

Shiva: May you be comforted among the mourners for Zion and Jerusalem

When someone we know has lost a loved one, we are called upon to console them. The first, most important way is to visit them during the week of shivah – the seven days following burial.

But what do we do? What do we *not* do? How do we get ready?

Start by preparing yourself. Think about the person you're visiting. Most people who suffer a loss feel tightness in the throat or heaviness in the chest. They may have an empty feeling in their stomach, or lose their appetite. Some people feel restless and look for activity, and many find it difficult to concentrate. Often they feel that the loss isn't real denying the loss or their grief. With grief comes guilt or anger over things that happened or didn't happen in their relationship with the deceased. Sometimes people feel intense anger at the loved one for leaving them and sometimes displace that anger onto others. The bereaved want or need to tell and retell things about the deceased and about the death. They are prone to mood swings at the slightest cause, and often cry unexpectedly or laugh inappropriately.

You may see any or all of these behaviors in the shiva home. Knowing what to expect may help you think through what you will and won't do.

Getting Ready For a Shiva Visit

Prepare to listen attentively.

Respond with empathy. Don't make assumptions about either spoken or implied feelings.

Recognize that you may feel powerless and sad yourself.

Take cues from the person about whether s/he wants to talk.

Use open-ended statements such as, "How are you doing?"

Respect the person's need to deny, to feel sad, to be angry or unfocused.

If you knew the deceased, think about your own contacts with him/her and be prepared to offer your memories and reminiscences. If you didn't know the deceased, ask about his/her history, marriage, work, declining health, etc.

Don't ignore children who are grieving. They need attention and support as much as or more than the adults in their world.

Do not overlook other family members who, although not mourners, are grieving and need our support.

Our tradition aims at relieving mourners of the duty of serving as hosts. So one usually enters a shiva house without knocking or ringing the bell, refrains from normal, "Hi, how are you" greetings, brings food and drink to the mourners rather than being served, and refrains from celebratory behavior.

What to Say:

I'm sorry for your loss
The traditional Jewish condolence
(see the title above) I'm sad for you
How are you doing with all this?
What can I do for you?
I'm here and want to listen
I'll call you tomorrow (and do it!)
You must be really hurting
Take all the time you need
Thank you for sharing your feelings
Had _____ been ill long?
I remember that s/he _____

What Not to Say:

I know just how you feel
Time heals all wounds
Things happen for a reason
It's G-d's will
She's in a better place
You need to go on with your life
Count your blessings
S/he is no longer in pain
Death was a blessing
It all happened for the best
You'll find someone new
Call me when I can help
G-d has something better in store
G-d needs him/her more.

Sources:

Lorraine Biros, LCPC, Mautner Project
Jewish Social Service Agency Discussion
Materials

**Prepared and distributed by the
Ohr Kodesh Congregation
Chevra Kadisha Committee**