

# Etiquette at Funerals and Houses of Shiva

Rarely does life demand greater sensitivity and religious commitment than when a Jewish community responds to the death of one of its members. Our natural and compassionate response is to call or call upon the bereaved as soon as we learn of their loss in order to offer whatever assistance we can render.

The principal Jewish values that apply in this situation are *kevod ha-met* (“showing reverence for the deceased”) and *nichum avelim* (“comforting the bereaved”). Attending the funeral and burial and the house of *shiva*, and doing so in the proper ways, fulfill both ideals.

## The Funeral

Your attendance at the funeral brings great comfort to the bereaved. It tells them that they are not alone in their sorrow and demonstrates that their loved one mattered not only to them but to the wider community. This shows honor to the deceased (*kevod ha-met*) and adds to their comfort. Visiting the family at the funeral home before the service is encouraged in our community and adds a personal sense of consolation to the mourners.

After the visitation, it is proper to take ones place in the Chapel, turn off your cell phone out of respect for the deceased and the family, and engage in quiet reflection until the service begins. Too often, those waiting in the Chapel engage in loud and inappropriate conversation. The Board of Rabbis urges the community to refrain from such discussion. After the funeral service, it is especially praiseworthy to attend the burial at the cemetery where a *minyan* is required for the mourners to say *kaddish* and where the comforting presence of friends is most urgently needed.

## The House of Shiva

Sometimes, friends are invited to return directly with the family to the House of *Shiva*. However, unless this is specifically requested, one should not presume to go at this time. Often, the mourners need some private time to restore their emotional equilibrium. Later, in the afternoon or in the evening when there are *minyanim* (services), it is a precious mitzvah for friends to attend. Regarding the *shiva* house, it is not appropriate to visit at a time of ones own personal convenience. Rather, it is the task of the consolers to accommodate those who are bereaved. It is especially inappropriate to come by at times when the family is eating their usual meals. They might feel a sense of obligation to receive you just when they need a respite from the strain that *shiva* sometimes imposes.

During visitations, it is important to listen rather than to talk, and to allow the family members to verbalize their feelings. Frivolous conversation ought to be avoided, and, even though it often happens, the *shiva* house should not become a food service institution where the bereaved serve visitors.

It is especially a comfort when visitors attend the services and thereby help to assure the *minyan* so the mourners can recite *kaddish*. Though the formalities of *shiva* never last more than a week, the mitzvah of *nichum avelim* (“comforting the bereaved”) poses ongoing obligations on all of us. The pain of loss may continue for months and even years. Sensitivity to the needs of those who bear such losses is a sign of our own spiritual sensitivity.

We all need a community of friends and supporters. Rarely is that more clearly felt than at times of bereavement. We can be such a community if we remain sensitive and motivated to offer of ourselves when others are in need.



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