

Making a Shiva Call: The Mitzvah of Comfort

By Rabbi Janet Marder, May 2011

“Why is it so hard to comfort? What causes the uneasiness, the loss of words, the stumbling, the nervousness?” –Dr. Ron Wolfson, A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort

The word goes out: there’s been a death in your community. Perhaps it’s one of your friends, and you hear the news with shock and sorrow. Or perhaps one of your friends has lost a loved one – a parent, a spouse, a sibling, or God forbid, a child.

The longer we live, the more often we find ourselves going to funerals. Not only do our own losses multiply with the passage of years – we also find ourselves, more and more, called upon to offer strength and comfort to those around us as they deal with the complicated emotions surrounding death. Dr. Ron Wolfson, in his helpful guide to Jewish traditions around death and mourning, notes that it’s often extremely challenging to provide comfort, despite our sincere desire to be of help.

When death touches our friends, it may awaken our own memories of loss, or arouse anxiety about our own mortality, leaving us so distressed that we’re unable to focus on the feelings of others. We’re afraid of uttering meaningless platitudes or blurting out a remark that may be hurtful. And sometimes the magnitude of the tragedy is simply paralyzing. Words seem completely inadequate on such occasions. We find ourselves overcome with sadness, literally unable to speak.

And yet we know that one of our most significant *mitzvot*, one of our paramount obligations as Jews, is *“nichum aveilim – comforting mourners.”* In the face of death – the most destabilizing event most of us will ever experience — our tradition asks us to find within ourselves the capacity to address another’s pain.

Within the Beth Am community, one of the most important ways we offer comfort to one another is by attending *shiva minyanim* – prayer services, usually held in the home of the mourner, during the seven days following the death of a close relative. The Hebrew word *“shiva”* means *“seven,”* and reminds us of the seven-day mourning period that our patriarch Joseph observed for his father, Jacob (Gen. 50:10). Some liken the seven-day mourning period to the Biblical creation story: as it took seven days to create the world, so every individual’s death represents the loss of an entire world.

During the *shiva* period, mourners traditionally do not leave their home to work or carry out their normal activities. The origin of the *shiva minyan* was the community’s effort to gather around mourners so that they might fulfill the obligation of daily prayer while remaining at home. On a psychological level, the *shiva minyan* provides a vital opportunity for mourners to share memories and emotions with others in a loving, supportive atmosphere, and to receive tangible reminders that they are cared for and valued.

Here are some guidelines from Jewish tradition about how to pay a *shiva* call:

1. You need not be a close friend to attend a *shiva minyan*. Indeed, if you suspect that there may not be many others present, it is a mitzvah to attend the *minyan* even if you did not know the deceased. You will represent our community’s care and concern for the mourning family.

2. The front door is usually left unlocked, so callers may enter without knocking or ringing the bell. Mourners should not have to continually be answering the door to welcome visitors; the general principle is that mourners are not expected to behave like “hosts” taking care of “guests” on this occasion.

3. It’s appropriate to bring food (cake, cookies, fruit) to a house of mourning. The mourner is not expected to feed or entertain visitors.

4. Greet the mourner by offering some simple words (“I’m so sorry”; “I was so sad to hear about your Dad”; “This must be really tough for you”) or simply by offering a handshake or hug. As Dr. Wolfson writes, “A warm embrace, a kiss, an arm around the shoulder, an empathic look, the sharing of tears together – these are the nonverbal messages to the bereaved that often say more than a thousand words. And the underlying message sent by these gestures – undoubtedly the single most important act of comforting – is the wordless proclamation, ‘I am here for you.’”

5. Jewish tradition suggests that callers allow the mourner to begin the conversation and set the tone for what is discussed. Do not attempt to introduce other topics to “distract” the mourner. Take your cue from him/her. If s/he wants to speak about the deceased, listen attentively, without interrupting or feeling the need to “fill up” the silence. It can be risky to share stories of your own experience with loss, lest it seem that you are drawing attention to yourself rather than to the mourner. If you feel it’s appropriate, you might say something like, “I don’t know how you feel, but when my mother died…” You can ask factual questions (“Can you tell me something about your brother?”) You might ask, “Do you feel like talking?”

6. Some common and well-meaning remarks can often be distressing for mourners to hear: “It’s probably for the best”; “At least she’s not suffering anymore”; “I’m sure he’s in a better place”; “You’re lucky you had her for so long”; “I know exactly what you’re going through”; “Be thankful that you have another child”; “He lived a long life”; “Why didn’t you call me?”

7. Do not give advice (“You’ll get over it in time”; “You have to be strong for the children”; “It will be all right”). Such remarks are often ways of dealing with our own anxiety or distress in the face of another’s grief. Recognize that there is no single “correct” way to mourn, and it is normal for mourners to experience a wide range of emotions. If the mourner seems to be feeling guilty (“I should have insisted that he get to the doctor”; “I didn’t tell her that I loved her enough”) do not try to “correct” him or her. The act of listening and empathizing is the greatest gift you can give at such a moment.

8. It is not necessary to speak with the mourner for a long time, especially if there are many other people present. Shiva gatherings can be very exhausting for mourners. If the mourner does not seem to want to talk, do not take it as a personal rejection.

9. During the *shiva minyan*, there will usually be an opportunity for participants to share memories about the person who has died. If you knew the person, by all means say a few words that will let the mourner know how much you valued his/her loved one.

10. Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman writes: “The house of mourning is a house of grief. It is not a festive gathering or a celebration. The point of attending is to allow the mourner to express grief and to support the mourner through the grieving process. That being said, when you see people you know, it is fine to engage in normal conversation, as long as joking, gossiping, and loud talk is avoided.”

11. Most important: try to be there for the mourner not just at the *shiva minyan*, but in the days, weeks and months that follow. True friends are those who stay in touch and continue to reach out, even if the mourner does not at first seem responsive to social invitations. The medieval rabbinic authority called Rashba describes a house of mourning in which many friends had gathered, and none were able to offer words of comfort. Nevertheless, he said, consolation was present. "Even if there are no [fitting] words of consolation, the presence of friends gathered in honor of the deceased is itself a consolation" [from Rabbi Maurice Lamm, *Consolation: The Spiritual Journey Beyond Grief*]. Nothing we can say will heal the pain of tragic loss. But our compassionate presence, over time, can help our friends find the strength to go on.