

THE MITZVAH OF PAYING A SHIVA CALL

BY RUTH GOLMANT

Attending a funeral for, or paying a shiva call to, a stranger might feel odd or uncomfortable, but it is one of the greatest mitzvot a Jew can perform. Beresheit 25:11 reads, "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham that God blessed his son, Isaac." The sages interpreted this blessing to mean that God was offering consolation to Isaac upon the death of his father. We are meant to act in God's image: as God comforts the bereaved, so do we.

The purpose of making a shiva call is to relieve the mourner of the intense loneliness that comes from having a loss that he or she alone has suffered. According to Maurice Lamm, author of *The Jewish Way in Death & Mourning*, "The strategy of true compassion is presence and silence, the eloquence of human closeness." We quietly join the mourner, sit alongside them, and provide empathic consolation. The cumulative effects of having many friends come to visit, including some not seen for a long time and those who may never have been introduced to the mourner, helps relieve the despair of loss. When someone you don't know takes the trouble to join you at a moment when you are truly brought low, it is hard to feel the world doesn't care.

Why will you always see a request for food when a shiva minyan is announced? We bring the mourner the sustenance of life, the bread of existence, at a time when life feels fragile and fleeting. The act of eating is itself an affirmation of life. So important was the basic courtesy of bringing food to mourners, the sages of the Jerusalem Talmud admonished and cursed the indifference of neighbors who caused the bereaved to make their own meals.

Visiting a house of mourning confirms to a grieving person that the world is not a hateful or dangerous place, but warm and friendly, and a place that welcomes mourners to return to when they are ready. At some time or another each of us will likely be on the giving or receiving end of a shiva call. When you have seen both sides, you will truly understand the meaning of Kehillah Kedoshah: a community whose worth is measured in sacred acts and relationships that connect us to one another and to God.