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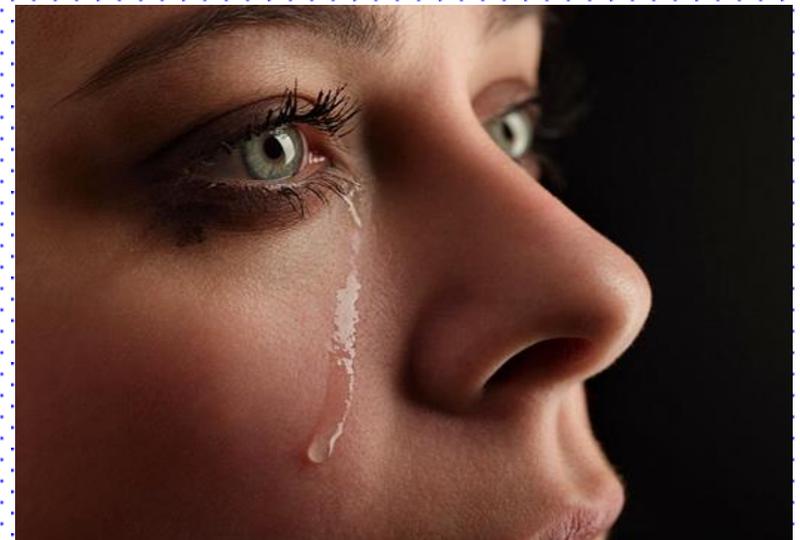


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## COMFORTING



## THE BEREAVED

Rabbi Dr. Maurice Lamm

## AFTER SHIVA

Excerpts from Rabbi Earl Grollman's Book  
"Living With Loss, Healing With Hope"



#10

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THE  
BEREAVED**

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## What About the Children

One person's death touches the lives of many.

Your children may have lost a parent, a sibling,  
a grandparent,  
or a treasured friend.

in the midst of your grief,  
it is important that you reach out to them,  
make time for them,  
talk with them,  
listen to them.

*Until my father told me how angry he felt  
about my mother's death  
I thought he was mad at me.  
- A ten-year-old child*

## Comforting the Bereaved Rabbi Dr. Maurice Lamm

A sacred obligation devolves upon every Jew to comfort mourners, whether related to them or not, and whether the mourner was a close friend or only a passing acquaintance. In Judaism, exercising compassion by paying a condolence call is a mitzvah, considered by some of our greatest scholars to be Biblically ordained. The Bible records that God visited Isaac; "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac, his son" (Genesis 25:11). The sages infer from this verse that God Himself comforted the bereaved Isaac.

It is a man's duty to imitate God: as God comforts the bereaved, so man must do likewise. Consolation is considered a Godlike action that the children of Israel must perform. When, following the destruction of Jerusalem and the decimation of the Jewish people, Isaiah proclaimed God's message, "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people" (Isaiah 40:1), it was not merely a recommendation from on high but a specific mandate obligating the prophet to bring consolation to his people.

The fundamental purpose of the condolence call during *shiva* is to relieve the mourner of the intolerable burden of intense loneliness. At no other time is a person in need of such comradeship. *Avelut* means withdrawal, a personal and physical retreat from social commerce and the concern for others. It is a loss that the mourner alone has suffered. All the traditions of mourning express this troubled loneliness in diverse ways, covering the spectrum of social life – from the excessive growing of hair in indifference to social custom, to the avoidance of greetings, the minimum social courtesy.

Recognizing this state of mind, the visitor comes to the house of mourning, silently, to join the bereaved in his loneliness, to sit alongside him sorrowfully, to think his

thoughts and to linger on his loss. The warmth of such human presence is inestimable. Practiced as the tradition prescribes it, true consolation is a distillation of empathy. The effect of such visits by friends and relatives – some long forgotten, others who may have rarely paid the mourner any attention at all – is the softening of loneliness and the relief of the heavy burden of despair. It is an affirmation that the world at large is not a hateful and angry place, but a warm and friendly one. It is beckoning with open arms for the mourner to return to society. Comforting the mourners, says Maimonides, is *gemilut chasadim*, a genuine kindness – to both the dead and the living.

**The purpose of the condolence call** is not to convince the mourner of anything at all. This is the time for accompanying him on his very own path, not for argumentation or debate. It is a time for contemplating disaster. While the mourner himself may want to discuss it, it is not the prime purpose of the visit to relieve his fears for the future or his guilt for the past. Nor is it proper (indeed it borders on sacrilege, say the Sages) to impress upon the mourner the inevitability of death, as though to doubt the true purpose and justice of a decree that God issued, but that He would change if only He were free to do so. It is not seemly, perhaps it is entirely useless, to assure the mourner that others have suffered similar tragedies or worse fates, as though by right he should be less despairing. “It could have been worse,” is cold consolation. This is a time for subjectivity, for an intensely personal evaluation of life, and the mourners should not be deprived of this indulgence. Some of the importuning of visitors that “life must go on,” and that the mourner should be “thankful that worse did not occur,” are well meaning, but hollow and sometimes annoying expressions.

