

A GUIDE FOR SHIVA

INTRODUCTION

This guide is intended to help congregants better understand the religious, psychological, and practical aspects of Jewish customs surrounding mourning. This guide focuses on shiva because it is a time when the community can join together to support the mourners. For more information about Jewish death and burial rituals, a list of recommended resources for further reading is included.

SHIVA

Shiva is the first part of the mourning period; it begins immediately following the burial. The word shiva means seven, and traditionally a mourner “sits shiva” for seven days. Although seven days is traditional, many Reform Jews sit shiva for three days, and some just one day. There is no typical length that Micah members observe shiva; members have observed anywhere from one to seven days. It is a time when the mourners remain at home; during this time, friends, community members, and family visit to offer condolences or join for a prayer service.

Mark Washovsky writes: “Mourning...is a prime example of the power of 'creative ritual' in Judaism, the process by which the Sages and the people develop elaborate structures of religious behavior out of relatively scant raw materials provided by the sacred texts.” In the case of shiva practices, the sacred texts include such references as a seven day mourning period for Methuselah, the oldest man who ever lived, and Genesis 50:10, where the text states: “And he (Joseph) mourned for his father (Jacob) for seven days.”

Shiva has been called psychologically important. Shiva can be exhausting, but also restorative. Observing shiva links us to the generations of Jews who came before us.

The Reform Jewish view of the mourning period is that it exists as a means of helping to lessen our grief, work through it, and ultimately return to the “land of the living.” Daniel Kohn writes: “The purpose of shiva is to give voice to sadness, not suppress it.”

An excerpt from Oliver Sacks’s memoir *On The Move* speaks to the role that sitting shiva plays in the grieving process. Sacks wrote:

I wondered how I would feel about sitting shiva. I did not know if I could bear it, sitting all day on a low stool with my fellow mourners for seven days on end, receiving a constant stream of people, and talking, talking, talking endlessly of the departed. But I found it a deep and crucial and affirmative experience, this total sharing of emotions and memories, when, alone, I felt so annihilated by my mother's death...

As they spoke of her, I was reminded of my own identity...A strange sense of peace and sobriety, and of what really mattered, a sense of the allegorical dimensions of life and death, grew stronger and stronger in me with each day of the mourning.....

UPON RETURNING HOME FROM THE CEMETERY

WASHING THE HANDS

While not universally observed, for many Jews the first act of the shiva period is the ritual of washing the hands. Sometimes people place a pitcher of water near the gravesite or outside the house of mourning. In *A Guide To Jewish Religious Practice*, Isaac Klein writes that hand-washing is a symbolic way of saying that our hands are clean; we bear no responsibility for the death, and have done everything in our power to keep the deceased alive or to ease his distress.

The custom of washing the hands may have originated out of superstition. In ancient times when an individual died of mysterious causes, the inhabitants of that city often washed their hands at the cemetery to symbolically affirm that they had not shed innocent blood. Later, washing hands became a ritual to wash off evil demons that some believed might have attached themselves at the cemetery.

LIGHTING OF SHIVA CANDLE

Immediately after the funeral at the house of mourning, a candle, provided by the funeral home, is lit; this candle burns for seven days. The candle reflects the references in Proverbs to the relationship between light and the soul. Proverbs says that the soul of man is the lamp of God; God's light is man's soul and the soul is attached to the body as the flame is to the wick of the candle.

MEAL OF CONDOLENCE (SEUDAT HAVRA'AH)

Upon returning from the cemetery to the home where the mourners will sit shiva, the mourners and their extended family will usually gather for the shiva meal. It is a meal for the family only, and is typically prepared, or arranged for, by friends, neighbors, or fellow congregants. The shiva meal, often

a dairy meal, includes bread, the staff of life, and round foods--such as hard-boiled eggs, bagels, or lentils -- to symbolize the cyclical nature of life.

OBSERVANCE DURING SHIVA

After the meal of condolence, later on the day of the funeral, the mourners gather to receive those who come to console them. Mourners decide what time they will receive visitors. For most Reform Jews, there is only one prayer service, and it is held in the evening. At this service, the mourners recite Kaddish which, halachically, requires a minyan, or a quorum of 10 people over the age of thirteen.

So, in addition to the emotional support role that callers play, it is important for the consolers to visit the house of mourning to assure that a minyan is present. Community members are welcome; you do not even need to know the mourner or the person they have lost to help make a minyan.

It is important, both for the mourners and those who come to call on them, to remember that when sitting shiva the mourners are not entertaining. For example, the mourners are not expected to answer the door to greet people. The house is usually unlocked, and traditionally those calling on the family do not ring the doorbell. In the same vein, the mourners should not feel obligated to provide food to those who come to pay a condolence call. Customs for offering refreshments vary in different communities. Temple Micah's Hineni group sends a fruit arrangement. A typical shiva gathering for Micah members includes cold drinks and baked goods.

Calling on mourners, or paying a "shiva call," is considered a mitzvah, an obligation. The purpose is to surround the mourners with community and enable the mourners to talk about the deceased and to be supported emotionally by those who come to call. Many callers are unsure of what to say to the mourners. "I am sorry for your loss" is always appropriate. Traditionally, mourners sit on low chairs, symbolic of the emotional reality of being "brought low" by their grief, though low chairs are not essential.

Mourners do not sit shiva on Shabbat. Instead on that day they go to synagogue to say Kaddish. Mourners may continue to sit shiva after Shabbat.

In the Temple Micah community, funerals for family members are often held out of town, and the mourners sit shiva there. If they wish, the mourners may continue to sit shiva upon returning home. If a Micah family whose loved one has been buried out of town wishes to hold shiva services in town, they should contact the rabbis to discuss.

THE ROLE OF FRIENDS AND COMMUNITY

Often friends wonder what, in addition to attending the funeral and paying a shiva call, they can do to help the mourners. One way is to prepare, serve, or contribute to the shiva meal. Another is to bring food or meals to the mourners during the shiva period. A valuable role a friend can play is to serve as the point person to coordinate the food being brought to assure that it doesn't all arrive at the same time. Friends can also help by coming to the shiva home early to help set up or by staying late to help clean up. Often there is food left over that the family may not want; it can be helpful to take this to a charity, if that seems appropriate. It is also traditional to make a charitable contribution in memory of the deceased.

RESOURCES

Websites

ReformJudaism.org contains a information on funeral, burial and mourning customs. In particular, see “What to Expect at a Jewish Funeral” by Rabbi Joe Black.

MyJewishLearning.com is a great resource. In particular, we recommend “Going to a Jewish Funeral” by Dr. Ron Wolfson.

InterfaithFamily.com, especially “How to Pay a Shiva Call” by Daniel Kohn

Books

A Guide for Reform Jews, by Frederic A. Doppelt and David Polish

“Jewish Death and Mourning Customs,” by Rabbi Paul Drazen

A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice, by Isaac Klein

Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice, by Mark Washovsky