

By Rabbi Aryeh Markman

It was 4 a.m. when the call came, but we slept through it. Then it came again at 5:45 a.m. and I let it go to voice mail. The third time the phone rang I ran for it. It was New York calling. My wife's family was on the line. I knew the words before they spoke them. My mother-in-law had passed away a few hours ago.

Shock, disillusionment, disorientation, regret, frustration. These emotions and more flowed through us as we scrambled to arrange the funeral and flights, and assemble a small army to tend to our children while my wife and I would be away.

Throughout the flight I felt terrible pangs of regret. Had I been too selfish by not championing my wife to visit her mother more often? Should she have red-eyed it more to New York to see her ailing mother, who was a widow and alone in a beautiful assisted living facility? I pondered these thoughts in the dark plane cabin, enveloped within my gnawing guilt. My poor wife, had I added to her mournful state?

I decided that I would do whatever necessary to ease my wife through the mourning process.

Shiva is the seven-day mourning period that follows burial. The purpose is to grieve intensely, and prepare to move on. During that week, friends, neighbors and colleagues come for a short visit to comfort the mourner. Here are my lessons learned from my wife's week of sitting shiva:

Lesson 1: Shiva is not for anything but mourning. Yes, if you are a mom you must do things no one else can, like give emotional deposits, guidance, and lunch instructions to your kids. Otherwise defer, postpone, and reschedule. Change your voicemail, have an auto-responder on your email, and post a sign on your office door.

Lesson 2: We posted visiting hours on our front door and made sure people understood they could not come after 9:30 p.m. Otherwise people will come in, whenever, for however long. In any event, leave a pad on the front door so people can leave notes. Some people traveled a long distance, only to find out they missed out on the hours and wanted to give their condolences.

Lesson 3: Contact everyone and let them know what happened. You have circles of friends and acquaintances that are bigger than you think. There are work circles, family circles, school circles, community circles, distant relative circles, etc. Think them through and have others help get the word out. I sent out notices on three different email lists and still missed a swath of people. If there ever was a week that things fall through the cracks, this is it. Worse than not coming to visit shiva, is forgetting to inform someone that would have come to visit. On the flip side, everyone forgives you for everything.

Lesson 4: Give your spouse everything you can. She has only one mother. The best advice a colleague gave me was to take the week off from work. I did. I ran errands and tried to make life pleasant with lunches and coffee drink surprises. It definitely brought us closer together. Normally I work long hours, so to take off work meant a lot to my wife. She knew I was giving her my all. And our neighbors knew something was amiss when, the first day back from the New York burial, I was spotted at 10 a.m. wheeling a baby stroller.

Lesson 5: Write down the names of everyone who delivers a meal, does you a favor, watches the kids for an hour, anything. It means a lot to people to be thanked, and my wife wanted to express her gratitude to all those who eased her loss. At first you think you will remember everyone, but then it becomes too overwhelming. Also, compile all letters and notes received. It makes for a comforting read months down the line.

Lesson 6: When you come to visit, remember that it is for the benefit of the mourner. This is the last place on earth you want to talk about yourself as interesting as you may be. It takes tremendous psychic energy for the mourner to entertain your ego. Also, never argue about anything with the mourner. Never. Leave it at the door. At least wait till the shiva week is over.

Lesson 7: When making a shiva call, don't expect food and entertainment. The "deli platter concept" every evening is really not conducive to the shiva process. Just focus on the mourner, not your appetite. The coffee clutch that sometimes develops in the kitchen is just out of place with the mourner holding court in the living room. There should be only one conversation going on. That is giving real honor to the deceased and the mourner. Obviously in other quarters of the house homework and other matters can be discussed as long as they are not heard. But it's not party time. [If there is a morning minyan in the house, you can put out coffee, juice, fruit, danish, etc., for those who need to go straight to work.]

Lesson 8: It seems to me that anything less than a 10-minute visit, unless you're the President of the United States or something like that, is too quick. God will forgive your time management goals this day, unless of course you left a child in the bath tub. And please, make sure to turn off your cell phone.

Lesson 9: So what should you talk about? Ask to see pictures of the deceased's life. Ask the mourner to describe the deceased's finest hour. What will they want to have been remembered for? How will you remember them?

Lesson 10: Never assume the mourner has taken care of anything. They are spaced out and disoriented. I have literally seen mourners go without lunch because everyone thinks they are taken care of. Don't assume that at all. Mourners are preoccupied. They may need shopping, errands, car pools, letters mailed, a phone call or three made, the dog walked, the baby diapered, etc. Who is doing the laundry and cleaning the floors and bathrooms? These are big jobs. Mourning is physically taxing and they are locked down with visitors. Assume nothing was done. Don't ask "Do you need something?" Instead, just do something. Better yet, do something and then ask, "Can I do anything else?"

Lesson 11: Make sure someone is on hand to rearrange chairs, clean up, direct traffic, take

deliveries, etc. Someone has to be the head referee and crowd controller. I walked everyone out and welcomed everyone in. It helped create movement to keep the rotation flowing. It also helped those who felt self-conscious about entering and exiting.

Lesson 12: When the shiva period has ended, don't expect the mourner's relief to suddenly break forth or sadness to evaporate. That takes time. So when you see the mourner participating in the world again, treat them with care. Constantly be checking in with the mourner. They will still like to talk about their loss. It is an awful feeling to be abandoned after the shiva, even for introverts. Spend some private time later on with the mourner, "just because." Getting back to normal could take a year or more.

Lesson 13: Make sure Kaddish is said every day. Kaddish fills the spiritual void that is now missing from the world and is an enormous merit for the deceased. We arranged on Aish.com for someone to say Kaddish by the Western Wall. We also arranged for the entire Oral Law to be learned in my mother-in-law's memory and merit. That is a big mitzvah and a big comfort to the soul of the deceased.

Lesson 14: Take on one good deed in the deceased's memory. My son and I learn small, concise pieces of Torah each day. We recite his grandmother's name before we start. It also has bonded us like glue.

Lesson 15: Write out an ethical will that the deceased would have left behind for their children, grandchildren, spouse, and friends. I asked my wife to write out what her mother would have told the children if she knew she would never see them again. It can be a very powerful and cathartic experience.

If you have additional advice, please post it in the comments box below, to help others deal with this difficult time of life.

Written for the elevation of the soul of Sheina Rishah bas Noach Leib

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