The strategy of true compassion is a blend of presence and silence, the eloquence of human closeness. Sad, muttered

## Community and Support

We all need the support of others, particularly when we are devastated by agonizing loss.

A good friend can be a lifeline, someone you can talk to honestly, someone who will not judge you, but accept you as you are.

*Rabbi Moshe Leib Sasover recounted a conversation he overheard between two villagers.*

*“Tell me, friend Ivan, do you love me?”*

*“I love you deeply.”*

*“Do you know, my friend, what gives me pain?”*

*“How can I know that?”*

*If you don't know what gives me pain, how can you say you love me?”*

*Yes, Rabbi Sasover concluded, to love, to truly love, means to know what gives pain to your friend.*

## Choosing Life

Grief ebbs, but it never ends

The path you walk  
is long and arduous.

Trust yourself and respect your feelings.  
In time you will gradually  
make peace with your loss.

Then, turn toward the future  
with courage and resolve.

*To everything there is a season, and a time  
to every purpose under heaven*

*A time to be born, and a time to die;  
A time to plant, and a time to pick that which is planted;  
A time to kill, and a time to heal;  
A time to break down, and a time to build up;  
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
A time to mourn, and a time to dance.  
-Ecclesiastes 3*

words are clumsy openers of the heart compared with the whisper of soft eyes. The comradeship demonstrated by a facial expression speaks volumes that ancient bards could not match with mere words, no matter how beautiful. It fulfills at once the mourner's desperate need for both companionship and privacy. It was, therefore, an old custom, unfortunately lost to our generation, for visitors to sit silently on the earth with, and like, the mourner who sat there. How magnificent is this expression of compassion.

**Therefore, the first principle of comforting** the mourner, found in the major codes of Jewish law, is that one should be silent and allow the mourner to speak first. In many Jewish communities in ancient days, congregants accompanied the mourner as he walked home from synagogue on the Sabbath or holiday, and there they sat with him. How warm the physical presence of other human beings is. How it relieves that sharp sting of tragedy. The classic mourner, Job, visited by three friends, sat with them for seven days and no one uttered a sound. Ecclesiastes (3:7) notes that there "a time to keep silent and a time to speak." The Midrash (*Kohelet Rabbah* 3:9) records that the wife of Rabbi Mana died. His colleague, Rabbi Avin, came to pay a condolence call. Asked Rabbi Mana, "Are there any words of Torah that you would want to offer us in our time of grief?" Rabbi Avin replied, "At times like this, the Torah itself takes refuge in silence!" indeed, the Talmud codifies this emphasis on silence by the mourner in unusually forceful terms (*Mo'ed Katan* 15a). It categorically prohibits the mourner from studying Torah – remarkable for these expounders of the Torah – because Ezekiel, the prophet (24:17), says: "Sigh in silence." Speech leads to enjoyment, and certainly Torah study.

It is in this spirit that Maimonides cautions visitors not to speak too much. Somehow, words have a tendency to generate frivolity, so contrary to the spirit of *shiva*. Jewish

folk wisdom notes: True reward comes to one who is silent in the house of mourning and voluble in the wedding hall.

It is true, of course, that it is exceedingly difficult to comfort with warmth and hope and compassion while sitting relatively silent. Perhaps that is the reason for the parting phrase of consolation, “May God comfort you among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.” For only God can thoroughly comfort, as He consoled Isaac after his father Abraham’s death, as He comforted the other mourners of Zion after the tragic destruction of the ancient Temple, and as he has comforted those who suffered in Crusades and pogroms and the Jewish exiled of every age. If the visitor feels uncomfortable in the tension of silence, he should of course talk to the mourner – but little and wisely.

## When to Pay a Shivah Call

Making a *shivah* call to console mourners is a sensitive matter that requires forethought. When and how to do this is very important.

1. One may visit the mourner by day and by night.
2. Some rabbis held that the visit should be delayed until the third day after the interment. The mourner’s wound is fresh, the deceased is constantly in his mind, and most prefer to agonize in private. However, if for some reason this delay cannot be arranged, the visit may be made even on the very first day. Other rabbis held that consolation visits could begin as soon as mourners begin *shivah*. Actually, comforting the bereaved begins at the cemetery when the mourners leave the grave passing through parallel rows of friends and relatives.
3. Visitors do not customarily pay condolence calls on the Sabbath or holidays, because these are days when one does

## Accepting Your Pain

“Why?”

“Why me?”

“Why did my loved one have to die?”

There are questions that have no answers.

Unanswered *whys* are part of life.

*Life and death  
are brothers/sisters who dwell together  
They cling to each other  
and cannot be separated.  
-Bahya Ibn Pakuda, Duties of the Heart*

## Shock

You may be numb

You may feel like a victim  
of a violent windstorm –  
swept away by forces  
you didn't expect and  
can't control

Nothing seems real.

You're not ready for this.

## Denial

"I don't believe it. It can't be true."  
"How could this have happened to my loved one?"  
"How could this happen to me?"  
"It must be a horrible mistake, a nightmare."

