



Dear friends,

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) has prepared this “how-to” guide for visiting mourners during shiv’ah in two versions, a longer version and a brief version. Both are designed for people to learn how to visit mourners during shiv’ah in a more sensitive and comforting way.

The longer version is designed for two contexts: 1) rabbis and educators may want to use it to teach how to visit during shiv’ah as part of a class or lesson; and 2) communities may send it out as an attachment to an email or other notice about a funeral and/or shiv’ah information.

The brief version is meant for posting at the entrance of a shiv’ah home to give guidance to those about to visit. A number of copies might be included in the briefcase or suitcase containing siddurim often brought to a shiv’ah home.

Warm regards,

Rabbi Pamela Barmash and Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff

Approved on November 17, 2025, by a vote of 19-0-0. Voting in favor: Rabbis Aaron Alexander, Pamela Barmash, Emily Barton, Chaya Bender, Nate Crane, Aviva Fellman, David J. Fine, Joshua Heller, Barry Leff, Amy Levin, Daniel Nevins, Matthew Nover, Joel Pitkowsky, Avram Reisner, Karen Reiss Medwed, Robert Scheinberg, Miriam T. Spitzer, Stewart Vogel, and Raysh Weiss. Voting against: None. Abstaining: None.



Why and How to Visit During Shiv'ah
A Guide from the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards
Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff and Rabbi Pamela Barmash

Why and How to Help Mourners Mourn During Shiv'ah

Shiv'ah, the seven-day period of mourning following the funeral, is intended to help mourners grieve the death of their loved one. The people with the Jewish religious responsibility (mitzvah) to mourn the deceased are that person's parents, children, siblings, and spouse, but anyone may recite the Mourner's Kaddish during a prayer service in memory of the deceased.

We physically separate from a person who has died by burying that person. To separate from the person psychologically we need to call up memories of the deceased. That is done in the funeral service and during shiv'ah.

People are understandably uncomfortable talking about death. So often mourners do not know how to grieve, and those who visit them during shiv'ah do not know how to comfort them. This Guide is intended to help both mourners and their comforters do that.

The first thing to note is that simply showing up is important; it is indeed both a mitzvah (fulfilling a Jewish responsibility) — nihum aveilim (comforting mourners), and a hesed (an act of kindness) to do so. (Shulhan Arukh Yoreh De'ah 376:1)

What should you say and do if you come to the home of mourners during shiv'ah — or “make a shiv'ah call” to those who are “sitting shiv'ah,” as this process is often named? Depending on your relationship with the mourner, offering your hand for a handshake, hugging or kissing the mourner may be appropriate, but do not be offended if the mourner does not wish physical contact.

You need not say anything. If you want to help the mourner grieve, however, note that mourners often focus on the last days or months of a person's life, but mourning the dead and honoring them requires us to remember the entirety of a person's life. So try doing this: after saying that you are sorry to hear about the death of the person who died, ask mourners for their earliest memories of the deceased. Be prepared for the mourner to tell some stories, to cry through others, and, yes, to laugh through others because people sometimes do funny things. You may share your own positive memories of the deceased, but refrain from talking about your own deceased relatives or matters unrelated to the process of mourning the person who just died. Please remember also that this is not a social visit.

Here are some things that you should not say:

- 1) Do not tell the mourner not to cry. Tears are perfectly appropriate in mourning.

2) Do not argue with the mourners or tell them their feelings or memories are inappropriate or wrong. Your job during shiv'ah is to listen, not to correct the record.

3) "I know how you must feel." (No, you do not.)

4) "Are you planning on moving after all of this is over?" – all too often said to a widow who lives alone in the family home but also sometimes said to widowers. Now is not the time for discussing a mourner's future plans.

If there are other visitors, be sure to let them spend time with the mourners.

One other piece of advice. Shiv'ah is exhausting physically and emotionally for the mourners. Once it is over, mourners feel a sense of cleansing, but also relief that it is over. At the same time, mourning the deceased members of one's family or close friends does not end with shiv'ah. It is thus a real kindness some weeks or months after shiv'ah to ask a bereaved family member or friend if they want to share a memory of the deceased, and that certainly should happen at the anniversary ("yahrzeit" in Yiddish) of the death. In that way we can help each other separate from the deceased and yet hold on to them in memory.

Jewish Customs Regarding Shiv'ah

1. When to Visit – Pay attention to the announcement, whether at the funeral or through email and social media, for the times that the mourners will be receiving visitors. Pay close attention to the times when prayer services take place, morning and evening. If you want to visit at a time other than the times of services or those the mourners have announced for receiving visitors, you must call ahead and receive permission from the mourners: do not just show up and assume that your presence is welcome at other times. Because many will choose to show up during the first days of shiv'ah, you may wish to schedule your visit towards the end of shiv'ah.

2. How to Dress – People do not dress as formally as they once did, and so "business casual" style is appropriate. That said, showing up is of paramount importance, however you are dressed.

