

Guidelines for Making a Shiva Call

It is a great but very difficult mitzvah to comfort someone who has lost a loved one. We often feel uneasy and at a loss for words. Some of us are reminded of our own losses. Most of us are uncertain about what truly comforts, what words or deeds will ease the way for the mourner. The following is a brief guide to making a shiva call (Drawing heavily on A Time to Mourn, a Time to Comfort by Dr. Ron Wolfson).

- **Decide when to visit;** those very close to the mourner can come immediately after the funeral; those who are not as close should wait until the second or third day of shiva to pay a visit. You need not call ahead to visit at announced times; but should you chose to visit during the daytime, you may want to call ahead.
- **Dress appropriately;** even during summertime, avoid shorts and t-shirts
- If visiting immediately after the funeral, you will likely see a pitcher of water and a basin and towels near the front door. It is traditional to **wash your hands** upon returning from the cemetery. No blessing is said.
- **Don't ring the doorbell;** the front door of most shiva homes will be left open or unlocked. This eliminates the need for the mourner to come to the door to greet you.
- **Take any food you might have brought to the kitchen;** there will usually be someone there to receive your gift of food. Be sure to put your name on a card or on the container so the mourners will know who brought them food.
- **Find the mourners.** Although there may be people you know at the home, go to the mourners as soon as possible to express your condolences.
- **What do you say to a mourner?** Ironically silence is the most powerful language. A warm embrace, a kiss, an arm around the shoulder, an empathetic look – these are the non-verbal messages that say more than a thousand words. According to Jewish tradition, comforters are not permitted to say anything until the mourner has commenced to speak. When you do speak, here are a few suggestions:
 1. The traditional words are "May God comfort you among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem," or you may want to say, "May God give you comfort."
 2. I'm so sorry.
 3. Please tell me about your loved one (if you don't know much).
 4. I have a story about _____. Could I share it with you?
- **Participate in the service;** if a service is conducted during the shiva call, participate to the extent that you can. If you don't know the prayers, sit or stand respectfully while the service is in progress.
- **If invited to, you are welcome to eat.** If you arrive at the home shortly after the funeral, be sure that the mourners have already eaten the meal of condolence before you eat.
- **Conversation:** It may feel like a party (with food and beverage in hand). As you know, the purpose of shiva is to comfort the mourner, not to discuss the weather or the shul. Reminisce about the deceased if you knew him/her. Of course, you may lapse into general conversation (it's human nature). Just avoid, gossip or loud talk.
- **Don't stay too long;** a shiva visit should be no more than an hour. If a service is held, come for a few minutes before and stay for a few minutes after. Don't overstay your welcome.

We hope these guidelines are helpful. Please remember that you have an important role to play; that of caring comforter. If we all do our job right then we can, with God's help, heal the brokenhearted.