

Shiva

Origins and General Information

Shiva (meaning “seven” in Hebrew) is the first and most intensive stage in the process of healing from a loss. The Torah mentions a seven day mourning period in connection with the death of Jacob, which is likely the source of the rabbinic law that shiva be observed. The sages declared that the first three days of shiva are especially marked by expressions of grief while the remaining days are characterized by healing and hope. While it is appropriate to observe all seven days of shiva, there is therefore some basis to view the first three days as the time when a mourner needs the greatest amount of attention and comfort.

Length of Shiva

Shiva begins on the day of burial, not the day of death, at the conclusion of the burial service. Whatever part of that day remains until nightfall is considered the first day of shiva. Shiva concludes after the first waking hour on the seventh day, assuming the sun has risen. Thus, shiva is not precisely a full seven days, since the first and last days are only partially observed.

The rabbinic sages anticipated the need for a period of healing and gradual return to normal life. Observing shiva for seven days represents not only allegiance to Jewish tradition, but also a desire to heal and return to normal life. During the days of shiva, mourners are comforted by friends and have time to reflect on the life of the deceased. Even if a mourner formally welcomes condolence callers on only some of the days of shiva week, one should remain at home for all the days of shiva and not return to the normal routine of life before the end of shiva.

When Shiva is Cut Off Before Completion

Responding to the notion that the festivals are a time of joy, the rabbinic sages declared that any one of the major Jewish holidays mentioned in the Torah (Passover, Shavuot, Sukkot, Rosh Hashana or Yom Kippur) “cut off” shiva, even if only a few hours of shiva have been observed. For example, if a burial is held on the day before Rosh Hashana, the beginning of the holiday would bring an end to shiva.

The case of death and burial occurring during a festival week requires a different arrangement. If a death occurs during Chol Hamoed Passover or Sukkot (the intermediate days of the festival), the funeral and burial take place (though not on the festival days of the holiday week). But since Jewish law does not permit shiva to be observed during a festival week, the start of shiva is postponed until the conclusion of the festival. This deferral can prove to be emotionally difficult for some to uphold.

While Shabbat is also a time of joy, the rabbinic sages decreed that Shabbat would not cut off shiva, as every shiva would inevitably be cut off before its end.

Location of Shiva

Shiva is usually located in the home of a member of the mourning family, though there is no law that stipulates where it must be held. It is acceptable to change the location of the shiva house during the week of shiva. A mourner need not sleep in the shiva house, unless it is convenient to do so, as it is acceptable to sleep at home and go to the location of shiva for the day.

Establishing Visitation Hours

Traditionally, mourners in a shiva home were always available to accept visitors throughout the day. That being said, many people find it especially tiring and difficult not to be able to rest during the day and await condolence callers. Thus, many mourners establish visitation hours that are announced to the community. If that is the preference of the mourner, sufficient hours should be set up so as to enable condolence callers to visit during the week. As an example, many mourners announce that condolence callers may visit on specified days during the week of shiva from 1:00-4:00 P.M. and again beginning at 7:00 P.M., with an evening service held during the second visitation. That way, the mourner can rest during the morning and receive condolence callers for most of the afternoon and, after a break for dinner, again in the evening.

Serving Food

The idea of serving food in a shiva house has its origin in the practice of condolence callers bringing food to the mourners because they should not prepare it for themselves. With such an abundance of food on hand, it became commonplace and even necessary (to avoid waste) to serve it to the condolence callers themselves. That likely resulted in the widespread practice of the mourning family feeling obligated to arrange for large amounts of food for those who visit the shiva home.

Those who are unprepared or not inclined to serve food to condolence callers need not do so.

Some people feel that serving food relaxes people and facilitates a meaningful visit between the condolence callers and the mourners. The food brought by condolence callers that is not needed by the mourners may be put out for all those who wish to partake.

Food left over from a shiva house may be donated to a local soup kitchen.

Observing Shiva When the Funeral is Held Out-of-State

When a funeral is held out-of-state and Oheb Shalom's clergy are not called upon to officiate, the family may still wish to observe all or part of shiva at home. Our clergy and congregation will assist the family in every way possible to conduct shiva in the same manner as if the funeral were held locally.

Shiva Customs

Several customs, enumerated and explained below, are commonly practiced in a shiva home, some by the mourners and some also by the condolence callers.

- **Handwashing**

Jewish law mandates that one who has come into contact with a corpse seek spiritual purification through water. The practice of washing hands after returning from a cemetery is related to other familiar forms of marking spiritual transition through water. Thus, it is customary to set out a pitcher with water, a bowl to collect the poured water, and a roll of paper towels so that all those returning to the shiva house from the cemetery, whether or not they are mourners, may wash their hands as they enter the home. (This is the reason that some funeral homes have a wash basin outside the building.)

