



THE FIRST SEVEN DAYS

BY MEIR WIKLER

The First 7 Days

**A Practical Guide to the Traditional
Jewish Observance of *Shiva* for Mourners,
their Families and Friends**

By Dr. Meir Wikler

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*(in alphabetical order)

Introduction

Jewish tradition encompasses all facets of life. Death is no exception. Jewish tradition guides the bereaved, their families and friends from the first moment of grief to the final stage of the mourning process.

This digest deals only with *shiva*, the first seven day period of mourning. It has been prepared to help mourners, their families and friends understand what is expected of them during this most difficult time. It is not designed to replace more in depth study, but rather to serve as an introduction to the observances of *shiva*. Consequently, a Rabbi must be consulted for individual guidelines concerning the questions you may have.

Shiva

What is *shiva*?

Shiva is the Hebrew word for "seven". The number seven in Jewish tradition has always symbolized the natural order, such as seven days of creation, seven heavens, seven days of the week, etc. So too, *shiva* is the natural order of the first stage of mourning, which lasts for seven consecutive days.

When does *shiva* begin?

The period of *shiva* usually begins immediately after the completion of the burial. This day is never a full twenty-four hour period, yet it is always counted as the first day. However, if a burial takes place during a Jewish holiday such as a *Passover*, *Succos* or *Shavuos*, or if a mourner is not attending the burial at the cemetery, the *shiva* will begin at a different time and a Rabbi should be consulted.

Who sits *shiva*?

The following seven relatives are required to "sit" *shiva*: father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter, and the spouse. These seven relatives are only required to sit *shiva* if all of the following three conditions are met.

- 1) The deceased was at least thirty days old.
- 2) The relative is at least twelve years old for a girl, or thirteen years old for a boy.

3) The relative was notified within thirty days of the death.

If any one of these conditions is not met, the observance of *shiva* is modified and a Rabbi must be consulted for details.

One is not required to sit *shiva* for step parents, step children, adoptive parents or adopted children. A Rabbi should be consulted if one wishes to make an exception. Friends never sit *shiva* regardless of their feelings for the deceased.

People who sit *shiva* are called mourners.

III

The House Of Mourning

The "house of mourning" refers to a residence where a mourner is sitting *shiva*.

What changes are made to a house of mourning?

All changes to a house of mourning display respect for the deceased and create an atmosphere conducive to the proper observance of *shiva*.

All mirrors are covered in the house of mourning. One reason given is that they may induce cheerfulness. For the same reason, mourners should not take small children onto their laps during *shiva*. This applies even to the mourner's own children, unless it is necessary to comfort them.

A candle is kept continuously lit throughout the *shiva* period in the house of mourning to serve as a constant reminder of the departed soul.

The required low seats should be available for the mourners when they return from the funeral.

Consult your Jewish Funeral Director for assistance in obtaining the candles and seats.

Daily services for a male mourner should be arranged, if possible, in the house of mourning so that he will not have to attend services elsewhere. Prayer books should be made available and, in most cases, may be borrowed from a synagogue.

It is customary to set out properly labeled *pushkas*, charity boxes or collection plates in the house of mourning during

the *shiva*. The money collected from friends and relatives is donated after the *shiva* in memory of the deceased.

No live or recorded music should be heard in the house.

Freshly laundered linen should not be used on a mourner's bed.

Should food be served in the house of mourning?

Although it is usually customary to serve guests who come to a Jewish home, visitors to a house of mourning should not be served a meal or any refreshments in a way that might create a party atmosphere. Visitors, on the other hand, may bring food to a house of mourning, but should do so discretely, again to avoid creating a party atmosphere.

While bringing food to a house of mourning is optional at any time, on the first day of *shiva* friends or relatives *must* do so because the first meal after a funeral should not be prepared by the mourners for themselves unless there is no other person to assist them. This meal traditionally includes bread or rolls, hard boiled eggs and a beverage. Hard boiled eggs are eaten to symbolize that just as the egg has no opening, so too the mourners feel that their mouths cannot open to express the depth of their grief.

Other meals during the *shiva* period should also be prepared by those not in mourning, whenever possible, and mourners should not eat in front of visitors.

IV

The Mourners

What is expected of the mourners?

Mourners are expected to demonstrate and express their grief through prescribed observances. Jewish tradition does not encourage denial or avoidance of death and its aftermath.

In cases where the observance of these traditions poses physical, financial or emotional hardship, a Rabbi must be consulted.

