

By Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven...a time to keep silent and a time to speak.”

The wisdom in this song is not for the Byrds, it comes from the wisest of all men, King Solomon. While the picture of many shiva homes today filled with people, food, and conversation is anything but silent, the Midrash interprets “the time for silence” as proscribing our behavior when comforting the bereaved. When Job, the very symbol of human suffering, experienced devastating loss, three of his friends came to comfort and console him: “They sat with him on the ground for a period of seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great” (Job, 2:13).

Consolation can be provided with words, but it is communicated even more powerfully through silent companionship, no matter how awkward or uncomfortable it may feel for the visitor. The acknowledgement of pain and willingness to share it by simply being present is the essence of a shiva call, *nichum aveilim*. The Talmud in fact states in the name of Rav Pappa, “The reward that comes from visiting the house of a mourner is for one’s silence while there” (Berachos 6b).

In an article in Jewish Action in the Fall of 2000, Rabbi Edward Davis shares the story of the time he went to get a haircut while visiting London. As he sat down in the chair the barber asked, “Talk or no talk?” The barber was sensitive to Rabbi Davis’s preference and comfort and didn’t impose a conversation on someone who preferred to sit in silent contemplation.

The Code of Jewish Law (y.d. 376:1) mandates that the visitors are not allowed to speak until the mourner speaks first. Essentially, the proper etiquette in a shiva home is to sit with the mourner and through our patient silence offer him or her – talk or no talk?

It is natural to struggle with silence. Sitting silently is intimidating, awkward and uncomfortable. Well-intentioned people therefore sometimes fill the silence by saying things that are in fact insensitive, thoughtless or even hurtful. When people do things like tell the family members about treatments or doctors that may have healed their loved one, or say to someone who has lost a child that at least they have other healthy children, they mean well, but their words are unkind. A woman who lost her father reported a visitor asking her why her mother doesn’t look as perky as usual. An older person who lost his wife shared that someone told him “Speak to me after shiva, I have a great shidduch idea for you.”

As a community Rabbi I have spent significant time in shiva homes and many mourners have shared their observations following shiva. I share the following advice based on their feedback:

A shiva home is not a social scene. The purpose of the visit is solely to interact with and comfort the mourner. Don’t congregate in other areas of the home or enter social conversations with others.

While it is not forbidden to eat in a shiva home, it is not the purpose of the visit and should not be the expectation.

Don't visit at inconvenient times for the mourners, even if they may be convenient for you, such as meals times, early in the morning or late at night.

Keep the conversation with the mourner focused on their loved one. If you knew them, share stories, anecdotes, memories or the impression they left on you. If you didn't know the deceased, ask questions like: Where was your mother or father born? How many siblings did they have? What kind of education did they receive? What did they do professionally? What is your favorite memory of them? How would they want to be remembered?

Do not ask details about the deceased's illness. Don't say things like, "At least he or she had a long life." Or, "At least they are not suffering any more." These are things the mourners can say if they feel them, but they are inappropriate comments from visitors.

Don't tell the mourners about your loss, illness in your family or the challenges you are experiencing unless it directly relates to providing comfort and support to them.

Don't take out your cell phone while paying a shiva call. Answering a call or even looking at text messages is rude and distracting.

Shiva visits should never be unduly prolonged. Don't create a burden on the mourners who feel obligated to play host.

Before leaving, one stands up, approaches the mourner and recites, "*HaMakom yenacheim etchem betoch sha'ar aveiliei Tzion v'Yerushalayim*" -- May the Almighty comfort you among those who mourn for Zion and Jerusalem. One can read this phrase from a sheet of paper.

May God indeed comfort those in mourning among the mourners of Tziyon and Yerushalayim and may we merit to see the day in which "death is no longer part of our experience" (Isaiah 25:8).

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