

By Lauren Roth

Dear Lauren,

I have to go to a shiva house and I don't know what to say to the mourners when I'm there.

Lauren Roth's Answer

It is so sensitive of you to be concerned about the feelings of the mourners. In fact, it's so sensitive of you to be concerned about the feelings of other people in general. That's a huge component of Jewish living, and I'm impressed with your character.

My advice for a shiva house visit is twofold: 1. Just be present, and listen to the mourners. Let them talk. 2. Try to think about what they are feeling and what they might want, then try to do that.

The second idea is the one I want to expound on: trying to think about what other people are feeling and what they might want, then trying to do that. That is the basis of effective and successful human interaction.

Today was Shabbos and we are visiting a city where many people come to visit. As I walked the streets, I wished all the Jewish people I passed "Good Shabbos!" Most people rejoined with a pleasant "Good Shabbos!" in turn. However, there were three individuals I passed who ignored my greeting (even though they did hear me) and walked by without acknowledging my presence. I didn't think it would be very effective to tell *them* this, but I decided it might help the world become a more sensitive place if I told *you*, my dear readers: your face is public property. There is a reason Ethics of Our Fathers says: "Greet every person pleasantly." Your face is not yours to do with as you please. Your face "faces" every person you pass, and it's your obligation to make it pleasant, welcoming, friendly, warm, and kind. Your face is public property.

At the shiva house, have a kind expression on your face. Not an expression that shows the mourners you pity them, just a kind expression.

Speaking of pity, one of my children has a fellow schoolmate who is in a wheelchair. She told me that she is careful to extend a happy "Hello!" to the girl in the wheelchair, but not to seem pitying or condescending, so as not to hurt her feelings. Actually, my daughter had dance practice in the gym, and this wheelchair-bound student entered that same gym with her physical therapist to have her therapy session. My daughter was horrified when her dance instructor continued the dance lesson in the gym while the girl had her therapy appointment there; my daughter and I agreed that the sensitive thing to do would have been to have moved the dance practice to a different room. How can you have fun dancing in front of a handicapped person having a physical therapy session?

Elvis has a famous song, “Walk a mile in my shoes.” Think of other people and their feelings. Really put yourself, in your imagination, into their situation. Figure out how they might be feeling and what they might want or need from you. Then try your hardest to give that to them.

My Husband’s Chemo

Eighteen years ago, my husband was sick and had to undergo chemotherapy. It was an intensely stressful, absolutely terrifying, extremely trying time. I wanted to spend as much time in the hospital with my husband as I could, and when I was home, I wanted to spend as much time with my children as I could.

I will never forget a story that happened; it has informed my sensitivity to others immensely.

I was finally home from the hospital and eager to spend quality time with my kids. A neighbor came by and said, “Lauren, go lay down. You need to rest. I’ll watch your kids.”

“Thank you so much for your thoughtfulness!” I replied. “But I want to take care of them now; I’ve been away at the hospital. It’s time for me to be with them now.”

But she was not budging: “Lauren, no. You need to lay down. I’m watching your kids. Go upstairs and rest.”

I replied, again, “Thank you so much, but I really want to spend time with my kids now.”

She was relentless: “I insist. Go!”

To tell you the truth, I was too emotionally drained to insist—but I was so hurt by what this neighbor thought was “kindness.” I *did* go upstairs—and I cried and cried in my room, so frustrated by her not listening to what *I* wanted.

“Walk a mile in my shoes.” Really pay attention to what the people around you want and need. Don’t do what *you* assume they want and need; really pay attention to *their* cues.

In Their Shoes

I remember when I was in high school and a friend of mine passed away. I was so nervous about going to the shiva house. What was I supposed to say? What was I supposed to do? I went, and I followed the lead of the mourners. I just sat with them. I listened to them. I actually didn’t say anything. And when I got up to leave, after just being present, in front of them, and listening to them for about an hour, they said, “Thank you so much for coming. You have comforted us.”

I’m sure you will also bring some measure of ease to the mourners you visit, by trying to pay attention to what they want, by trying to put yourself in their shoes, and then by trying to do whatever it is they might want you to do. Even just your thinking about this question shows your sensitivity to others, and I, for one, am very proud of you.

I'm sure God is proud of your consideration, too.

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