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Consolation

The Spiritual Journey Beyond Grief

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The Spiritual Journey Beyond Grief



MAURICE LAMM

Author of *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*

Chapter 4  Shiva; The Habitat of Healing



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and apply it to the management of our grief. Habitat Shiva includes the contrasting moods of many “rooms,” each room calling forth its own spirit and style.

But the Habitat Is a Sukkah, It Is Only Temporary

Most people who have gone through the mourning experience can testify that Habitat Shiva, despite its magnificence, is notoriously unstable. The sukkah was a temporary dwelling or hut built by the Israelites and used by them during their wanderings in the desert before they reached Canaan. The ritual sukkah that we Jews build today is a hut, specifically built to be fragile by using see-through reeds or slats that enable rain to fall through, reminding us that our fate is in the hands of God.

Similarly, Habitat Shiva is a temporary shelter that stands for seven days, affording us limited protection until our strength begins to return. It is exactly what the Psalmist sought: “[God] will hide me in [His] Sukkah in the day of trouble” (Ps. 27:25).

In the day of our bitterness, we take refuge in this spiritual sukkah of healing, shielding us for the short trek



and imperceptibly when we face terrifying small griefs in personal ways, especially when we finally accept our griefs and integrate them into our future.

There are gender differences in how such grief is expressed. Men are less comfortable than women with a dramatic release, preferring slowly and deliberately to chip away at grief. Male mourners often intentionally suppress their sadness during certain times and then consciously bring it up later. Some psychologists call this practice “sampling”: other psychologists have referred to this as “dosing.” Men are likely to heal through silence and solitude, with little of the therapy or group support that women favor.

Traditionally, the female style of grieving focuses on crying, hugging, talking it out, and using therapy and support groups. In our times and culture, this is often viewed as “the right way” to mourn. And yet, scholars on the cutting edge of grief research are finding that the masculine style has its own benefits, too, and is no less effective. It emphasizes thinking it through, acting soberly, and exercising emotional control. The two modes appear to be contradictory, but on a profound level they likely compliment one another. In fact, the expression of mourning – male or female – may be more effected by other matters, such as a complex mélange of each mourner’s background, fears, closeness to the deceased, and experience with previous death events.

Mindful of the elasticity built into shiva, the Halakhah, Jewish law, empowered people to respond to the life-shattering experience of loss in keeping with their own personality. One simply could not mandate talkativeness to a normally quiet person or silence to a verbose one. The style of each person’s coping with grief must emerge from inside out - within the general framework established by the tradition. This ingenious arrangement, in synergy with the elasticity of the shiva laws and customs, and the strivings of each person’s soul, provides the best possibility for restoring the mourner’s health. It is sound, therefore, to take the advice of the Talmud – “make yourself a heart of many rooms” –

Chapter 4

Shiva; The Habitat of Healing



Mourning is like reentering the womb. We find a dark place where we can weep unheeded and become whole in our own time. Emptiness turns to hope in this safe refuge, this comforting cavern echoing endings and beginnings, slowly transformed again into a passageway into our older, other life.

- M. Fumia



Shiva is a sanctuary for grieving. It follows the course of suffering: It does not dismiss suffering with preachments of God’s goodness nor cite easy assurances of desirable outcomes; it confronts rather than evades the pain of separation. In addition, it provides a profound though indirect healing regimen that leads us out of the entanglement of grief to a full acceptance of our loss and takes us even further, empowering us to growth and self-realization.

How does it accomplish such enormous tasks?

Carving Time Out of Eternity

Shiva responds to deep, rudimentary needs that are common to us all. It is Torah meeting us deep in our sub-conscious, in moments of profound despair.

We live in the infinite. We look up into a vast incomprehensible dome of billions of stars that are billions of years old – knowing that even with our marvelous brains, we cannot comprehend the idea of a “billion.” We stand at the edge of oceans, whose depths we cannot truly fathom, which stretch beyond the farthest horizon to the point where endless sea touches endless sea. We stand beneath wild mountain ranges that pierce the skies while they dwarf our souls, shrinking us to feeble Lilliputians. And we peer down into deep caverns.

Time and space both seem infinite. But we are mortal and finite, blips in the endless stretches of the cosmos. To function in our world we need finite boundaries. To do that we must mark time and space. Boundaries enable us to orient ourselves; to navigate; to measure progress; to find meaning; to associate with ideas, with things, and with one another.

Because our lives, as we know them, are finite, we nail down special times – celebrations and commemorations – creating a grid that enables us to locate ourselves among the immensities and the eternities. How far are we from this boundary, that end, this precipice? Though we are each created unique, we are not alone. How close are we to this relative that neighbor this friend? We base our relationships on intuition, voice quality, senses, logic, and a bewildering network of criss-crossing communications. Our personal distinctiveness is replicable in every person. But it is the fences and separations that enable us to identify and associate with others. This grid, with its limits, its exclusivities, and its foci, enable us to navigate. We have set boundaries in time and space that become our directional signposts.

