

Congregation Ohr Torah Shiva House Guide – Making a Condolence Call to a Mourner's House

With the death of a husband or wife, you lose your present; with the death of a parent or sibling, you lose a part of your past; with the death of a child, you lose your future. None of these events can be compared to each other. That is why it is a mitzvah of compassion and kindness to visit during Shiva. What makes a condolence call best fulfill its function is summed up in three words: **just be there**. What a mourner needs most is the gift of you. The purpose of the visit is to be supportive, to listen and respond to the mourner.

Words often miss their mark. They may hurt as often as they heal. What leaves no room for misunderstanding, however, is a simple hug, a shared tear, and the language conveyed by our presence.

Show by your presence that you are also affected by the loss. Demonstrate by your sorrow that you share in some measure the pain of the mourners. Illustrate by recounting your memories of the departed that the life that is no more will continue in your mind and in your heart, offering a measure of immortality to the deceased. Make clear to those who mourn that you will always continue to be there for them because you are part of a greater community that understands that all of us are responsible one for another.

When one pays a Shiva call, the focus is on comforting the mourners in their time of greatest grief. Traditionally, one enters the Shiva house quietly with a small knock so as not to startle those inside, unless one hears that others are already there or the door is open. No one needs to greet visitors; they simply enter on their own.

A person in pain needs to talk, and he/she needs someone to listen. He/She doesn't need you to say very much. Your job, in comforting the mourner, is to *listen* to the mourner, responding when necessary and when it is appropriate. Always let the mourner take the lead in the conversation.

The idea is not that we should try to take the mourner's mind away from his/her pain. The mourner has to come to grips with his/her loss, to learn to accept it, and not ignore it. The mourner has to pour out his/her feelings and express his/her sorrow. You can show your empathy and caring by listening. Even just entering and not speaking gives comfort, and honors the mourners. Most of all, the mourner needs to know that he/she is not facing the world alone, that he/she has friends.

A mourner should not say hello or goodbye; likewise we do not say hello or goodbye to a mourner. We do not say "shalom," or any other greeting. You should not begin speaking until the mourner has spoken to you first. Remember that when you approach the mourner, your presence is the most important thing. Therefore, allow the mourner to open conversation.

Try the door before ringing the bell. The door to most Shiva homes will be unlocked. Bring any food to the kitchen, not into the room where the mourner is sitting.

When entering the house, you should not greet the mourner. In fact, it is best to come in silently and sit down close to the mourner. Take your cue from the mourner. If the mourner feels like speaking, let him/her indicate it by speaking first. Let the mourner lead and talk about what he/she wants to talk about. It is best to speak about the one who has passed away, and if you have any stories or memories to share with the mourner, this is the time to do so.

This is not a time to distract the mourner from mourning. Out of nervousness, we often make small talk because we do not know what to say. Don't fill in the time talking about happy subjects or inconsequential topics like politics or business. The mourner should not be joyful during Shiva. A Shiva visit is no time for telling jokes or for being light-hearted.

Often, the best thing to say is nothing. A Shiva call can sometimes be completely silent. If the mourner does not feel like talking at that time, so be it. Your goal is not to get the mourner to talk; it is to comfort the mourner. Your presence alone is doing that. By sitting there silently, you are saying more than words can express. You are saying: "I am here for you. I feel your pain. There are no words." And sometimes there aren't any.

Use phrases such as "I'm sorry" or "This must be so difficult for you." It is appropriate to talk about the deceased and reminisce. As a visitor, you should be sensitive in what you say. If you don't know what to say, say nothing. Comforting does not mean distracting with meaningless chatter. If you meet other friends, remember that you are in a Shiva home. Conversation should be low and respectful. This is not a party. The focus is on comforting the mourners. If many people are visiting, spend only a few minutes with the mourner so that others can have their turn.

Don't ask how old the deceased was or how he/she died. Get that information from someone else if you must know.

Don't say "well at least he/she lived a long life".

Don't ask for many details about the deceased's sickness or death.

Don't ask, "How are you?" (You know that the mourner is not happy.)

Don't discuss non-Shiva issues with the mourner.

Don't come to tell the mourners about **your** problems.

Don't discuss business and non-Shiva issues with other visitors unless out of sight and ear of the mourner.

Don't stay for a long time unless the mourner specifically asks you to remain.

Don't jump in and leave in five minutes.

- Do** offer to tell nice stories about the deceased.
- Do** ask about the deceased's life.
- Do** try to bring the conversation back to discussing the deceased.
- Do** offer to help serve, take out garbage, etc...
- Do** come to as many minyanim as possible.
- Do** ask about the deceased's (surviving) family.

Obviously, let the mourner guide your conversation. If the mourner wants to discuss the details of the death, then by all means, discuss it.

Some Shiva houses see many hundreds of visitors during the week. Try to time your visit when it's not too crowded. The mourner feels an obligation to speak with every visitor. If there are ten visitors encircling the mourner at once, it can become quite unnerving and overwhelming. Above all, take your cue from the mourner.

Remember that speaking about the loved one the mourner lost is comforting. It's all right if the mourner cries because the mourner is in mourning. It is all part of the important process of coming to grips with such a loss.

The visitor should take one's cue from the mourner and leave when it is appropriate because overstaying one's visit could cause the mourner discomfort. You should not overstay your visit. Fifteen to twenty minutes will suffice, unless the mourner wants you to stay. When other visitors arrive and space is a concern, it is certainly time to leave.

Before leaving, one stands up, approaches the mourner and recites, in any language you prefer, "Hamakom y'nachaim eschem b'soch sh'ar availay Tzeeyon Veerushalayim.", which means: "May Hashem, the Almighty, Who is everywhere, comfort you amongst the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." The mourners should answer "Amen." One can read this phrase from a plaque in the house or from a sheet of paper that you bring with you.

Upon leaving the house of the mourner, it is customary to give charity in memory of the one who passed away, may his/her soul be elevated.

If the mourner does not speak at all to you during your visit, you may still say "Hamakom Y'nachaim..." when you leave.

If one has not comforted a mourner during Shiva, one should do so during the first thirty days after the funeral, by saying "Hamakom y'nachem, etc." If thirty days have passed, one should not recite that specific phrase, but should say "May you be comforted," or "May you never know any more pain."

Important Contact Information:

Assistance with mourning arrangements – Rabbi Marc Spivak – 917-957-3784

Laws of Mourning - Rabbi Marc Spivak – 917-957-3784

Shiva Chairs - Stu Rosenblum – 973-731-5331

Shiva Minyan - Rich Maron – 973-243-0862

Shiva Announcement - Rich Maron – 973-243-0862
Mark Grebenau – 973-325-7947
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Shiva Meals Robert Grosberg – 917-378-7355
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