

# Slipping and Falling Through Time and Space: A Mystical Moment at a Minyan for My Father

Rabbi Michael L. Feshbach  
Hebrew Congregation of St Thomas

The most common reaction, by now a “trope” or “meme” of its own in popular culture, when a new character in the long-running British science fiction show *Dr. Who* steps into the TARDIS, is to gasp and gape and say: “It’s bigger on the inside than the outside!”

And, indeed, this innocent looking now iconic big blue Police Box does transcend ordinary experience; it is a portal which can take you anywhere in time and space.



I may have been a fan of the show for many years. But I did not really know what it felt like to travel on the TARDIS until late last month.

It was the second of the shiva minyan services for my father, evening gatherings held in the home of a mourner. Because we no longer have our own home in the Washington area, following the funeral we gathered for the first night in the common space at my father's retirement community and then, for other evenings, we “wandered.” We were welcomed into the homes of friends. We were deeply moved that so many of my father's colleagues, and mine, and his friends and ours and friends of our children, and so many from my former congregation came to comfort us.

And we were also grateful to have a chance to mourn with our island community, for a final gathering and "seventh" night service, on our return to St. Thomas.

Shiva is an amazing tradition. The community rallies, brings food (so much food!), but, more importantly, is simply “there” at a time when we need it the most. I have long believed that the Jewish rituals around death and mourning mirror the insights of modern psychology more closely than in any other area of life. There are specific things to do and specified time tables of deliberately diminishing intensity. It tracks so closely with what we now call the “stages” of grief.

But something happened on that second night.

Learning from a failed attempt to do so following the death of my mother, I did not even try (except on our return to St. Thomas) to lead these services myself. And, in fact, even though there were multiple clergy colleagues present each evening on the mainland... I was touched and grateful (and, yes, proud) that these services were led by congregants, lay people --all from my former congregation, who I found out basically insisted on helping in this way.

Why is this so important to me? Because this is Jews modeling what "doing Jewish" is for one another – not dependant on a rabbi or cantor to always "do it" for them. To have a trained crew who can step in and play this role is... well, instead of doing my job "instead" of me, I actually view this as one of the healthiest ways in which I fulfilled my rabbinic role.

So it was there, a few minutes into the rhythm and flow of the Hebrew chant and occasional English reading, that I looked around the room, and was internally knocked over by a sudden realization.



Dr. Murray Feshbach, who could find anything in these stacks, at one of his offices.

There, in a crowded living room in which I had spent Thanksgivings and so many Passover meals, there, in my line of sight was a woman whose sister's funeral I officiated at, partially blocking my view of a woman whose husband's funeral I had been at, who was standing next to a man who just lost his wife and I knew I had missed that occasion. I looked in a different direction and all I could see, hovering in a translucent mist next to the people present, were faces and images shimmering but there, parents and partners, siblings or cousins. And a young child. And a stillborn baby. And all the shiva houses I had been in with so many who were now here.

I was overwhelmed! People I had been there for, who were, now, there for me, and for us. These are ties which bind. I felt a tug, a pull, bound together with those who are there for each other.

And at that moment I was transported, and transformed. I fell through the crack of time and space. One shiva blurred, and became every shiva, one act of kindness intertwined with every other.

That moment happened, of course, because it was a community I had served for some time. But it echoed, and almost happened again, here, in a place where I am fairly new. At the end of the service on the first Erev Shabbat back on St Thomas, as I read the weekly Yahrtzeit list, before adding my father, other names jumped out. For a fleeting moment, there, too, they filled the Sanctuary, this “presence” from another time and place. That night I read out loud three names of those who had passed away during the same week, in different years: an Ambassador, a Governor, and a previous rabbi who had served the community for over 50 years. And time slipped, and past, present, and future all met again.

For me, services are only in part about God, or theology, or belief. We are Jews; our views of God differ, ranging from quite traditional to outright atheists who nevertheless faithfully come to services every single week. No, it is, for me, at least as much about community, the act of coming together.

In this I believe – and at a service in a living room in Kensington, MD, last month I felt – there is an opening, at least a chance for a mystical moment which can change our lives.

It may be rare, but it is real. Any place can become every place, one space all of space, when here and there and now and then blend and mix and almost anything is possible.

Such is the potential of kindness, and coming together. In the midst of sadness and loss it was a glimpse of love and an overwhelming sense of support. It is a feeling that cannot be staged and cannot be faked but which.. well, you know it when you feel it. It was real, and it was precious.

My father, [Murray Feshbach](#), was...a very [special man](#). To all of you who have been there for us, who have listened to [stories about him](#) if you did not know him, or shared with us if you did, thank you.

There are so many wrong things to say at a time of death, and no guaranteed “right” words. But honesty, and simple presence, are a great gift we give each other.

And yes, in this way, it is true to say that a real community... it’s bigger on the inside... than you can possibly guess... by just looking at in... from outside.