What type of clothing should be worn?

Mourners should wear the garment on which the *kriah*, tearing of clothing, was made.

Mourners are not permitted to wear any new, freshly laundered, or freshly dry cleaned clothes. However, mourners may put on freshly laundered undergarments.

Mourners are not permitted to wear leather shoes. They may wear slippers or shoes made of cloth, rubber, plastic or any synthetic material, as long as they do not contain leather.

What are the guidelines for personal hygiene?

Mourners are not permitted to bathe or shower. They may, of course, wash any individual parts of their bodies which need to be cleansed.

Mourners are not permitted to cut their hair or their nails. Similarly, shaving is prohibited. While nails may not be cut with a scissor, clipper or nail file, they may be bitten off if necessary.

Mourners are not permitted to use perfume or cologne. All deodorants are allowed. All women, with the exception of newlyweds within the first year of marriage and single women of marriageable age, are not permitted to use make-up or cosmetics.

How do mourners "sit" *shiva*?

Mourners are not permitted to sit on regular chairs or benches. They must sit either on the floor or on low stools, benches or chairs. This practice is the basis for the term "sitting *shiva*."

Mourners are not required to rise from their seats to honor a visitor, regardless of the visitor's importance.

Can mourners greet visitors?

Mourners are not permitted to extend, receive or return greetings. This includes saying, "*Shalom*," or even, "Good morning." From the fourth day on, mourners are still prohibited from extending or receiving greetings; but if someone greets them, they may return the greeting.

Is a mourner permitted to use the telephone?

Mourners are permitted to use the telephone for personal needs. Mourners may also answer the phone, if necessary, but special caution should be exercised to limit the conversation to consolation and avoid using a greeting.

How should mourners occupy their time?

Mourners should spend most of their time receiving the consolation of those who come to make a *shiva* visit. Mourners should avoid leaving the house of mourning unless they must do so to attend daily services where they can recite *kaddish*.

Do all mourners recite the *kaddish*?

Only male children are required to recite the *kaddish* for a

deceased parent. If the deceased left no male children, a Rabbi should be consulted.

In addition to these activities which demonstrate and express the feelings of grief, mourners must refrain from other activities which might distract them from bereavement. Excessive distractions from the mourning process are viewed by Jewish tradition as a sign of disrespect for the deceased.

What activities are prohibited to mourners?

Mourners are not permitted to attend or participate in any parties or celebrations such as a *bris*, *bar mitzvah* or wedding. There are numerous exceptions to this rule. If the *bris* is being made for the son of the mourner, attendance is permitted. Similarly, a mourner may attend the *pidyon haben* of his own son. Mourners may not get married during the *shiva* period; but they may attend the wedding of a son or daughter, with some restrictions. In such cases a Rabbi must be consulted.

Mourners are not permitted to engage in any business or professional activity. If this prohibition results in excessive financial loss, another person may conduct business on behalf of the mourner. In extreme cases, a mourner may be permitted to work after the first three days of *shiva*, but first a Rabbi must be consulted.

All reading is prohibited except for that which relates to the mourning. Consult a Rabbi for suggestions.

Mourners are not permitted to engage in marital relations. This is the only observance of *shiva* which is not revoked on the Sabbath. This is because it is a private matter.

Is the observance of *shiva* modified on the Sabbath?

The observances of *shiva* are suspended on the Sabbath because open display of grief would detract from the Sabbath observance of others.

The Family and Friends

How do the mourners' family and friends participate in the *shiva*?

Although the mourners' family and friends do not sit *shiva*, they do participate in the observance of *shiva* in other ways. For example, the mourners' family and friends channel their own bereavement by honoring the memory of the deceased. In addition, they provide the emotional support and practical assistance which the mourners need most during the week of *shiva*.

How do the family and friends honor the memory of the deceased?

Family and friends can contribute to Jewish institutions in memory of the deceased. They also can recount the good deeds of the deceased to the mourners, as well as to others; and they can try to emulate the religious commitment and moral standards of the deceased.

What support and assistance are the family and friends expected to provide?

Mourners have many practical and emotional needs during *shiva* which can only be met by devoted family and friends. Even mourners who are otherwise very independent will need considerable assistance and support during the week of *shiva*.

First and foremost, relatives and friends of mourners should familiarize themselves with the observances of *shiva* so that they will understand the changes which take place in a house of mourning and the traditions observed there.

