David better. Synagogue acquaintances performed the mitzvah of visiting mourners during their first week of grief. David wore a black ribbon that the rabbi had cut almost in two with a razor, symbolizing the rending of the fabric of the mourner's life. Mira wore no ribbon; instead, her blouse was rent. "I'm more of a traditionalist," she said, shrugging.

At 7:30 each evening, someone would lead the 40 or so assembled in evening prayers. David and

Mira would sit close on low cardboard boxes—the lowness the customary symbol of their spirits. Sometimes, during the psalms, David would stroke Mira's back; she would lean against him, crying. At each service, they rose together and chanted, in Aramaic, the words of the Mourner's Kaddish, the memorial prayer for the dead, Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'may rabba…, which, in keeping with the Jewish tradition of liturgical indirection, makes no mention of the dead at all, but instead speaks to the glory of God.

Around the circle, old Jewish men and women—Steven and David's neighbors—wiped tears from their eyes. And some of the relatives joined hands in song with gay folks from the synagogue. Mira and her husband had planned to stay only a day or two; instead, they stayed the week. They mourned as a family: the surviving spouse and the older sister, the way things are meant to be, but so rarely are. One night, gay friends told stories of Steven's exploits as a bodybuilder, his gourmet cooking and his ability to knit the most complicated things. As Mira sat on her cardboard box, she gestured to the circle of people around her. "Thank you," she said. "You've given my brother to me."

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Covered-Reflections-10419-2038