Sigmund Freud noted that “there is no innate grid of time and space in the unconsciousness; but as soon as we become

swerved? Where did he or she get lost? Shiva is a time for sharing information – to relate how our loved one managed to make a living and care for family or to hear stories of his early school years. What were her favorite movies, art style or music? What effect did he have on the lives of others? This is the stuff of earthly immortality; these are the fragments we mourn.

Instinctively, as we reconstruct the biography, we make judgments; and as we smile or cry over foibles and stories never before heard, we begin to form a picture of a real person. Comforters often exaggerate when they speak of the dead, as though hyperbole and false estimates were solace to mourners. Yet it is possible that we can re-evaluate some of our original impressions, separating truths from glorifications, fables, and exaltations. The opposite is also possible. We may realize areas in which we perhaps underestimated or misjudged the deceased – and we may now feel free to recant some of the offhand criticisms made during a lifetime of achievements.

Ma’ase avot siman le’banim. (The actions of parents are signs for their children.) On its face, this means that children replicate the behavior and destiny of their parents. But profound phrases yield layers of interpretation, and this aphorism takes on an additional meaning in mourning: that the actions of the parents can be signposts for children to use – or perhaps disagree with – so that some of the pain that befell their elders need not befall them.

Habitat Shiva is a “Heart of Many Rooms“

No two people mourn in the same way. There is a masculine way, a feminine way, a children’s way, a parent’s way, a grandparent’s way, a sibling’s way, and a host of ways for friends. Also, especially at death events, we express ourselves in a way that resonates from our unique psychological makeup. There is no one way that is the

and mementos, objects and odors – or the footprints of our activities, our life’s journey.

Shiva is the habitat in which we mourners confront those pieces of the past. We bump into the remnants of life, such as the clothes and pictures; we listen to the stories of others; we have set aside seven days to contemplate the past; we touch things from the past that have unique aromas and textures. We begin to embrace the soul of the deceased, read cherished and dog-eared books, discover treasures in the picture albums, and listen to friends reminisce. In doing so, we take an unconscious inventory of the life of the deceased and tally the results – opening subjects and shutting them, finding closure by setting some aside and enshrining others in memory.

The healing of our angst is facilitated not by allusion to abstract principles and sage advice or by pills and needles, but by small, specific actions – the piecemeal disengaging from each association, the handling of each item that belonged to the departed. This is a powerful and beneficial aspect of mourning in Habitat Shiva.

Tracking the Tread Marks of Life’s Journey

Just as we are surrounded by physical remnants of the past when we open closets, so we are soon surrounded by the deceased’s outlook on life. If we go beyond chitchat with comforters and draw them out, they can help us reconstruct the biography of a person we thought we knew well. Why did the one we mourn take a particular direction? What were the achievements, the loves, and the angers our loved one prized? It is exceedingly rare to find no skid marks in a person’s journey, to find that our loved one’s life was smooth and that he or she just cruised the years.

To track our beloved’s travels on life’s rough road, we can ask relatives and friends (who find comfort in helping): Where were the incidental stops and reverses, the sudden detours of the main road, and the times our loved one

conscious, we seek patterns in the continuum of time.” William James explained that when we look at wilderness, we discern patterns that are not embedded in nature; our minds instinctively impose such a grid on the natural world. In fact, military map-reading courses teach this early on: If a geometric structure is detected in the wild, it is evidence that human beings have intruded on nature. The need for patterns, shapes and boundaries is encoded in the human mind.

Not only do we need to measure time, we also need to invest it with meaning, purpose and will. That is why holy days, memorials, fast days and feasts, punctuate the calendars of all peoples – to commemorate historical events and to make sense of the morass of days. Professor Harvey Cox, author of *The Secular City*, called human beings “Homo festivus” for our built-in drive to mark significance through celebration. It is a spiritual counterpoint to our ever-present, ever changing secular landscape.

When we apply these ideas to mourning, we discover that shiva is not simply carved from the calendar to sharpen our focus on what we have lost. It also enables us as mourners to locate ourselves and orient ourselves in an environment distorted by the disappearance of a signpost. Shiva anchors us firmly in a nucleus of stability, calm and caring. Without the specific mourning periods – shiva, the thirty day sheloshim period, the year of saying Kaddish – we would be lost in a morass of days; and in the end, we would free-fall into Shakespeare’s “dark backward abysm of time.”

Mindfulness

To appreciate the Jewish tradition of mourning, we need to understand the subtlety of mindfulness. To focus on a single event at a precise moment, we set our “acute awareness.” We bring the event to the front of our minds, giving it our special attention. Other matters, peripheral to our immediate concern, reside in “latent awareness.” For instance, when we feed our children breakfast and get them ready to go off to school, we hold them in acute awareness. When they are

safely on the school bus, we may still retain them in acute awareness, but generally, when we focus on work and other concerns, we move them into our latent awareness.