- **Covering Mirrors**

The practice of covering mirrors in the shiva home has its origin in human nature. The rabbinic sages decreed that a mourner is not supposed to be concerned with physical

appearance and tend only to one's hygienic needs. But since it is human nature to look at one's reflection in the mirror and desire to improve our appearance, even if one is a mourner, Jewish law decrees that mirrors in a shiva house should be covered.

If the mourning family wishes to honor Jewish tradition or if the mourner anticipates that he will be concerned about his physical appearance if he looks in a mirror, all the mirrors in the home may be covered. Otherwise, one may honor the spirit of the tradition by covering a wall hanging mirror.

- **Lighting a Shiva Candle**

The Bible tells us that “the flame that emanates from God is a symbol of the soul of the human being” (Proverbs 20:27). It is a common practice to light a candle to symbolize the soul of a loved one who has passed on during the week of shiva, on the occasion of a yahrtzeit (anniversary of death) and on the four Yizkor days.

The shiva candle should remain lit for seven days, beginning with the moment the mourners return home from the cemetery. It should be placed in a location that is visible but out of harm's way. A meditation (included at the back of this booklet) may be recited upon lighting the candle, which is done without reciting a blessing.

If a mourner anticipates sleeping at home and going to another location for all or part of the day during the week of shiva, a candle may be lit in both places. If shiva begins in one location, such as the out-of-state residence of the

deceased, and continues in one's own home, a shiva candle should be lit upon returning home. The candle should not be extinguished at the end of shiva.

- **Meal of Consolation**

A meal of consolation (seudat havra'a in Hebrew) is customarily eaten by the mourners and their family upon returning from the cemetery. The meal should be ready and waiting the moment the mourners enter the house. Non-mourners from the family, friends or neighbors should arrange for the meal. If that is not possible, someone from the synagogue will help to arrange for the meal.

The meal of consolation should include foods that are round to symbolize the cycle of life.

- **Sitting on a Low Stool**

Mourners typically sit on a low stool or even on the ground while in the shiva house to reflect the mood and emotional disposition of mourning. The synagogue has a set of shiva chairs that are low to the ground. Because they have cushioned seats and backrests they are likely to be more comfortable (the tradition is for a mourner to be low to the ground, not in discomfort). The funeral home can also provide cardboard boxes that fold into a cube on which the mourners can sit.

- **Wearing the Kria Ribbon or Torn Clothing**

It is proper to wear the “kria” ribbon (the black ribbon that was torn at the funeral service) throughout the days of shiva. The ribbon may be pinned to whatever garment the mourner is wearing each day. If the ribbon is lost or breaks, the rabbi can provide a replacement (which should be torn again). If the mourner tore his clothing, the torn garment should be worn throughout the days of shiva.

The kria ribbon should not be worn on Shabbat, whether the mourner is at home or in the synagogue.

- **Wearing Slippers or Non-Leather Shoes**

Traditionally, mourners do not wear leather shoes during shiva week (a related practice calls for wearing non-leather shoes on Yom Kippur). Instead, the mourner should wear non-leather shoes, socks or slippers while at home during shiva week. Leather shoes may be worn when mourners attend synagogue on Shabbat.

- **Grooming**

Typically, someone in mourning is not concerned with grooming oneself but is focused on the deceased. During the week of shiva, mourners do not get haircuts, shave, wear cosmetics or polish nails. It is also a long standing practice not to cut one’s hair or shave facial hair for the first 30 days of mourning (counting from the day of the funeral).

- **Displaying Photos and Memorabilia**

It is appropriate to set out photos and other memorabilia belonging to the deceased in the shiva house, as they provide a way for those visiting the mourners to become more familiar with the life of the deceased.

- **Shiva Minyan**

A shiva minyan should be held in the shiva house as often as possible during the week of shiva. Since mourners are expected to remain at home for the duration of shiva (except for Shabbat), physical and spiritual support is provided by the mourners' family and community. The synagogue will ensure that someone is present to lead the minyan and that prayer books and head coverings are available. If they wish, the mourning family may appoint someone to lead the service from among its relatives or friends, but should not feel compelled to do so. Shiva minyan should begin at 7:30 or 8:00 P.M. in order to enable commuters who wish to attend the service to do so, but the time can vary according to the needs of the mourning family.

The mourners may choose to say a few words about the deceased near the end of the shiva service.

Shiva minyan is never held on Shabbat.

- **Shiva Books and Chairs**

Oheb Shalom provides shiva books, along with head coverings, for every shiva minyan. The books are either brought (usually by the clergy) to the funeral service and placed in the vehicles of the mourning family, or they are

brought to the shiva house by the leader. Someone from the mourning family is asked to return the cases with books after the conclusion of shiva.

