

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR A SHIVA VISIT

By: Rabbi Noah Gradofsky

Visiting a Jewish house of mourning is considered a great *mitzvah* (commandment/good deed). The goal of a shiva visit is to express one's caring for the family and respect for the deceased. This is far more than a mere social call. In order to make your visit more meaningful to the mourners and more comfortable for you, here are a few general guidelines.

1. **Doo not knock or ring the bell;** simply let yourself in. In general, the door is left unlocked during the hours that the mourners are receiving guests.
2. **The custom is not to speak to the mourner(s) until they acknowledge you.** However, if the mourner appears not to be aware of this custom, or may otherwise be made uncomfortable, one should not stand on ceremony.
3. **Try not to ask questions like "How are you doing?"** Questions like this are called *she'elat shalom*, and may be perceived as insensitive to the mourner's sense of loss. Simply tell the mourner that you are sorry for his or her loss.
4. **Some people bring food (but generally not flowers).** Others prefer to make a donation in memory of the loved one. Although either act is appropriate, neither is required.
5. **You are welcome to eat any of the food that has been set out.** If the mourner asks if you would like to take food home, that's OK, and contrary to common beliefs does not violate Jewish law. It's better than any food going to waste.
6. **The low chairs and boxes are for the mourners to sit on** as a symbol of their mourning.
7. **Shiva visits are generally not made on Friday afternoons, on Jewish holidays, or on Shabbat** (Friday at sundown through Saturday 45 minutes after sundown). However, one is permitted to express condolences on the Sabbath and holidays if one sees the mourner(s).
8. **Let the mourners set the tone of the conversation.** The main goal is not to socialize, but to show the mourner that we care. General conversation is OK, particularly if the mourner needs a break from the intensity of the moment. It can also be both appropriate and meaningful to ask the mourner about his or her loved one.
9. **There are no magic words, and philosophy will not be comforting** (and may appear to be insensitive to the gravity of the loss). You are here to show you care. You are not expected to take away the mourner's pain. Try to avoid expounding on your own philosophies, or comparing your experience in loss to theirs.
10. **Most importantly, be a good listener.**
11. Try to limit the length of your visit and allow others to have access to the mourners.
12. **What to say when you leave:** It can be difficult to find the right parting words. It is usually better to use one of the traditional sayings upon leaving a shiva house. Ashkanezi custom is to leave with the words "May God comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." Sephardic custom is to say the words *min hashamayim tenuchamu* – "may you be comforted from the heavens." Either phrase is appropriate.
13. **Caring goes beyond Shiva:** The mourning process continues well beyond shiva. A friendly call, a lunch invitation, or offering to join the mourner in synagogue where he or she will say kaddish are some ideas of how to continue to care for mourners beyond the Shiva period.