

## *Taking Back Shiva*

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Well this is not how I imagined speaking with you on this Yom Kippur! In fact, this is the first time in my life that I can remember not being in shul on Yom Kippur. It is pretty disorienting, but I want you to know that I am on the mend, and that I have read every message you have sent me over the past several days, and each one has been a true source of encouragement. I feel so blessed to be part of such a caring community. I also want to express my appreciation to all my colleagues for supporting me, and for carrying our community at this time, and during my absence.

Can you imagine a full-length, feature film all about sitting shiva? I couldn't either, which is why I felt it was my professional, rabbinical responsibility to view this film on your behalf. Let me just say for the record that we Jews do not generally believe in vicarious substitution. On Yom Kippur, it's between you and God; no intermediaries, no proxies. The Yom Kippur Torah reading is full of great symbolism: a ram carrying the sins of Israel into the wilderness; the High Priest beseeching God's forgiveness for the Jewish people at the Holy of Holies. But none of those rituals exempted each, individual Jew from the very personal, very individual work of atonement. In this one case, however, I, as your rabbi and spiritual leader, will give you a free pass. I have taken this one for you, so that you should never have to do this yourself. I have saved you, or at least 1 hour and 48 minutes of your life, so that you will never have to watch the 2014 film "This is Where I Leave You." It really should have been a great movie. The cast includes Tina Fey, Jason Bateman, Corey Stoll, Adam Driver; even Jane Fonda had a lead role. But that ridiculous collection of talent cast couldn't save this film from itself. I watched it on my iPad while lying in bed one night in a Covid stupor. I rented it from AppleTV, and even though it cost me a whopping \$2.99, I felt committed to seeing it through.

The movie is about yet another dysfunctional family that is reunited in their suburban, childhood home by the death of the patriarch, whose dying wish is that all his children return home to observe the traditional Jewish rite of shiva for the full seven days...never mind that he identified as a "Jewish atheist." The one cast member who is actually Jewish in real life, Ben Schwartz, plays a total shmegegge of a rabbi, trying to shepherd this very reluctant family through the rituals of mourning. If you still go ahead and watch this film, please don't say I didn't warn you. Although I hear the book was definitely more redeemable.

In any case, there was one aspect of this story that the screenwriters captured with surprising accuracy. When the family members all assembled themselves on low shiva chairs lined up in the living room to receive condolence calls, the comments and conversations of the visitors were positively cringe worthy. After one exhausting day of shiva, the camera pans the house, emptied of guests, but piled high with half-eaten sandwiches, empty cups, and Jane Fonda, the widow, and her son, played by Jason Bateman washing dishes and wrapping up food long after everyone has left. Now if you're thinking to yourself, "That's not accurate...at least, that's not how it's supposed to be!" Well, you'd be right. It's not at all how it's supposed to be. But it has become all too common for shiva in this day and age.

One of the great existential questions that people are asking these days is “What lessons have we learned from Covid?” And even, “What did we start doing during Covid that we might continue doing even when we have emerged from this pandemic altogether?” I will be perfectly honest with you, that when I logged-on to lead my first Zoom shiva minyan about a year and a half ago I thought it would be awful. How could Zoom even come close to conveying the warmth, the comfort, the feeling of being surrounded by the loving presence of community after experiencing the loss of a loved one? I thought it would be a totally contrived, sterile experience. Boy was I wrong. With the exception of a few awkward relatives who hadn’t yet mastered the mute button, Zoom shiva actually lived up to its namesake: It zoomed in on the most important parts of shiva. Zoom shiva enables people from all over the country, all over the world who could never have attended an in-person shiva to participate. That in and of itself has been very powerful. I have led a few trans-continental Zoom shiva minyans! But more than that, people at Zoom shivas speak almost exclusively about the deceased, in loving, personal tributes. The focus is on comforting the mourners, not schmoozing with people about work or the kids. In a New York Times article a few months ago, Rabbi Jeff Salkin summed it up by saying: “In person, you can hold people’s hands and embrace them. On Zoom, it’s more about holding people’s eyes and simply being with them.” What Zoom shiva has also meant for mourners is not having to host a days-long open house or calculating how to cram in throngs of people into a home, or how many platters to order to feed everyone who comes. We ought to consider carrying that value into our post-Covid world...

I’m sure you’ve heard the one about Rivkah and Saul...

Poor Saul is nearing the end of life, and his beloved Rivkah asks him: “Sauli, is there anything I can do to make easier this passing into the next world?”

Saul says from his deathbed, “Rivkeleh, do you remember that chocolate babka you used to make? How I would love to have just one more taste of that babka before I leave this world. That would give me so much comfort.”

To which Rivkah responds, “Oh Saul, for crying out loud I was saving the babka for the shiva!”

