

Visiting the Jewish House of Mourning¹**Shiva Etiquette – Proper Behavior for Visitors to a House of Mourning**

By Larry Fine

Sitting *shiva*, the custom of mourning for a loved one, is never a pleasant experience. Losing a loved one is hard; regardless if he or she died young or old, with or without suffering, having to sit for one week in the closed environment of a house can be difficult and depressing.

Visiting the mourner is a very important *mitzvah* and should top the list of everyone's important activities. Among observant Jews, a mourner is not supposed to go out to shop or work, is not allowed to launder or shower, and cannot watch television or listen to music on the radio. In short, diversions during the mourning period must be avoided. Mourning for a loved one is emotionally stressful; add to this emotional strain sitting *shiva* for a week and you can have a very difficult situation.

Visitors can help to make this period easier, as anyone who has had to sit *shiva* knows, yet many people feel uncertain of themselves when a neighbor or friend is sitting *shiva*. They may feel that they will not be welcome; possibly they do not consider themselves close enough friends or neighbors to come to visit. If they live far away, they may feel that it is too difficult to come, reasoning that the mourner must have closer friends who will visit. It is important to realize that your relationship with the mourner does not matter; your visit will be appreciated. Calling in place of visiting is understandable for out-of-state friends or relatives, but if you live in the same town, make time to visit. Only in circumstances where travel is impossible should a phone call replace a personal visit.

Some people are uncomfortable because they do not know what is expected of them at a house of mourning. There are certain rules of *shiva* etiquette, but they are flexible enough to allow much leeway from one *shiva* to another.

In terms of bringing gifts, in some circles food is not offered to visitors, while elsewhere, it is on the table. By the *S'fardim* the custom is to make blessings on the food, one blessing for each type of food to give additional merit to the departed soul. Before you visit, consider the needs of the mourner: do they need food and, if so, what kind, would be appreciated. If the person who ordinarily prepares meals is sitting *shiva*, or if the deceased played this role, the family suffers. Often a call to the house before coming can make the need clear. If you wish to bring baked goods or other food, take into account the kosher question before you bring it to the *shiva* house. You can't go wrong by bringing food; it is always appreciated. Flowers are not normally brought to the *shiva* home.

Are there young children in the household? Perhaps you can volunteer to take the children out for a small period of time or serve them meals. Having children around when you are trying to sit *shiva* can be trying. At the same time, if *you* have small children, it is not recommended to bring them to the house of mourning. Children like to play and run about and their activities take away from the mourning process.

Another possibility is doing the dishes or the laundry for the mourner. Choose a time to visit that is not normally time for relaxation or eating. Whereas some people do not mind a visitor while they are eating, others do. If you are not certain whether there are restrictions, call and inquire.

When you come to visit, in many communities the door is left open or slightly ajar and if so, it is customary to enter without knocking or ringing the bell. If you are unsure, knock lightly and then walk in. Keep your greeting brief and say something like, "I just heard about your loss." or "I am so sorry to hear about the death of your...". It is best to let the mourner talk about the person who just died. Try to be focused on the their loss and not discuss events happening in the world or in the community. If you do become involved in side conversations with other visitors or family members who are not sitting

¹ http://www.jewishmag.com/150mag/shiva_ettiquete/shiva_ettiquete.htm

shiva., it is good manners to do this in a different room or outside.

A mourner appreciates your presence. It helps him/her through the mourning cycle. Don't come to just fulfill your obligation, but rather come to stay and speak with the mourner and share his/her feelings. While you do not want to overstay, this is subjective and dependent on the conditions at hand; use your discretion. Ask about the deceased, such as how old he/she was, his or her interests, and so on. Questions encourage conversation.

If the family has put out a bowl for donations to the favorite charity of the person who died, put a small amount in the bowl. It makes the family feel good when others share in this charity.

It is also important to help spread the word that someone is sitting *shiva*. The mourner cannot call everyone. Tell people. If you think someone knows the mourner, inform them; do not assume that they know as it is very possible that they have not heard the news.

Visiting a mourner is a significant mitzvah. It helps the mourner feel cared about at a time of real need. Do all you can to visit those who are sitting *shiva*.

A word for the mourner: If the phone rings when there are visitors, designate someone else to answer the call. They should tell callers that you are busy and ask them to call again at such and such a time. It is not appropriate to have long telephone conversations when people are with you who have made the effort to visit. Keep all necessary phone conversations to a minimum.

Last word to the visitor: before leaving, remember to say the traditional words of condolence -

“May God comfort you together with those who mourn for Zion and Jerusalem.”

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