

The Shiva Visit

The practice of Shiva (Hebrew for seven) probably dates back to Biblical times. When the Patriarch Jacob died, his son Joseph “wailed with a very great and sore wailing and he made a mourning for his father seven days” (Genesis 50:10).

Shiva begins immediately after the deceased is buried and is traditionally observed for seven days, although many Reform Jews sit for three. It is an intense time. The day of burial is considered a full day of mourning regardless of the time of day the interment takes place. Traditionally, Shiva ends on the morning of the last day observed. Jews formally observe Shiva for their parents, siblings, spouses and children. All other loved ones are mourned, but the formal laws of Shiva do not apply. During this time, mourners stay at the home of the deceased, a close family member or a friend. Family and friends come to express their sympathy and love to the mourners. Those who mourn are not left alone; they are surrounded by people who care and share their loss. The visitors also help form a minyan for services in the home of those families that wish to have prayers.

The Shiva (condolence) call: The Condolence call is an ancient custom. The Talmud teaches that consoling mourners was originally an act of God. Genesis 25:11 states: “After the death of Abraham, God brought blessing to Isaac his son.” Thus, states the Talmud, just as Isaac was consoled by God’s presence, so we are commanded to bring comfort to loved ones with our presence.

Here are some basic do’s and don’ts of the call:

- The purpose of the visit is to be supportive, to listen and respond to the mourner.
- Visit during the times that the family is open to callers. These times are usually announced at the funeral. Alternatively, the funeral home or synagogue will be aware of visitation hours.
- If visiting after returning from the cemetery, it is traditional to wash one’s hand. A pitcher of water, a basin and paper towels often will be by the door.
- Try the door before ringing the bell. The door to most Shiva homes will be unlocked.
- Bring any food to the kitchen (inquire in advance whether it is a kosher home.)
- Approach the mourner—your presence is the most important thing, but allow the mourner to open conversation.
- Offer a hug, handshake, or kiss.
- Use phrases such as “I’m sorry” or “This must be so difficult for you.”

- It is appropriate to talk about the deceased and reminisce.
- Never say, “don’t cry.” Crying is a normal part of grieving.
- As a visitor, you should be sensitive in what you say. If you don’t know what to say, say nothing.
- Comforting does not mean distracting with meaningless chatter.
- If you meet other friends, remember that you are in a Shiva home. Conversation should be low and respectful. This is not a party. The focus is on comforting the mourners.
- If many people are visiting, spend only a few minutes with the mourner, so others can have their turn.
- The entire visit usually lasts 30-45 minutes.
- It is a mitzvah of compassion and kindness to visit during Shiva.

The Rabbi, members of the Caring Community and other members of the congregation are available to help set up Shiva, to organize and lead the minyan and to give general guidance. Call the Temple office if you need assistance.