

Help! I don't know what to say!

When in doubt, don't say anything. If you feel a need to talk... then, watch out! That's a recipe for sadness. We often say cold or even cruel things because we are overcome with the need to fill the silence. In a shiva home, silence is acceptable! You are there for physical presence. Talking is secondary and at times not needed.

Good things to say and talk about:

- ❖ "I'm so sorry"
(This is by far the best thing to say - as a greeting, as a response, whenever).
- ❖ Ask about the eulogies; stories, memories; anything biographical.
- ❖ When leaving, say the phrase that is on the front of this booklet: "May God comfort and console you among those who mourn for Zion and Jerusalem."

Bad things to say and talk about:

- ⊘ Any explanation for why the death was good and just (see below).
- ⊘ Any statement that is designed to make you feel better about your ideology at the expense of the mourners' need to grieve.
- ⊘ Try to avoid social conversation with other visitors. Focus on the mourners.

What to do if they demand to know "why"?

You don't know why. Nobody knows why. It's a dangerous question to answer with anything but "We don't know" and "We can't know." God isn't telling us why He does bad things to good people - and we can't take His place in answering.

I don't really know these people that well, should I still visit the shiva home?

Funerals and shiva homes, unlike weddings or bar mitzvahs, don't require familiarity or pretext to be included. Inviting yourself to a wedding is gauche because the guests receive more than they give. But a home in grief receives so much from people simply showing up to provide comfort.

I can't make it to the home, what can I do?

Call. Write. Any type of contact is better than none.

Can mourners talk on the phone?

It's their prerogative to choose to talk on the phone, just as it's their choice to receive visitors. Just understand ahead of time that they won't be able to speak for very long as they often have many people to greet who are right there in front of them.

Suggested Reading

- Lamm, Maurice. Jewish Way in Death and Mourning. 0-8246-0126-2*
- Goldberg, Chaim. Mourning in Halachah. 0-89906-171-0
- Greenberg, Sidney. Treasury of Comfort. 0-87980-167-0
- Levine, Aaron. To Comfort the Bereaved. 1-56821-966-0
- Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. On Death and Dying. 0-684-84223-8
- Riemer, Jack. Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning. 0-8052-1035-0
- Weinberger, David & Jacob J. Schacter. The Funeral and Cemetary Handbook. 1-57819-748-1
- Wieseltier, Leon. Kaddish. 0-375-40389-2.

* note: this is really the best book out there.

הַמָּקוֹם יְנַחֵם אֶתְכֶם בְּתוֹךְ שְׂאֵר
אֲבֵלֵי צִיּוֹן וִירוּשָׁלַיִם

HaMakom Yenacheim Etchem B'toch
Sh'ar Aveilei Tzion Virushalayim

May God comfort and console you
among those who mourn for Zion and
Jerusalem.

Visiting a Mourner: How to Pay a Shiva Call

Dedicated in Loving Memory of
Fred Pilevsky

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Whom is this Guide for?

For anyone who feels uncomfortable with the prospect of visiting Jewish mourners who are "sitting shiva." We detail what is expected of you, what is kind to do, and what would best not be done.

What is "shiva"?

"Shiva" literally means "seven," and in common parlance it refers to the week (seven days) that we are commanded to stay in our homes following the death of a close relative (parent, child, sibling or spouse). The term "shiva" is used as a noun; it corresponds to the whole experience of the first week of mourning. The proper verb to use with shiva is "to sit" as in "Ira is sitting shiva in his parents' home."

Why do they sit for seven days?

God commanded that seven days be observed for many life-cycle events. A wedding is followed by seven days of rejoicing, and a funeral is followed by seven days of deep mourning. Seven is the number of Creation - and everything in life follows the number God has set.

Why should I visit?

Shiva isn't shiva without visitors. The whole purpose for keeping mourners at home is for their friends and community to come to visit -- to comfort them, to show them by their words, and even just their presence, that they care.

What do the mourners do during shiva?

Not much. They can't shower, shave, watch TV, listen to music, or be at their jobs. They can eat, pray, and talk. They sit at home all week, waiting for you to visit. Truly. And they

want to talk about the loved one whom they just lost.

When is the best time to visit?

By its nature, the shiva home can become a stressful environment. The day starts with *shacharis* (the morning prayer service). The family will provide some refreshments (almost always donated by the community) for breakfast. The day is open for visitors. In the evening there is *mincha* and *maariv* (the afternoon and evening prayer services, often put back-to-back). It is best not to stay in the shiva home too long, to come before *shacharis*, or to stay after 9:30 p.m.

It is a big *mitzvah* - and very supportive to the family - to attend the prayer service in the morning and/or evening.

Should I bring anything when I visit?

There is no need to bring anything unless you are specifically asked to do so. If you need to bring something, Jewish tradition frowns on flowers as a waste of money. Food is always safe, especially items that can be frozen for later use. Donations to charity in the name of the deceased are tasteful and spread the kindness. But really, all you are expected to bring is yourself.

What do I do when I visit?

You are there to show that you care. Studies show that people in grief do not remember what was said to them, but they do remember the people who visited.

If you are close to the family, then you can treat this visit as any other visit you've made before. Yes, they have suffered a great loss -- and that makes your friendship all the more

valuable -- but they are still the same friends they were before.

You are there to talk to the mourners. The best topic is the deceased. Stories, memories, etc. At the funeral, there was only so much time for eulogies. Shiva is used to continue that process of remembrance. And this is done through conversation.

Be aware that according to Jewish law, the mourner must initiate the conversation. This requirement is in place to force us to recognize that sometimes mourners are so overcome with grief that all they want to do is be silent. Do not worry about this overmuch because if mourners do not want to talk, they will not accept visitors (either by being in another room or by leaving a note on their door).

What are the customs of the shiva home?

The door is open - you don't knock or ring the bell. The mourners sit on low chairs, wearing the clothing they wore at the funeral, unshowered and unshaven. Mirrors are covered. The custom is not to say "hello" or "goodbye" (thus there is a lot of smiling and nodding). It's good to keep the tone and noise level low. Naturally you try to avoid jocular topics, but you aren't commanded to be dour and gloomy either.

I feel apprehensive about visiting

A natural reaction... but don't worry, you are expected to be yourself and to be friendly, kind and gracious. A shiva home is naturally uncomfortable, but your role as a visitor is straightforward and simple: come in, sit down, talk about the deceased, leave. There is no minimum time for a visit (but there is a maximum, err on short frequent visits).