

## Visiting a Shiva House

Jewish tradition teaches that we have a positive obligation to comfort people in times of loss. Mourners need time to grieve. The *shiva* period – which begins immediately after the funeral – is intended to give close family members of the deceased time to remain at home without their usual obligations of work or social activity. While the mourners remain in their home (or the home of the deceased), members of the community visit at specified times to offer comfort and to pray together. The mourner is considered a guest and it is the obligation of community members to serve as hosts to tend to the needs of the mourners.

Here are some suggestions on how to visit a *shiva* house, a house of mourning:

**Visit during announced hours.** Usually, the calling hours are announced at the funeral or can be found in the Synagogue or funeral home email, or in the obituary. Visit at the times that the family has specified. Traditionally, *shiva* is observed for seven days unless it is interrupted by a major Jewish holiday. Many families choose to shorten their *shiva* observance, often to three days.

**Just walk in.** There is no need to ring the doorbell or knock. Remember, you are the host, not the guest. Do not force the mourners to get up to answer the door. Do not expect to be greeted.

**Bring food, not flowers.** Visitors to a *shiva* house are there to offer comfort and to care for the mourners. It is very appropriate to bring food to the *shiva* house, especially food for the mourners to eat at a time when they might find it difficult to prepare meals for themselves. When you enter the home, just bring the food to the kitchen and put it down. Whether or not the family keeps traditional *kashrut* (eating kosher foods), do not to bring foods that are obviously non-kosher (such as ham or shrimp) as they are inappropriate to this religious occasion. Jewish tradition considers gifts of cut flowers at a funeral or a house of mourning to be wasteful. The money is better spent on a donation to a charity specified by the family of the deceased.

**Participate in the minyan service.** Families usually choose to observe worship services (*shiva minyan*) in their home during the days that they sit *shiva*. The service is a way for the community to "bring the congregation to the mourner." The service is usually brief, twenty to thirty minutes, and often includes a time to share remembrances of the deceased. Everyone is encouraged to participate in the service, Jews and non-Jews. Prayerbooks with translations and transliterations of the Hebrew portions of the service are usually available.

**Let the mourners set the tone.** People often feel uncomfortable or uncertain about what to say to mourners at a *shiva* house. The best approach is to let the mourners be your guide. If they are sitting in silence, it is best to remain silent. If they wish to talk about the deceased, it is entirely appropriate to listen and to share your positive

memories of the deceased as well. If you wish, a simple statement like, "I am sorry for your loss," is sufficient. Hugs and kisses are appropriate when mourners welcome them. If mourners laugh or want to tell funny stories, it is appropriate to laugh. If mourners want to cry, allow them to do so. Avoid talking about your own losses or experiences. Let this be a time to be focused on the loss of the mourners.

**Leave.** A visit to a *shiva* house does not need to be long. Twenty or thirty minutes may be all that is needed to express your wishes of comfort and peace for the mourners. A *shiva* house can sometimes feel like a party, and that can be okay *if it is what the mourners want*. Be careful, though, to keep the needs and wishes of the mourners at the forefront. Be mindful not to exhaust their already depleted energy by overstaying your welcome or by monopolizing their attention.

Adapted from the guide by Temple Sinai, Cranston, RI  
<https://www.templestinairi.org/visiting-a-shiva-house.html>