

Chayei Sarah 5772  
 Making Shiva More Helpful, Jewishly  
 Rabbi Betsy Forester

Having opened with news of the death of Sarah and concluded with the death and burial of Avraham, our parashah opens a window for us to explore our Nichum Aveilim, or Comforting Mourners initiative, intended to enhance our capacity for being present to the needs of people following a death. Today we will continue the conversation. Know that each time we discuss this topic will draw from the last and point to the next while also standing alone on its own merit.

As Daniel Goldman explained in his Kolot Kehillah presentation last Sunday, the week following burial is a complicated and disorienting time for mourners. Jewish tradition offers many insightful practices that carry us from the moment of loss through the rest of our lives. Shiva is the first and most significant container of space for mourners to be held in the community's care.

Being present for people who are vulnerable and suffering is Judaism's highest ideal, and this community takes that obligation seriously. We have become accustomed to a certain order of events at a shiva in the evening: we pray, then someone, usually a mourner, speaks about the person who died, then we eat and schmooze. This structure, when expected, forces mourners into particular ways of being that may or may not be what they need at any given time. What we do now is done with all good intentions, warmth and generosity. But it does not work for everyone. For some mourners, this set of expectations is depleting and does not allow them to process their grief. I have heard from mourners here, enough to know that we need more tools when we visit a home where people are grieving.

As Daniel explained, we must not judge or make assumptions about what mourners need or how they are handling their loss. All we need to know is that they are grieving. Then we wait to see how they need us. Our goal will be to create the conditions for supporting mourners in a greater variety of ways. We're not going from bad to good. My hope is that we go from good to better.

We grieve differently from those around us. The notion of Jewish distinctiveness has roots in this week's parashah.

When Sarah dies, Avraham approaches the Chittim to buy a burial plot. He says, “I am an alien and a resident with you. Give me a burial site with you so I may bury my dead before me” (Gen. 23:4). It is striking that Avraham says I am an alien *and* a resident—*ger v'toshav*. This is specifically *not* a resident alien. It is a claim of dual identity. How can Avraham be both an alien and a resident?

The commentators note that like nearly all Jews today, Avraham and Sarah did not live in the country where their ancestors lived. They are residents, but they lack ancestral land that they can use for burial grounds.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik argues that we must follow the example of Avraham, who presented himself as a “stranger and a resident. On one hand,” he says, “we must be ‘residents’ and integrate into the economic, scientific, and certain aspects of the cultural life in our country of residence, but we also must be ‘strangers’ and form our own “subculture” in order to survive in a country that is hospitable and inviting.”

Indeed, much has been written based on this week’s parashah about the Jewish experience of settling in different countries, coming to feel at home, and then finding ourselves spurned and outcast. History has shown that losing our distinctiveness serves us poorly from a survival as well as a cultural and spiritual perspective. You know that I don’t like to dwell on how we come to be hated by others over and over again, because while I acknowledge the reality, I don’t find it to be an animating principle or mindset or for Jewish thriving. But it is something we must not forget.

To my point today, we also must not forget that as Jews, we have a distinctive way of life. I am very interested in making the most of Jewish practices that help us thrive as individuals and as a community while reinforcing our identity as a unique people devoted to a life-giving Torah. With that in mind, it is worth being aware of whose practices we are following when we think about how a visit to a house of mourning could look, sound, and feel.

The custom in most Christian communities is to host guests with refreshments as a celebration of the life that was, and to minimize exposing other people to the grief the mourners are experiencing. By contrast, Jewish tradition puts us in the thick of what is real. In our tradition, mourners do not feel they must withhold their sadness when people come, because in our tradition, the visitors at a Shiva home are *not* guests of the mourners.

A shiva house may be very quiet. It may be full of stories, or tears, laughter, expressions of relief, or whatever the mourners feel like. The mourners are not “on” for us in their time of grief. Giving speeches and socializing over food are definitely things that people do, and there is nothing inherently wrong with them—but they are not Jewish practices. Historically, Jews have done it differently.

The features of Jewish mourning practices which differ most from our surrounding culture are the following:

- Jewish practices make a lot of space for the mourners to grieve in the presence of their community. Mourners are not only permitted, but typically expected, to appear as they are: people who are grieving and whose focus is on making their way through their grief.
- In Jewish mourning, the community hosts the mourners, providing for all of their needs, especially food, beginning with the Seudat Havra’ah, the “Meal of Condolence,” and throughout the duration of Shiva. Meals are served to the mourners privately, when other visitors are not present. In Jewish mourning practices, *visitors* offer the *mourners* a cup of tea, and *mourners* do *not* invite *visitors* to eat.

Visitors to the Shiva home are not guests. In a traditional shiva visitors do not eat in the Shiva home.

Most of us would rather avoid sitting in the face of other people’s grief. It is uncomfortable, avoiding causing discomfort is part of Upper Midwest culture. It’s not Jewish culture. Our tradition understands that the discomfort comes from fear—fear that we cannot bear another’s pain and fear of burdening others with our pain. But we don’t need protection from someone else’s grief. And we can do hard things in order to help people who are suffering. What we are actually doing when we shy away from offering our presence to someone else’s grief is reinforcing an unhelpful practice, ensuring that when it is our turn to grieve, others will turn away.

We are beginning to learn how to sit with mourners and make space for whatever they want to share or not share. If they just want to sit quietly in the presence of their community, we will sit there quietly with them. This may sound weird if you have not experienced it. It may feel awkward at first. I have been through this change, and I promise you that it will not always feel awkward, and the benefits will be felt.

In order to make space where we can give the mourners our attention and relieve them of the burden of hosting us, we are going to shift how we provide food to those who are mourning. Instead of a buffet table when visitors come, we will bring meals, prepared based on the preferences and tastes of the mourning family, that they can eat without being surrounded by visitors. This will have the added benefit of feeding them more thoughtfully.

I know that some of you are worried that when you visit a Shiva home there will be no food, and that will feel harsh. So let me say that while refreshments are not found at a traditional shiva, our reality is that some mourners will want us to provide a nosh, and others won't. It's really not about whether or not there is rugelach. It's about what helps people who are mourning to process their grief. Maybe there will be rugelach, maybe even kugel. As a community, we will find the sweet spot that feels right, and it probably won't be the same in every case.

We will move through this shift together. I am asking you to trust that we will not be asked to do what we don't know how to do, and we will not be made to confront any sadness beyond what is appropriate when we make ourselves present to loss. By expanding our repertoire of responses, putting more Jewish wisdom into Shiva, I believe that our kahal will be more connected, resilient, and empowered.

Some of you have been writing to me and other members of our Nichum Aveilim team with questions and concerns, and I know that there is some buzz out there as lots of feelings are coming up for people. That's good. It is very helpful to know where you are coming from. I know that you are taking this seriously because it is important to you. It is very important for all of us. Our next learning events are planned for Nov. 21 and December 12. Both will be Zoom-only. Please join us.

I want to thank you for going on this journey together. It does involve some measure of risk for all of us. And so I pray: May we always strive to be the hands, the faces, and the voices that bring the help we need to one another.