Denial is a coping mechanism,  
a part of grief.

When life seems unbearable, denial intervenes  
and allows a temporary breathing spell.

not mourn publicly. However, the mourner may receive company and condolences on these days. There may be *shivah* visitation on *chol ha-mo'ed*, Rosh Chodesh, Purim and Chanukah.

4. If one did not visit during the *shivah*, one can express condolences anytime during the twelve months upon meeting those bereft of parents and during the thirty days for those bereft of other relatives.

5. Condolence calls may be paid by mourners who needed to return to business during *shivah* (if it was proper to do so) the same as to other mourners. If the mourner returned to work in violation of the tradition, he need not be visited, as he has denied himself the comfort of religious consolation.

## Etiquette at the House of Mourning

The purpose of the visitor's presence and speech during the *shivah* should not be designed to distract the bereaved. It is altogether fitting, and entirely proper, to speak of the deceased, his qualities, his hopes, and his loved ones.

1. There should be no greeting, either of welcome or farewell. Details of this law are found above.

2. It is customary not to speak until the mourner does.

One should not speak too much and monopolize the discussion. Conversation in the house of *shivah* should be in the nature of a response to the mourner.

One should address the mourner's anguish, not distract his attention from it. Far from recalling the anguish that surely has not been forgotten, it gives the bereaved person the opportunity to reminisce and express his grief aloud. Psychologists assure us that the mourner very often desires

to speak of his loss. Dr. Eric Lindemann, in his *Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief*, says: "there is no retardation of action and speech; quite to the contrary there is a push to speech, especially when talking of the deceased." Both the mourner's words and his tears should not be avoided or suppressed. It is analogous to the world of nature, where animals heal themselves by the licking of wounds.

There is really no need in these pages to chastise those that believe that joking and humorous remarks or frivolous tales will relieve the bitterness of the mourner's feelings. This all too prevalent type of "socializing" in the house of mourning is a constant reminder that coarse souls know no bounds.

3. One should not urge the mourner to "sit" on the *shivah* stool, as this innocent remark may imply to the mourner that he "remain" in grief. It may possibly cause resentment.

4. The visitor should, by all means, be sensitive to the mourner's feelings, even if this means leaving early so that the mourner can have a rest from the baggage of good advice and well-meaning instructions. There is a time for all things, the Bible tells us, and surely there is a time for leaving the house of the bereaved. Visits should never be unduly prolonged, in the mistaken belief that one's presence brings an unusual degree of relief.

5. Upon leaving, the visitor should recite the phrase in Hebrew or in English or both: *Ha-makom yenachem etchem betokh she'ar avelei Tziyyon vi-Yershalayim*, "May God comfort you among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

## Behavior During the Condolence Call

It sometimes is awkward to respond to condolence. The law provides some guidelines.

## Expressing Your Feelings

Respect your feelings

Sorrow, like the river, must be given vent  
lest it erode its bank.

Allow yourself to mourn and grieve  
for what was and  
what could have been

## Tears

Crying is one means of working your way  
out of despair

Crying is an honest expression of a grief  
that transcends words.

When Sarah, our aged matriarch, died,  
her husband, Abraham,  
"came to mourn and weep for her." (Genesis 23:2)

## Anger

With time, your anger may diminish

Find ways to let it go.

- Consider a long walk
- Work out at the gym
- Scream out loud in a private place, for example, car or shower
- Beat on a pillow with a tennis racket
- Listen to music
- Meditate.

Do whatever brings relief.

1. The mourner should not respond to even well-meant greetings during the first three days.

2. The mourner does not need to rise to greet any guest, no matter his stature, and the mourner should not feel compelled to obey the little niceties of good form at this dreadful time. Visitors will understand.

3. The mourner should sit when people comfort him as they are about to leave. However, especially during prolonged visits he need not sit all the time but may stand and walk as he desires.

4. At mealtime, in the company of guests, the mourner can sit at the head of the table on a lower stool.



*All garments must be rent  
opposite the heart...  
for the mourner has to  
expose the heart  
-Kitzur Shulkhan Arukh 195:3-4*

# AFTER SHIVA

Excerpts from Rabbi Earl Grollman's Book  
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Hope"

## Grief

Grandfather, you were the pillar of fire in front of the camp,  
and now we are left in the camp alone, in the dark;  
we are so cold and so sad

*-Noa Ben-Artzi Philosof, age seventeen, spoken  
at the funeral of her grandfather, Israeli prime  
minister Yitzhak Rabin*

*I am racked with grief  
Sustain me in accordance with Your word  
-Psalm 119:28*

Your grief is your own

None can know how you feel  
No one can shoulder the pain for you

But there can be solace in the presence of others-  
people who love you and want to help  
people who also mourn the loss of your beloved.

And there can be solace in the rich sources  
of our Jewish faith

That is why, during the *shiva*,  
friends and family  
come together  
to offer condolences,  
to offer help,  
to recall the life they shared with your loved one.

*Comforting the mourner is an act  
of loving kindness toward both  
the living and the dead  
-Kitzur Shulkhan Arukh 193:11*