A GUIDE FOR MOURNERS

Shiva, most profoundly and simply, is for you the mourner, to receive comfort and support. Shiva reminds you that you are not alone in your grief; there is a rich legacy of Jewish tradition and a caring community to offer you comfort and support. We at Holy Blossom Temple offer this guide to help you in the days following the burial of your loved one. And we are available to answer any and all questions relating to this difficult time.

In Judaism, all mourning customs are guided by the mitzvah to honour the dead, and the mitzvah to console the bereaved.

Shiva

And [Joseph] observed a mourning period of seven days for his father (Genesis 50:10).

Shiva refers to the period of mourning immediately following the burial of a loved one and concludes on the morning of the last day. Shiva moves the mourner from aninut, the first stage following the knowledge of the death, to avelot, the period of mourning following the burial. The word Shiva is derived from the Hebrew word sheva meaning seven and traditionally is observed for seven days. Historically, the week of Shiva has been divided into two parts. The first three days after the burial are recognized as a time of intense grief. The next period is often less acute after mourners have been receiving support from friends and relatives. Shiva begins immediately after the burial and concludes on the morning of the last day.

Shabbat counts as one of the seven days, but observance of Shabbat overrides observance of Shiva. Depending on the time of year, Shiva can resume Saturday evening after Shabbat ends. Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot can suspend or cut short Shiva. Please consult one of our Rabbis to determine how to best honour the Holy Days while providing comfort for the mourners.

Location

Shiva is usually held in the home of the deceased. Families may choose to sit Shiva elsewhere so that all the mourners may be comforted.

CUSTOMS AND RITUALS FOR THE BEREAVED

Kriah

Jacob rent his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and observed mourning for his son many days. (Genesis 37:34; See also II Samuel 1:11, and Job 1:20)

Since biblical times, mourners express their grief by cutting or tearing a piece of clothing before the funeral. This is referred to as kriah. The Rabbi will guide you through this ritual. The garment is torn on the left side for a parent. For all other relatives the cut clothing is on the right side.

Today mourners often choose to wear a black ribbon, and tear it instead of a piece of clothing before the funeral. The ribbon is usually provided by the funeral director, pinned on and cut just before the funeral. The kriah ribbon is worn during Shiva but not worn on Shabbat, High Holidays or Festivals.

Washing Hands

The ritual impurities associated with death and the cemetery are symbolically removed by washing one’s hands (see Numbers 19:11).

The ritual of washing one’s hands begins Shiva. It separates the mitzvah of honouring the dead from the mitzvah of comforting the bereaved.

It is customary for anyone coming from the cemetery to wash their hands. There is no blessing recited; the water in poured over one hand, the other three times. This can be done at the cemetery or just outside the home where Shiva is held. Most Jewish cemeteries provide an outdoor washing facility. Usually, a wash basin, water pitcher, paper towels and waste bin are set up outside the front door of the Shiva home. The water vessel is not passed from hand to hand but rather placed overturned in the basin.
Candle
Ner Daluk
After returning from the cemetery, it is customary for the mourners to light a Shiva candle, called a ner daluk (burning light). This candle is usually provided by the funeral director and burns for the entire Shiva period. It is placed prominently and lit without saying a formal blessing.

Meal of Consolation
Seudat Havara’ah
This meal often includes a symbol of continuity such as hard boiled eggs, and bread, the staff of life. Close relatives or friends often provide and serve this meal. Serving a meal to mourners is a tangible act of condolence.

Sitting Shiva

...Job’s three friends...sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights. None spoke a word to him for they saw how very great was his suffering (Job 2:11-13).

The primary mourners are the children, siblings, spouse and parents of the deceased. During Shiva, primary mourners traditionally sit on lower surfaces while receiving visitors. The funeral home can provide lower height chairs or mourners may choose to remove cushions form a sofa or chairs. The elderly, physically weak, pregnant and nursing mothers are exempt from this custom. Primary mourners sit at the regular height when eating.

It is a mitzvah to comfort the mourner and therefore visitors need not be thanked. Customarily, the door to the Shiva home is left unlocked so that visitors may enter without disturbing the mourners. Mourners do not need to rise to greet visitors. A condolence book and pen might be placed conveniently for visitors to sign.

GUIDELINES FOR THE BEREAVED

Traditionally, mourners remain at the Shiva home for the duration of the Shiva, leaving only to attend services, particularly on Shabbat. Customarily, Shiva is a period of relinquishing routines as well as ordinary pleasures and comforts. Usually, mourners do not cook, or run errands, or attend school or work. A close relative or friend can oversee meals and other necessary household tasks. Often a sign-up sheet is placed prominently in the kitchen for friends and relatives to volunteer for various tasks.

During Shiva mourners are not expected to concern themselves about their appearance. Mourners will often cover mirrors in the Shiva home to signify that personal appearance is of little consequence during this time. Shiva is a time for reunion and reminiscing. Mourners may find comfort in displaying photographs of the deceased.

Prayer Services
Kaddish is an Aramaic poem sanctifying God and has been recited by mourners since the 13th century C.E.

The Mourners’ Kaddish is said at the cemetery after the burial and at prayer services during Shiva. Traditionally, Mourners’ Kaddish is recited twice daily with a minyan, a prayer quorum of ten adult Jews. Holy Blossom Temple encourages, but does not require, a minyan for the recitation of Mourners’ Kaddish.