3. Helping Mourners by Providing Food or Fulfilling Other Practical Needs – Often a friend of the family volunteers to organize meals for the mourners during the shiv'ah period because the mourners are not supposed to do work. (Shulhan Arukh Yoreh De'ah 380:1-3) It is a mitzvah to provide food for the mourner. (Shulhan Arukh Yoreh De'ah 378:1) If you are bringing or sending food to the shiv'ah home, please be sure that it is kosher and call ahead to ask about allergies and/or food needs (such as gluten-free, peanut or nut-free, or low-sodium) or preferences (such as vegetarian or vegan food). If you bring food to a home, take it directly to the kitchen. Be sure to label the food as dairy, meat, or parve and whether it contains gluten, peanuts, nuts, or other allergens. Visitors to the house of mourning should eat from the food provided only if specifically invited to do so. Sometimes many people offer to bring food: do not feel slighted if the food organizer asks you to bring something other than what you have planned or to express your condolences and care for the family by donating to tzedakah in memory of the deceased instead of bringing food. Taking care of mourners' carpool duties or other tasks that they would normally do is also an important way of caring for them during shiv'ah.

4. If You Have Not Washed After the Funeral at the Cemetery, Wash Your Hands at the Entrance of the Mourner's Home – A pitcher of water, a basin, and towels may be placed at the entrance of the shiv'ah home. It is customary to wash your hands ritually after returning from the cemetery. No blessing is recited.

5. Just walk in; do not ring the doorbell.

6. How to Participate in the Prayers – Try to participate in the prayers as much as you can. Siddurim (prayer books) may be distributed. If you do not know the prayers, stand or sit when others are doing so while services are being conducted.

7. How to Talk with the Other Visitors – You may encounter people you know and naturally start to socialize with them at the shiv'ah home. However, remember that you are not there for a social visit.

8. Out-Of-Town Mourners – Naturally you pay attention to the mourners who are your personal friends. Note, though, that there might be mourners from out-of- town or siblings who might be sitting alone. Spend time with them.

9. Younger Mourners – Young people who are mourners need to be comforted by their friends. If deemed appropriate by their parents, you and a friend might want to take young children to the park or supervise play in a back or front yard.

10. If You Visit by Video Conferencing – If you cannot attend in person, be sure to find out whether there is a sign-up sheet so that the mourners do not have to ignore in-person visitors in order to go online with you. Please respect the mourner's privacy by not recording.

11. Do Not Stay Too Long – If you come to attend prayers, be sure to come a few minutes early or stay a few minutes afterwards to have some time directly with the mourners. If you are staying after prayers or coming during the day for a shiv'ah call, do not overstay your welcome. It is best to stay no more than 30 to 45 minutes.

12. Saying Goodbye – When you depart, it is our custom to make a formal farewell to the mourners, with a number of options.

One option:

May you be comforted from heaven.

Min hashamayim tenuhamu

מן השמיים תנחמו

Another option:

May God comfort

Hamakom yinnahem

האָקָם ינְחַם

you (in general)

etkhem

אַתֶּכֶם

you (addressing one man)

otkha

אָתָּה

you (addressing one woman)

otakh

אָתָּה

you (addressing a group, a majority of whom are men)

etkhem

אַתֶּכֶם

you (addressing a group, a majority of whom are men)

etkhen

אַתְּכָנָ

among the mourners in Zion and Jerusalem

betokh she'ar ha'aveilim betziyyon verushalayim

בְּתוֹךְ שָׁאָר הַאֲכָלִים בָּצִיּוֹן וִירוּשָׁלָיִם.

As You Enter A Shiv'ah Home
A Sheet to Post at the Entrance of a Shiv'ah Home
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- 1. Thank you for fulfilling the mitzvah of comforting mourners.**
- 2. If you have not washed your hands at the cemetery after the funeral, wash your hands at the entrance** of the mourners' home – A pitcher of water, a basin, and towels may be placed at the entrance. It is customary to wash your hands ritually after the funeral. No blessing is recited.
- 3. Just walk in; do not ring the doorbell.**
- 4. Take food directly to the kitchen.** Be sure to label the food as dairy, meat, or parve and whether it contains gluten, peanuts, nuts, or other allergens. Visitors to the house of mourning should eat from the food provided only if specifically invited to do so.
- 5. How to behave with the mourners** – Our custom is to be silent until the mourners decide to start the conversation. If silence feels uncomfortable, ask the mourner to share a memory of the deceased. Tears are OK. Do not argue with the mourners or tell them their feelings or memories are inappropriate or wrong.
- 6. How to Participate in the Prayers** – Try to participate in the prayers as much as you can. If you do not know the prayers, stand or sit when others are doing so.
- 7. How to Talk with the Other Visitors** – You may encounter people you know. However, remember that you are not there for a social visit.
- 8. Out-Of-Town Mourners** – There might be mourners from out-of-town or siblings who might be sitting alone. Spend time with them.
- 9. Younger Mourners** – Young people who are mourners need to be comforted by their friends. If deemed appropriate by their parents, you and a friend might want to supervise play in a back or front yard.
- 10. Do Not Stay Too Long** – Aside from prayer times, stay no more than 30 to 45 minutes.