They say there’s a kernel of truth in every joke, and I think the kernel of truth here is that sometimes the babka becomes more important than the shiva. Sometimes the emphasis is more on entertaining than comforting. There’s a company in Los Angeles, called Shiva Sisters, that you can hire to come into your home and set everything up—cover the mirrors, provide the memorial candles...but they will also arrange catering, prove photographers, videographers, babysitting services, even valet parking! Certainly not your grandmother’s shiva! Perhaps you have felt this kind of pressure when you have been a mourner. Perhaps you’ve made a decision to only sit shiva for three days or two days or one day because who wants so many people in the house for so long? How unfortunate that mourners are depriving themselves of one of Judaism’s wisest and most sensitive traditions because it has become so untethered from its original purpose!

Mourning for a loved one for seven days originates in the very earliest sources of our tradition. After Joseph buries his father Jacob, *Ya’akov Avinu*, he mourns for seven days. After King Saul and his sons fall in battle to the Philistines, their supporters fasted for seven days! No babka at that shiva! And when Job experiences such unfathomable loss in his life, he receives visitors:

*Vayashvu ito la'aretz shiv'at yamim, v'shivat leilot, v'ein dover eilav davar, ki ra'u ki gadol ha'ke-eiv me'od*

...who sat with Job on the ground for seven days and seven nights, and they didn't speak a word because they saw the depths of Job's suffering.

I think there is so much truth in that description from Job 2:13. There are no deli platters, no drink tables, no tubs of whitefish salad or trays of rugelach...just people who come to sit, and accompany their friend in the depths of his suffering. There is no boisterous talking, no backslapping, or uproarious laughter in the room. Rather, no one speaks; no one says a word. Because presence is so much more powerful than anything even the most eloquent among us can say.

Now I recognize that not every death is a tragedy, and not every mourner is afflicted with profound grief. Sometimes death marks the end of terrible suffering, and it is, in a very real sense, a relief. Sometimes death comes after many long years in this world, and while sad, would not be considered catastrophic. I know that mourners in those situations may have different needs than mourners who have experienced a more sudden, unexpected, or horrific loss. I also know that relationships with the deceased affect our needs, our state of mind as mourners. Human relationships are complex, and they are sometimes fraught with pain, disappointment, anger, and resentment. How one grieves for a very close loved one compared to an estranged one, for example, will obviously not be the same. But every death represents a loss. It may very well be the loss of a precious, beloved relative who has been a larger than life presence for as far back as anyone can remember... Or it may be the loss of a relationship that never really developed, never lived up to its potential. Those are very different realities, but both are losses, and in both cases the survivors deserve the time to process that death and what it means for the rest of their lives with the support and care of their community.

No one should be intimidated by sitting shiva. Yet I encounter this all the time. People are intimidated by all the hosting, intimidated by the crush of people, intimidated by having to put out so much food and drink, intimidated by how it will turn their house upside down, intimidated by the thought of people overstaying their welcome. I hope you understand that these concerns are the inverse of what the tradition intends to offer us in our most fragile state.

I have never, *Baruch Hashem*, been a true mourner for one of the close relatives for whom I am obligated to sit shiva. But I came pretty close a few months ago, when my beloved father-in-law passed away. For the first time, *our* house became a shiva house; *our* mirrors were covered; *our* living room turned into a sanctuary. The most touching moments of those seven days were during the quiet hours of the day, when people came, sat for a while, and spoke with us, and yes, then went on their way. We were, of course, all so touched and deeply grateful that so many people came to morning and evening minyanim. But it was also at those times when I saw on my mother-in-law's face in particular a sense of being sort of lost in the crowd. So many people; so many voices; it was hard for her to hear even when someone came practically face-to-face to offer condolences. There were times I just wanted to spirit her out of the room, because I thought she may have needed to escape. No one intended for that to happen, God forbid...it just happens that way in so many modern shivas. And we don't realize that some of those mourners may find that clamorous atmosphere actually more painful than comforting; more isolating than enveloping.

So I want to make some suggestions for how we can take back shiva as a community; how we can return this beautiful, sensitive, nurturing tradition to its original, intended purpose; and how we, as a community, can better fulfill the mitzvah of *nichum aveilim*, providing crucial comfort to people who have experienced the loss of a loved one.

If I could change just one thing in this whole, modern shiva culture it would be the food. There is absolutely no reason that a family in mourning should feel the pressure to serve meals for days at a time to the entire community. The food at a shiva house should be almost entirely for the benefit of the mourners and their family, who shouldn't have to think about cooking, or shopping, or what's in their pantries or refrigerators. Mourners do not need 50 bagels or 5 pound tubs of cream cheese, and no one should come to a shiva house hungry. If you can't fathom having people in your home without putting out something to nosh on, then have some very light nosh on some tables; a little something snack or drink, but really that's it. The cocktail reception shiva-culture is just not in the spirit of comforting mourners, and it actually, albeit unintentionally, may make their lives more difficult. Let's save the *simchas*, the *Shabbatot*, and the *yom tovs* for entertaining and welcoming people into our homes for full meals.

