



## **REFLECTIONS ON SHIVA**

**H**aving completed the shiva period commemorating the tragic loss of my 33-year-old wife following her eight year-long battle with cancer, I would like to offer a few personal reflections regarding the shiva process. I have no resentment towards anyone. I was, and remain to be, overwhelmed by the love and support shown to our entire family. These comments are meant to be personal reflections, which I hope others will find helpful when making decisions regarding how to properly comfort mourners.

### **Show Up**

I cannot emphasize enough how uniquely meaningful it was to see each and every person who walked through the door. There were some people whom I expected to show

up, but many, many more whom I did not. People from every stage of our lives came to demonstrate their support and — without exception — every visitor added to my sense of consolation and connection with the world. As expected, some of the guests who were closer to me or to my wife were able to provide a more acute form of comfort, but that certainly did not diminish the cumulative level of support offered by each individual condoler — regardless of their affiliation to our family. Some drove many hours just to sit for a few minutes, share a story, and/or give a hug before driving right back home. While sitting shiva in New York, we had visitors from: Israel, Switzerland, England, Illinois, South Carolina, Florida, Colorado, Utah, and California. It is exceptionally moving, meaningful, and reassuring to be

surrounded by the type of people who are willing to go to such great lengths to show love and support.

### **Read the Room**

While the following may sound obvious, I admit that I myself had never really considered it when I was the one paying a shiva call: what you see when you visit is only a highly-segmented glimpse of a tumultuous seven-day period filled with a myriad of emotions. There were times when I wanted to tell emotional stories and cry. Alternatively, there were times when I wanted to tell funny stories and laugh, times I wanted to listen, and times when I just wanted the room to be silent.

It may be difficult in practice, but the halacha of waiting to be spoken to

before speaking at a shiva house is the instructive embodiment of a keen and sensitive insight. I would suggest that, upon arrival at a shiva home, one should sit back and observe for a few minutes before interacting with the avel (mourner). There is no script for grieving, and mourning is a non-linear and individualized process. Read the room and engage in a manner befitting the mourners' current behavior/tone, and don't rely on your expectations.

### **Do Not Ask Practical Questions**

Thankfully, throughout shiva, insensitive, foolish, or (unintentionally) hurtful comments were extremely rare; and the few that came were — indeed — very few, and far between. I believe — as many visitors observed — that sometimes there really are no words. And yet, many people could not help trying to fill the vacuum with practical questions: “When are you going home?” “Who is coming with you?” “When do your kids start school again?”

While these questions seem innocuous and likely reflect an underlying level of care and concern, answering the same immaterial questions over and over again can become very annoying very quickly. Telling the same stories about my wife over and over again was comforting. Telling 300 people about my travel itinerary was not.

### **Quick, Quiet Visits are OK**

Among the many visitors who came during shiva were some people who did not know my wife. In such an instance, I found it to be perfectly acceptable to sit in silence for a few

minutes and then leave. Or, if you just want to listen, stay for as long as you like. You may not be able to offer any words of comfort, but again, there is comfort in your presence alone. And, even when it's less busy, staying 5-10 minutes is not offensive. I will restate: it meant a lot to me that you took the time to show up. I do not take that for granted, but please don't feel pressured to talk or to make me talk. (see: Read the Room above)

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about my wife  
over again was  
comforting; repeating  
chitchat with people  
who didn't know  
what to say was not

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### **If You Knew My Wife, I Wanted You to Share**

While the status quo for a guest at a shiva home should certainly be more listening than speaking, the instances in which people who knew my wife — friends, family, students, neighbors — shared their own anecdotes and feelings about her were extremely meaningful. Of course we know a lot about her life, but sharing with us the parts we may not know goes a long way towards helping to preserve not only the memory of a loved one, but of a more complete, colorful, and relatable person. Even — and perhaps especially — the most seemingly benign stories can help us remember the subtleties that made that person

who they were. We can never have enough memories of the people we've lost, so please don't worry about over-sharing.

### **E-mail, Don't Call**

From a purely practical standpoint, it is very, very difficult to take phone calls during shiva. I understand the preference to call vs. e-mail, because it seems a little more personal, but it ends up having the opposite effect. You can't know what I'm doing at the moment at which you call, so it usually means disrupting something or someone — thereby detracting from both the significance of your call, as well as any in-person conversation (or much needed meal) you might be unwittingly interrupting. When a person takes the time to write a nice e-mail, the end result tends to be much more meaningful and personal. I received many heartfelt, emotional, thoughtful e-mails, and that format provided people with an outlet to express themselves properly, and allowed me to receive their messages at times during which I was able to devote my proper focus to the words of comfort.

I found the shiva process to be extremely moving. I have always believed there is great wisdom in the Jewish mourning process. Having the unfortunate luck of experiencing it firsthand, I can state unequivocally that it is a brilliant, therapeutic and thoughtful time period. Thank you to each of you for showing up, calling, or e-mailing. While my heart aches and I wish my wife were next to me, this experience made me proud to be a Jew. May we continue to be there for each other.

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