

Shiva

Shiva (“seven” in Hebrew) is the period of mourning directly following the funeral of a loved one. During this time, mourners traditionally stay at home, and the community comes to them to comfort them for the loss they have sustained. Prayer services are held at the mourners’ home to enable them to say the Kaddish prayer with a minyan of ten adult Jews. Mourners also often use this time to share memories of the deceased with the community gathered around them for support. During this time the mourners are said to be “sitting” shiva, referring to the custom of sitting on low stools or chairs during this period of mourning.

It is a beautiful and important mitzvah to comfort the bereaved in our community, whether or not we are personally acquainted with them. Attending a shiva minyan creates a sense of community for the mourners, who can so often feel isolated at this traumatic time. You need not feel that you must have a close relationship with the mourners or with the deceased in order to attend shiva. Your presence alone can be a comfort.

As we know, ours is a diverse community, and consequently, shiva practices vary widely. The following are some basic guidelines for those attending a shiva minyan or visiting a shiva house:

- * Traditionally, mourners do not greet visitors at the door, and you may often find the door of the house unlocked to facilitate this. In turn, visitors traditionally do not greet the mourners but wait to be acknowledged by them. This custom emphasizes that this is not an ordinary social occasion but a profound moment of grief and of comfort.
- * Mourners are treated like guests in their own home. That is, mourners do not attend to those arriving as at a social event. Instead, visitors take care of the mourners’ needs, offering them food and drink and so on.
- * In interacting with the mourners, it is important to follow their lead. Whether they are experiencing tears of grief or laughter at memories, having visitors with whom to share these is incredibly valuable. The visitors’ role is not to “cheer up” the mourners but rather to listen to them, to sit with them, to comfort them simply by their presence or with a few heartfelt words of sympathy. A silent hug or handshake can be enough.
- * Shiva visits should be brief, and again, it is important to follow the lead of the mourners. Often the traumatic experiences of the death and the funeral can leave the mourners exhausted. Some people open their homes only during the announced time of the service; others welcome guests all day long. When we have the information, our announcements will make that clear. Otherwise, feel free to call the shiva house and ask when visits are welcome. Visits usually should not exceed an hour, and it is perfectly acceptable to attend a shiva minyan

and leave after saying a few words of comfort to the mourners. Rabbi Maurice Lamm writes, “Visits should never be unduly prolonged, in the mistaken belief that one’s presence brings an unusual degree of relief” (The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning, page 137).

- * It is common (but by no means required) to bring food to a shiva house, both for the mourners and for their visitors. Again, ours is a diverse community in which standards of kashrut practice vary widely. Certainly, if the kashrut practice of the mourners’ household is known, any food brought should conform to their practice. If it is not known, it is best to bring pareve or dairy items that are marked as kosher.

For any additional questions or concerns, please feel free to contact Rabbi Gordon or Student Rabbi Adam Zeff.

The following two books are also useful references:

Anita Diamant, Saying Kaddish: How to comfort the dying, bury the dead, and mourn as a Jew (New York: Schocken Books, © 1998).

Rabbi Maurice Lamm, The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, © 2000).