Daily services always include Kaddish and may be held at the Shiva home. Services in the house of mourning may be led by one of the primary mourners, by a qualified friend or relative, or by one of the devoted volunteer Service Leaders from Holy Blossom Temple. Holy Blossom will provide volunteer Service Leaders in the home for an 8:00 pm half hour service as well as Shiva prayerbooks and kippot on request.

Mourners may prefer to attend synagogue for recitation of Kaddish.

Kaddish is part of prayer services at Holy Blossom Temple. The name of the deceased is read during the following services for the first 30 days following the burial.

Shacharit (morning) Services:
- Monday to Friday 7:30 - 8:00 am followed by a light breakfast.
- Shabbat 10:30 am - 12:30 pm followed by Kiddush lunch.
- Sunday and Statutory Holidays 9:00 am - 9:30 am followed by a light breakfast.
- Festivals 10:00 am - 12:30 pm followed by Kiddush lunch

Mincha/Ma’ariv Services
- Monday to Thursday 6:00 - 6:30 pm
- Kabbalat Shabbat Friday evening 6:00 - 7:00 pm

Bereavement Group
- Tuesday evenings 6:30 - 7:30 pm
  (Facilitated by an experienced grief counselor, and supported by our Rabbis and Cantor)

End of Shiva (Getting up from Shiva)
It is customary to end Shiva after the morning services of the final day. To signify their return to life outside the Shiva home, it is customary for the primary mourners to take a circular walk. Before getting up to walk, mourners may want to have a short prayer ceremony (see Page x in Holy Blossom Temple’s Shiva Prayer Booklet).
Shloshim

The mourning period continues with shloshim, a 30 day gradual re-entry to normal activities. Shloshim begins on the day of burial. Mourners are encouraged to say kaddish daily during shloshim. The time spent sitting Shiva is included in the period of shloshim.

Mourners grieving the loss of a parent customarily say kaddish for 11 months. Mourners grieving the loss of a sibling, spouse or child, say Kaddish for shloshim (30 days). During the period of shloshim, it is customary to restrict participation in celebratory occasions.

Please consult with one of our Rabbis about further considerations of mourning practices. Additional resources can be found below.

Unveiling

And Jacob erected a monument by [Rachel’s] burial site (Genesis 35: 20).

After the period of shloshim and within a year after the death, the bereaved customarily gather at the cemetery to unveil the monument. The dedication of a headstone marks the transition from mourning to remembering. Our Rabbis and Cantor are available to lead the service, or the mourners may compose their own personal ceremony and lead the service. Unveiling Service Pamphlets are available.

Yahrzeit

Yahrzeit is Yiddish for “a year’s time”. It is the anniversary of the death of a primary relative (parent, spouse, sibling, or child) or other loved one. The date is traditionally marked according to the Hebrew date on which the person died. Some people prefer to observe yahrzeit on the date of death on the secular calendar. Holy Blossom Temple will send a yahrzeit reminder to family members according to the requested date. The purpose of yahrzeit is to honour the memory of a loved one.

Yahrzeit may be observed by lighting a twenty-four hour candle on the evening before the day of death. Yahrzeit candles are provided at Holy Blossom Temple, or can be purchases in Judaica shops and other Jewish stores. There is no fixed blessing for lighting this candle. A personal prayer may be said. An example may be found in the Holy Blossom Siddur on page 485. Traditionally, the mourner attends morning and/or evening services at the synagogue to say kaddish and hear the name of the deceased recited. It is also customary to visit the grave and make a charitable donation on the occasion of a yahrzeit.

Yizkor

Yizkor is the name of a prayer and the service during which it is recited. The word means “memorial” and is based on the Hebrew “may God remember.” Holy Blossom Temple holds four yizkor services during the year: on Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeret, the seventh day of Passover, and Shavuot. Mourners are encouraged to attend Yizkor services to acknowledge their bereavement and remember their loved one(s).

GUIDELINES FOR VISITORS

Nichum aveilim means “comforting mourners” and refers to the mitzvah of visiting the mourners during Shiva. Visitors help the mourners deal with their grief by listening, supporting, and responding to the mourner. Sharing memories of the deceased may be helpful. Visitors usually wait for the mourner to greet them. It is a mitzvah to help mourners by providing food and comfort. After attending a funeral and burial, close friends and relatives support the mourners by returning to the Shiva house to share the Seudat Havara’ah.

All Shiva visits should be brief and avoid meal times. It is a mitzvah to participate in the daily Shiva service(s) and/or to make a donation in memory of the deceased.

Visitors do not sit on the low seats reserved for the mourners. It is often difficult to know what to say to a mourner. Visitors may find it easiest to follow the mourner’s lead, responding to subjects mentioned by the mourner or remaining silent. One gives support just by being there.

When leaving, it is customary for the visitor to say, “Hamakom yenachel et’chem b’toch she’ar avelei Tziyon Vi’rushalayim” (May God comfort you among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem).
REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


JEWISH FAMILY CELEBRATIONS, Arlene Rossen Cardozo, St. Martin’s Press, 1985.


THE JEWISH MOURNER’S HANDBOOK, Rabbi William Cutter, Chairman of Editorial Committee


SIDDUR PIRKEI KODESH, Editor, Rabbi Yael Splansky, Holy Blossom Temple, 2011 - 5772.

A TIME TO MOURN, A TIME TO COMFORT, Dr. Ron Wolfson, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock VT, 1996.

See also:

www.Shiva.com/learning
www.myjewishlearning.com/article/death-mourning/
www.reformjudaism.org