

CITY FOLK

Kitty Kaddish

Robbie Silverman honors his cats Tweety and Sylvester in the Jewish tradition



J.M. GIORDANO

By [Evan Serpick](#)

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Every single Sunday for the past seven years, Robbie Silverman has gone to the Humane Society's pet cemetery in Owings Mills to visit Tweety, the cat he lost to diabetes in 2006.

"I never missed a weekly visit in seven years," says Silverman, 53, who breaks down in tears frequently while talking about Tweety. "I don't care if it's raining, snowing, whatever it is, I'm out there."

While he's there, Silverman always stops in the Humane Society shelter to donate newspapers for the crates and cat food—about \$300's worth per year, he estimates—but he's careful not to linger. "It's hard to see them in cages," he says, his voice catching. "So I go in, I drop everything off, and I leave, because I can't look. If I was there, I would take them all home with me."

Silverman's grief multiplied in March of last year, when he lost his only other cat, Sylvester, to cancer. "I'm a single guy, I live alone, and they're all that I have," he says. "And now, you come home to an empty house."

A lifelong observant Jew, Silverman looked to his tradition to find refuge from his pain. He noticed the memorial boards, called Yahrzeit boards, around his synagogue, Moses Montefiore Anshe Emunah Hebrew Congregation (also known as MMAE or Greengate Jewish Center) in Pikesville, where congregants' loved ones are remembered on small plaques and he wondered if Tweety and Sylvester could be remembered the same way.

"I see the Yahrzeit boards, and it's people, and it's great, but these are also gifts from God, and let's remember them also," says Silverman, who says Kaddish, the Jewish prayer of mourning, for both cats. "I just wanted to honor their memory and the unconditional love that they shared."

Silverman brought his idea to the rabbi, Yerachmiel Shapiro, and synagogue president Jeff Forman, and they liked the idea, though Shapiro was a little hesitant at first.

"I was both excited about a cool idea and also nervous about how it would be received," he says. "I liked the idea personally, but the last thing in the world I wanted was for someone to say 'You disgraced my ancestors, you disgraced humanity.'"

After discussing the idea with other members of the community, Shapiro and Forman embraced the idea. It was Shapiro who suggested the name Hashem's Little Angels—Orthodox Jews often refer to God as Hashem—and Forman who bought the first plaque (after those for Sylvester and Tweety), to remember his dogs Friskie, Missy, Candy, Rover, and Jasper. Shapiro has ordered a plaque for both his childhood dog, Einstein, and his wife's bird Lexie.

"At first this seems like a radical idea in the world of traditional Judaism," says Shapiro, who says he's received only positive feedback from the congregation although rabbis at some other congregations have said they wouldn't have approved the idea. "But the idea that real love is the truest expression of Godliness is a core Jewish idea, so why not have that?"

Silverman donated \$1,400 to build the memorial, also called "The Sylvester and Tweety Silverman Pet Remembrance Tribute Board." It hangs in a room near the lobby where children often play. In the center of it is an essay Silverman found online, called "The Rainbow Bridge."

"Just this side of heaven is a place called Rainbow Bridge," it starts. "When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone here, that pet goes to Rainbow Bridge. There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they can run and play together." It

continues to describe the day when departed pets and owners are reunited. "You cling together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again."

"It's at home, on my mantle, and I read it to them at the pet cemetery," Silverman says of "The Rainbow Bridge." "It's comforting until you think that they're there and we're here until we meet again."

Silverman grew up in Mount Washington and has always worked at his parents' stores, Jerry's and Jerry's Too, near Lexington Market, which specialize in school uniforms and other children's clothes. The cats, he says, originally belonged to an ex-girlfriend, but "I could just tell she wasn't that interested in them," he says. "Whenever I would play with them, she would say, 'Oh, Robbie, you and those cats.'" When the relationship ended in 1999, he asked if he could take ownership of the pets, and the ex agreed.

"So I geared my house to the Sylvester and Tweety theme, with pictures, with stuffed animals of Sylvester and Tweety, with posters, stuff like that," says Silverman, who is wearing a Sylvester and Tweety tie. "I really just dedicated myself to them."

The memorial wall has helped Silverman focus his grief on something positive, and he hopes other institutions will be inspired to do the same thing.

"Not only a synagogue could do this, but churches, a mosque, community center, a lodge," he says. "People have ideas about memorializing their pet, but maybe if you see something on the wall, hanging up a picture, it means something. And it's everlasting."

In addition to creating the memorial wall and making donations to the Humane Society, Silverman gives regularly to the ASPCA, the American Diabetes Association, and the Jewish National Fund in Sylvester's and Tweety's names. He's thought about adopting another cat, but he says he's not ready.

"I was just in pieces whenever I would even take them to the vet just for a regular checkup when they were healthy," he says, shaking his head. "I want to, but I'm still mourning."

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