My second recommendation is both for mourners and for those coming to the house of mourning. I strongly encourage mourners to offer visitation times other than when minyanim are scheduled. If you have advertised evening minyan at 7:30, and that's the only time of day when people are offered to come, then there is hardly any way to avoid the mass of people filling up your house all at once. It is nearly impossible to have quiet, individual conversations or interactions with people, to hear the stories they may want to share with you about your loved one. Controlling the noise factor, the traffic in the house is practically hopeless. Offer a few time slots during the day, separate from minyanim, when people can visit. And far be it from me to tell any Jew not to go to a minyan, but comforting mourners is a mitzvah that can definitely be done at less congested times.

And there are a few things that anyone making a shiva call should remember. It can be summed up in three words: Less is more. That goes for what you say and how long you stay! Coming up with the right things to say to a mourner is very daunting. But the tradition instructs us that we should actually not speak until the mourner speaks first. We should just go and sit by them and be present. If you must say something, "I'm so sorry for your loss," is perfectly acceptable. But then just wait, and listen for their cues. Talk about what they want to talk about, or if they prefer, just sit quietly. But when you feel something else coming out of your mouth like "He was so young," or "He lived a long life," we heard both of those comments about my 82 year old father-in-law; or should some other philosophical speculation come to mind, like why that person's time was up, I urge you to flex every muscle in your face, mouth, and jaw to keep those words from coming out. They are not comforting; they are not helpful; even though your intentions may very well be...

You may offer to bring the mourner a drink or some food, so they don't have to get it for themselves. It is often very comforting to share a story or a memory you have about the deceased. But to quote the great Kenny Rogers, "you gotta know when to walk away, know when to run." Spend some quality time, then get up, and let someone else do the same. And if you used a cup or a plate during your visit, please dispose of it properly, you know, like your mother taught you...Don't leave it for someone else to clean up.

Now there are some traditional parting words...unfortunately it's sometimes comes in the form of a clunky Hebrew benediction:

*Ha'Makom yinachem etchem betoch sha'ar aveilei Tzion viYrushalayim*, meaning, May God comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem, is the traditional Ashkenazi formula.

Sephardic Jews have a slightly more aerodynamic phrase: *Min Hashamayim tenuchamu*, May comfort come from Heaven.

I think actually the South African Jews have figured it out the best. To mourners they simply say: *Long life*.

You can come up with your own too...maybe write it down and keep it in your glove compartment or in your wallet. Something easy like, "May God comfort you and your entire family." Or "May you all find comfort."

Having a pre-scripted, traditional statement of comfort can be helpful when our own words fail us. Then get up and go. No long Jewish goodbyes. Mourners are not expected to walk you to the door or greet you at the door for that matter. Just see yourself out.

Another important aspect of this mitzvah that we can all do is check in again with mourners in a few week's time, or even a month or two later, when all the activity has calmed down, and the real struggle of returning to some kind of normalcy has begun. That's often when mourners need the most support.

This mitzvah called *nichum aveilim*, comforting mourners, is one of those beautiful ways that we show up for each other and take care of each other in the Jewish community. I am always in awe of how much compassion, generosity, and kindness people bring to their fellow Jews in times of loss. My family certainly felt that in such abundance this past May. The word *nichum*, which we usually translate as comfort, actually has a more nuanced meaning. In Exodus 32, after the episode of the Golden Calf, God is so angry, so fed up with the Jewish people, God basically says to Moses, 'I'm done with this disloyal, rebellious people. Stand back while I wipe them all out.' But Moses persuades God not to destroy the Jewish people, by reminding God of all kinds of promises God has made in the past, by recalling Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which is why we begin the Amidah to this day by invoking their names. And then God says, *Vayinachem*, there's that word, *Vayinachem Adonai al ha'ra-ah asher dibeir la'asot l'amo*,

God reconsiders the punishment; God gains a different perspective on what God was planning to do.

That word *nachem*, *nichum*, *nechama*, is the kind of comfort or peace that comes from a different appreciation of the circumstances, a reframing of sorts. And that is what shiva attempts to provide. By bringing the community to the mourner, rather than the other way around; by providing for all of their needs; by taking their minds off the mundane so that they can reflect on the person they have just lost; through prayers and rituals that connect this grief with a much larger story of a family, a culture, a religious civilization. *Nichum Aveilim* is about so much more than babka and deli platters. It is about providing a context for honoring and remembering a loved one while in the loving embrace of the Jewish people. We owe it to each other to do this mitzvah with kavannah; with thoughtfulness and punctiliousness and devotion. Not the least of

which because at some point we will turn to that very same community's embrace when we need it the most.

Now, also surrounded either in person or on various screens, we turn to another one of those moments that is best done when we know that our community is there to bouy us, and console us, and support us. We are turning now to the Yizkor service, and in our thoughts and memories to loved ones who have passed from this world to the next. In these next moments of prayerful reflection, may you be blessed to reconnect with those precious *neshamot*, and recommit to living a life that honors them and continues to make their memories a blessing. May this time provide you *nechama* in the truest sense: the unique comfort that comes from reexamining the many blessings of sharing your lives with those we now lovingly remember.