

THE SHIVA VISIT

Sara realized that none of the events of the week (of shiva) had anything to do with her father at all . . . Whenever Sara was in the room with the guests, she had noticed, the adults in the household avoided mentioning him. It was as if they wanted her to forget him."

This short passage from Dara Horn's novel, *The World to Come*, gets to the essence of the shiva call dilemma. Although one of the simplest steps to supporting one another is to attend a shiva minyan/visit of consolation after a death. It is also one of the most challenging. We are unsure of the etiquette. It is a social event and a time for a religious service, a time to see friends and a time to comfort the mourner, a time to bring a gift (food is usually appropriate) and a time to just be present.

Shiva literally means "seven," implying seven days of staying at home and receiving visitors and words of comfort. The reality is that few of us are comfortable taking off that much time and we are unsure of our ability to sit in our own homes and allow other people to feed us and help take care of the details of our domestic life. For those of us accustomed to taking charge of our home lives, shiva can seem like an invasion of our private space and three consecutive evening services can push our limits.

This brief guide to shiva is designed to help us all understand our roles and articulate our communal norms. I hope to make it easier for us to perform two critical tasks – mourn our losses and support one another, two of the most essential functions of any community.

From Death to Burial

The period between a death and burial is known as "*aninut*," a transitional time when mourners focus on funeral arrangements. Visits and calls during this time are generally short and limited to offers of assistance and making sure the mourner's immediate needs are being met. Dropping off a meal can be helpful; a lengthy visit may be less appropriate. Even in situations when burial might take place days after a death, formal mourning and visits of consolation do not begin until after the return from the cemetery.

Returning Home

The family returns home after the burial service to a "meal of consolation" that traditionally includes simple foods, often round (such as bagels and hard boiled eggs) that remind us of the cyclical nature of life and death. Traditionally, only the immediate family gathers at the home on the first day, but in our community, where shiva is often held for only three days, friends are usually welcome immediately.

As you enter the house from the cemetery for the first time, hands are washed at the front door marking the return from the world of death to a place of life, and a shiva candle is lit to anchor the soul of the deceased in the room where she or he will be remembered. Mirrors are covered

in the house of mourning to help the mourners avoid concerns for physical appearance and as a reminder of a time when a person died at home and (folk tradition held that) his or her soul might have been prevented from beginning its journey by becoming trapped in the mirror's glass.

How to be a Good Guest

While there is often abundant food in a shiva house, as a guest we want to make sure that the mourners are fed and that they do not have social responsibilities. The mourner might choose to sit on a low chair or bench and wait to receive greetings rather than reaching out to welcome visitors. The goal of the visit is threefold: 1) to help the mourner be a mourner rather than a host, 2) to encourage conversation about the deceased, and 3) to ensure that there is a comfortable minyan so the mourner feels the active support of the community. Ask family members if more food is needed. Offer to help move chairs or open the door as others arrive. Most importantly, be prepared to listen. Silence is fine. Tradition holds that we follow the lead of the mourner while gently letting them know that we are there to hear what they have to say when they wish to share. Avoid moving the conversation away from the deceased for too long or in an inappropriate direction.

When to Visit

Visits are always welcome before, during and after the time announced for the shiva service (minyan). Services are most commonly held in the early evening. If B'nai Tikvah is aware of plans to receive visitors during the day, we will include that information in the email sent to the congregation. Be prepared to step back if the family is having a quiet meal together or if the mourner's seem tired at the end of a long day. If you sense that the family needs rest, help encourage people to make their farewells.

Who Should Visit

B'nai Tikvah sends news of deaths and shiva plans to the entire congregation for a simple reason: everyone is encouraged to visit a house of shiva. It is never inappropriate to help make a minyan, say a kind word, and introduce yourself to a fellow congregant.

In Closing...

Upon leaving the side of a mourner one might recite the following words, "May God comfort you among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." These words give us a ritual of closure to cover any awkwardness about what to say to someone who has suffered the death of a loved one. They also remind the mourner that they are not alone, they mourn "among the other mourners..."

Where is God in this moment? By paying a shiva visit we bring God's presence into the house of mourning.

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