Furthermore, relatives and friends must handle a variety of practical matters for the mourners. As previously

mentioned, mourners must eat a meal prepared by others when they return from the funeral. (See page 8.) If possible, daily services should be arranged in the house of mourning so that mourners do not have to leave the house. Because the mourners are not going to work, they may need certain business or professional matters taken care of immediately. Mourners may have other chores which they cannot do while sitting *shiva*, such as tending to small children, canceling appointments, filling prescriptions and moving their cars to avoid parking violations. Or, the mourners may simply want someone notified of the fact that they are sitting *shiva*.

Finally, relatives and friends provide emotional support by coming to the house of mourning to make a *shiva* visit.

VI

The Shiva Visit

What is a *shiva* visit?

Many Sages consider the source of making a *shiva* visit to originate from Biblical commandments. One Sage, Maimonides, determined that making a *shiva* visit fulfills the commandment, "And you shall love your fellow man as yourself." (*Leviticus 19:18*).

A *shiva* visit, or "*shiva* call" is not a social call or a family reunion. A *shiva* visit is a religious observance of condolence practiced by the friends and relatives of the mourners or of the deceased. The purpose of the *shiva* visit is solely to comfort the mourners, regardless of how it makes the visitors feel.

Who makes a *shiva* visit?

Generally, relatives and friends of the mourners or the deceased come to the house of mourning to make a *shiva* visit. But literally any Jew may do so. It is not necessary to have known the deceased or any of the mourners. Therefore, neighbors, co-workers and acquaintances may make a visit even though they never met the deceased or the mourners. In fact, people who have suffered an unusually tragic loss, such as bereaved parents, report that some of the most supportive *shiva* visits were made by total strangers.

A *shiva* visit can be made by a group of people all at once or by individuals, one at a time. At times, the needs of the mourners might be served best by making individual visits, so that the mourners can meet with the visitors separately. The practical considerations of a group needing to share a car ride, or needing to arrive on time for services, however, may necessitate a group *shiva* visit.

What is the correct timing for a *shiva* visit?

Many people have heard that *shiva* visits should not be made during the first three days of *shiva*. This is only partially accurate. It is true that some Sages ruled that only close relatives and friends should make a *shiva* visit during the first three days. But all Sages agree that if the mourners will be left alone or if it will be difficult for the visitors to come to the house of mourning after the third day because of social engagements, business appointments or travel arrangements, a *shiva* visit can be made any time after the funeral.

The scheduling of the *shiva* visit should be made with the mourners' convenience in mind, not the visitors'. Therefore, if at all possible, *shiva* visits should not be made late at night or during meal times.

What should be said during a *shiva* visit?

Before answering this question it should be noted that the greatest single factor causing people to avoid making *shiva* visits is the fear of not knowing what to say. Many people feel overwhelmed by the thought of trying to comfort a mourner. As a result, they often end up looking for excuses: "I get home from work too late," "I'm not sure how to get there," "I'm really not that close with the family," etc.

This fear of not knowing what to say is based on fundamental misconceptions regarding the mourners' emotional needs and the traditional requirements of making a *shiva* visit. A heightened awareness of these emotional needs can lead to a deep respect for the timeless wisdom of Jewish tradition. An understanding of both can help insure that the *shiva* visit will be welcomed by the mourners.

In most cases, mourning can trigger any one or a combination of the following emotional reactions: shock, denial, anguish, frustration, fear, anxiety, loneliness, isolation, guilt, regret and depression. In each case, the mourners will not be helped by efforts to distract them from their loss or by advice to "Calm down," "Don't feel so bad," or "You can't change things, anyway." What is helpful, is patient listening and conversation which is initiated by the mourners.

Therefore, Jewish tradition, expects that visitors will not greet the mourner. This applies to saying "Hello", "Good morning", or any other form of greeting. Friends and relatives should also refrain from greeting or conversing extensively with each other in the house of mourning. So, conversation begins as follows: The visitors wait for the mourner to initiate conversation; and if nothing is said, they should sit in silence. Once conversation has begun, the visitors should try to focus on the merits of the deceased, which may have been mentioned at the funeral, or the practical needs of the mourner.

Remember, your presence in the house of mourning is the loudest declaration of support that can be made.

How should a *shiva* visit be concluded?

Perhaps the most difficult part of a *shiva* visit is bringing it to a close. Many people feel awkward, self-conscious and tense as they nervously grope for those appropriate words which they never seem to find.