The shiva chairs (noted above) are brought to the shiva house and should be returned to the synagogue in the same manner as the books.

- **Saying Kaddish**

Saying kaddish is perhaps the most familiar of all Jewish mourning rituals. Originally composed as a statement of faith in God following a period of teaching by a scholar, Kaddish was later cast as a formulaic expression of praise of God offered by mourners at a time that they might question their faith in God because of the emotions surrounding death. Kaddish can also be thought of as a way of affirming the notion that despite the pain of loss and the anguish of tragedy, the world is essentially a good place. This is the faith that mourners might be urged to embrace, namely that albeit that people experience grief there is good reason to hope that those who have been stung by life will again feel happiness and contentment.

Kaddish is recited for 11 months for parents (one month less than the year of mourning), counting from the day of death and not the funeral. This is because kaddish was once conceived of as a form of testimony by children for their parents who were subject to Divine judgment. Reciting kaddish for a month less than the full year of judgment was a way of expressing that one's parent was sufficiently righteous so as not to need a full year of such

“testimony.” Others may be more comfortable relating to the kaddish as a way of honoring our parents and remembering their lives in a consistent manner during the first year after death.

Kaddish should be recited daily, but if that is not possible it should be recited according to a regular pattern (e.g., weekly).

Kaddish is recited for other relatives (a spouse, sibling or child) for 30 days.

Children under the age of 13 should not recite kaddish.

It is a long standing Jewish practice for someone who feels they cannot say kaddish regularly to “hire” a kaddish sayer to recite the prayer regularly for them, though there is no credible foundation for the practice. The obligation to say kaddish is not one that can or should be delegated to another person.

- **Leaving the Shiva House During Shiva**

It is customary for the mourner to remain in the shiva house for the duration of shiva and not tend to other obligations or commitments of any type. Those who would be destitute or unemployed if they didn’t go to work may do so. One may leave the shiva house to attend the morning minyan and say kaddish (Oheb Shalom does not typically convene a morning minyan in a shiva house). The mourner should not accept any Torah honors during the week of shiva.

One may, of course, leave the shiva house for medical reasons (i.e., for an appointment with a physician that can't be postponed until the end of shiva).

- **The Shabbat of Shiva Week**

The community's obligation to comfort the mourner (the mitzvah is called "nichum aveilim" in Hebrew) does not apply to Shabbat. Instead of coming to comfort the mourner in his house during the days of shiva, on Shabbat the mourner comes to the synagogue. On Friday night, the mourners traditionally remain outside of the chapel for the Kabbalat Shabbat portion of the service. The reason for this practice is that the Kabbalat Shabbat prayers are especially festive and are not in keeping with the mood of mourning. Near the end of Kabbalat Shabbat, the mourners are ushered into the sanctuary while the congregation greets them with the traditional words of consolation (the phrase that starts "Hamakom yenachem etchem..."). Seats will be provided outside the chapel while the mourners wait for the end of the Kabbalat Shabbat prayers. If the mourners are needed to make the minyan or if they are uncomfortable with the practice of remaining outside of the chapel, they may join the service.

On Shabbat morning, the mourner should come to the synagogue to recite kaddish but should not be offered or accept any Torah honors during the service.

- **The End of Shiva**

Shiva ends on the morning of the seventh day after the funeral (counting the day of the funeral), after the first hour of the morning. It is customary to walk around, or up and down, the block of one's house after getting up from shiva as a symbol of beginning to restore one's life after experiencing loss. A meditation may be recited upon completing shiva (one is included at the back of this booklet).

What Condolence Callers Should Do

It can be difficult to console mourners who are shocked by the loss of a loved one. The most important thing to keep in mind is that merely being present in the shiva house is already a significant gesture of comfort for the mourner. No wise words of advice or eloquent words of comfort need to be spoken during a shiva visit. In fact, the tradition holds that one need not even speak directly to the mourner unless he addresses the visitor (though this may seem a bit odd and unnatural). It is often best to ask the mourner about the life of their loved one, often beginning the conversation with a statement as simple as "Please tell me about your father." Offers of help (such as "Is there anything I can do for you?") are surely well meant but usually not necessary. A shiva visit of 15-20 minutes is usually an appropriate length.

It is customary to enter a shiva house without knocking. Condolence callers will feel more inclined to enter without being let in if a sign with instructions to do so is placed on the front door. A laminated sign telling visitors to enter without knocking is included in the case of shiva books provided by the synagogue. If the mourners wish to follow this practice, the sign should be placed on the front door only during the prescribed hours of visitation.