



Temple Shalom

Guidelines for those coordinating and setting up a shiva house

What is shiva?

The shiva period is a time to honor the memory of the loved one and offer consolation to the mourners. It is an opportunity for the mourners to speak freely of the loved one and share memories, stories and photos.

During a shiva call, visitors enter quietly (usually the door is unlocked) and bring food directly to the kitchen. Visitors do not need to announce their arrival or bring attention to any food they have brought. Many people bring sweets, so consider bringing a vegetable or fruit platter instead.

The gathering is not a dinner party. It is respectful to refrain from loud conversation and feasting.

If you are unsure about what to say to a mourner, it is often enough to say something like, “I’m sorry for your loss.” Then you can take the cue from the mourners. They may want to talk about their loved one or sit in silence.

What should a coordinator do?

Typically, one or two people volunteer to coordinate a shiva. Usually these are friends, neighbors, or more distant relatives. Immediate mourners (spouse, siblings, children, parents) should be free to share memories of their loved one or to sit quietly.

The family may want to have someone stay in the house during the funeral.

The coordinator(s) should check with the family about supplies and purchase in advance if needed:

Hot/cold cups

Napkins

Plates

Plastic utensils

Hand towels for 1st floor bathroom

Kleenex tissues

Toilet paper

Large garbage bags

Paper towels

Plastic wrap, foil, and Ziploc bags for leftovers

Beverage set up: coffee, hot water for tea, milk, sugar, sweetener, cold drinks, ice, ice bucket and tongs

Depending on the season, the family may want help to arrange a space to put coats and boots. Coat racks may be rented from funeral homes. It might also be helpful to have towels or plastic near the front door for shoes and boots.

If a large number of people are expected to attend the shiva, extra folding chairs may be needed. Chairs could be borrowed or rented.

The coordinator should ask the family about their wishes concerning Jewish mourning customs. The family should do whatever feels comfortable for them at this difficult time. At the discretion of the family, prepare the following:

- Place plastic pitcher of water, large bowl, paper towels, and a small garbage pail outside the door (for use by mourners upon return from the cemetery in ritual hand-washing)
- Prepare a dozen hard-boiled eggs (traditionally the first thing that the family eats when they return from the cemetery, as eggs are a symbol of life)
- Gather sheets or pillowcases and tape to cover mirrors (mirrors may be covered as a reminder that the focus in the mourning period is not on appearance)

Upon the family's return from the cemetery, they may choose to light the seven-day shiva candle (no special blessing is necessary)

The family may want to place a sign-in book and a pen on a table near the entryway, so that visitors may sign in. They may also want to keep a list in the kitchen of food contributions in order to send acknowledgement cards.

Some families may prefer to return from the cemetery before the shiva hours begin. In that case, the coordinator needs to ensure that a meal of consolation (a meal served by friends meant to signify that life goes on) has been set out for the family to eat upon arrival.

Other families may prefer to return from the cemetery and have shiva hours begin immediately. If so, the coordinator needs to set out a buffet of food to be shared by all visitors.

Be sure to keep in mind special dietary issues, both kashrut and medical.

The coordinator should respect the family's privacy. During the visiting hours, the coordinator is unobtrusive, keeps the kitchen clean, monitors supplies, and empties garbage and recycling bins as needed.

We appreciate your feedback to improve this guide.