What these people may not realize is that Jewish tradition has provided a verbal formula which brings a universal closure to the *shiva* visit. Upon leaving, each visitor offers the identical words of comfort in Hebrew, or its English translation, "*Hamakom yenacheim es'chem besoch she'ar avlei Tzion VeYerushalayim.*" "*May G-d comfort you among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem*". These

traditional words of consolation help the mourner connect his personal loss with the shared losses of the entire Jewish people. These words of comfort should be said while the mourners are seated and the visitor is standing. Nothing more need to be said and the visitor should then leave the house of mourning.

If two visitors must speak with each other for any reason, they should wait until they are outside of the room where the mourners are sitting.

VII

Getting up from Shiva

When is *shiva* over?

The week of *shiva* is completed in the morning of the seventh day following the burial, with the day of the burial counting as the first day. The exact time depends upon the conclusion of morning services. After morning services are completed, those who came to attend the service say the traditional words of comfort and then the mourners may "get up" from *shiva*. If the mourners are not attending services they get up from sitting *shiva* at the same time as morning services are concluded in their local Synagogue. Please note that morning services are held after sunrise and take approximately one half hour.

The exceptions to this are the following:

If the burial took place on a Sunday, the public observance of *shiva* is concluded before candle lighting time on Friday, in order to allow enough time for Sabbath preparation. Marital relations are still prohibited until after the Sabbath. (See page 11)

If the burial takes place shortly before a Jewish holiday, such as Passover, *shiva* may not last seven days.

If the burial took place in one country and mourners are sitting *shiva* in another country, the seventh day of *shiva* might not be counted from the day of the burial.

In all such cases a Rabbi should be consulted.

Is the mourning process completed after *shiva*?

Most of the prohibitions listed in this pamphlet are lifted after *shiva*. For a detailed explanation of the prohibitions which continue after *shiva*, a Rabbi should be consulted.

VIII

Mourning Customs

Do all Jews practice the same mourning customs?

Because of their varied backgrounds, not all Jews practice the same customs. Even within the European and Sephardic traditions, not all customs are universally observed since there were some differences, at times, in the Jewish customs practiced from one country to another. For example, it is customary for some to conclude the *shiva* by walking around the block of the house of mourning immediately after getting up from *shiva*. This formally concludes the observance of *shiva* for the mourners who are following this traditional custom, as it symbolizes the final departure of the soul of the deceased.

Since many different customs are prevalent you should consult a Rabbi from your community for guidance.

The Prophecy of Isaiah

This booklet was prepared for practical application. Even so, it is the hope of the entire Jewish community that there will be no need to observe the traditions of *shiva* in the future when we merit the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (25:8)

He will destroy death forever;
And the Eternal G-d will wipe
away the tears from all faces. . .

Dedication

This digest is dedicated in memory of Hillel Jacobson by his wife, Miriam, their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and the Officers, Directors, Members of the Staff of the United Hebrew Community of New York, Adath Israel of New York.

Mr. Jacobson as the Executive Director was the driving force behind the success of the United Hebrew Community of New York for three decades. His unwavering dedication and sensitivity to the needs of tens of thousands of crises who called for his help throughout those years is legendary. He was absolute in demanding that the religious and ethical standards established throughout the Jewish history be forever maintained for the members he assisted as well as for the entire Jewish community. His steadfast belief in Jewish Law, Customs and values and his unyielding determination to sustain and support his *Adas Yisroel Chevra Kadisha* as its *menahel* became the foundation upon which has now been established most other community *chevros* in New York.

Hillel ben Chaim Aharon Jacobson died *b'shalom* in 1996 and was returned to Jerusalem the city of his birth, for burial. May his memory be a source of comfort to *Klal Yisroel*.

About the Author

Dr. Meir Wikler is a psychotherapist and family counselor in private practice in Brooklyn, New York. A former Professor at the Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University, he is the author of **Bayis Ne'eman B'Yisrael: Practical Steps to Success in Marriage**, New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1988.

One of Dr. Wikler's numerous articles, "*The Psychodynamics of Grief and Mourning: A Layman's Guide to Making a **Shiva** Visit*," which appeared in **The Jewish Observer**, January 1985, prompted David Jacobson, the Executive Director of the United Hebrew Community of New York, Adath Israel of New York, to invite him to prepare this digest. Anyone who would like to receive a free copy of Dr. Wikler's article on making a **shiva** visit should call:

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