Grieving is so powerful and so mind altering that it demands acute awareness. When, too soon, we resume our workaday lives and marginalize mourning to our latent awareness, we also marginalize our feelings of loss.

Judaism is keenly sensitive even to our unarticulated needs. Ears do not hear the cries of the soul. Mourners may be convinced that they can just go on living; their upbringing may convince them that they can handle anything that comes and maintain their composure – but one day mourning will face them in their acute awareness. It is human. Grieving refuses to remain latent; it tugs at the human mind, demanding attention, even if it takes a lifetime. Diversion does not dissolve this difficulty. In this and other subliminal ways, the seven-day space of shiva synchronizes with mindfulness.

Reorienting

The Rabbis held that while shiva may be observed in a home that is most comfortable for the mourners and their visitors, ideally it should be observed in the house of the deceased, with the family sitting together. Where a person has lived, say the Sages, the spirit of that person continues to dwell for some time:

It is, after all, in that home that one is surrounded by all the tangible remains of a person's lifework, and it is only right that evidence of his life should be evident during shiva. It is therefore permitted to travel even long distances after the funeral in order to accomplish this. This is true even if no one has lived but the deceased, and even if there are no mourners present; his spirit is there.

If this cannot be accomplished or is not suitable in present circumstances, the first alternative is to hold shiva in the

Healing Bit by Bit

The natural antidote to suffering piecemeal is healing piecemeal. The strategy of healing during shiva is not to reduce the severity of sadness but to confront the source of sadness: the death. By confronting the fact of death and our specific loss – frontally, shorn of the typical niceties of social life – we mourners ultimately find comfort through suffering. Only by exposing our wounds to the open air and the light of day can we achieve timely closure. We get to the other side of the life cycle not by going under or by going over, but by going through.

The life now extinguished is examined in these days of fresh mourning, fragment by fragment. Bumping into the odds and ends of memory is not an annoyance, not an aggravation of an already painful situation, but a necessary step in reorientation. This is plainly observable and good theory, too. Freud, in his classic essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” empathized and reemphasized that the “work” of grief is in fact the slow resolution of the bits of grief the mourner suffers – the meticulous process that must be performed piecemeal.

Rummaging in the Closets of Yesterday

Facing our grief acknowledges the value of certain practices, not directly taught by Jewish law but implicit in its style. During shiva, especially in the home of the deceased, mourners may examine the drawers and closets that hold the treasures and the trivia of the departed's life. Some find that it is too soon after death to do this. Some can never do it by themselves but ask others to dispose of everything. There is no mandate either way; griever should function on their own level of comfort in such matters.

We go through life leaving clues from room to room, whether what we do is noble or trivial, foolish or wise. The clues are always there if we look hard enough; they are either the inanimate evidence of physical left behinds – the letters

by religious fiat. Therefore, the final halakhic decision in a dispute over mourning practices follows the lenient position. Also, for example, in the laws of mourning, the principle inheres that “a partial day is equivalent to a full day.” This means that a full “day” of shiva is downsized to a partial day – an hour or two. That is why the first day of shiva, which begins directly after the cemetery service, is nonetheless considered a full day of mourning, even though only a few minutes of daylight may be left. That is why shiva ends early in the morning on the seventh day, and this, too, is considered a full day.

This concept allows mourners to expand or compress the seven-day period to fit their inner need. Because the law is flexible in dealing with the grieving heart, it wondrously facilitates mourners in adapting to a rearranged universe, especially mourners at the two extremes – those believing themselves strong enough to dispense with grief and those that are too weak to manage the rigors of the grief period. It can accommodate mourners who have conflicting emotions and behaviors, seeking both solitude and sharing with others at one and the same time.

Grief Breaks into a Thousand Pieces

We tend to view mourning as a single unwieldy burden, a heavy load that we struggle under and are sure will finally wear us down. We just want to unload the heaviness from our hearts. But grief is likely to be triggered more by small details than by a solitary emotional upheaval.

During shiva, we stumble over seemingly insignificant things that stop us cold: an article of clothing, a familiar gesture, a sensitive touch, a giggle, a tone of speech, an article of faith, a preposterous mispronunciation. These trifles unexpectedly detonate explosions of memories, forcefully transporting us back to roads we thought we had already trekked.

home of the family member recognized as the head of the family (*g'dol ha'bayit*), who stand in place of the deceased parent. This replicates a traditional family structure into which we can reinsert ourselves as we did in our youth, learning – in that environment – to be empowered to leave that haven and proceed courageously to the next step of life.

In some cases, mourners come to sit elsewhere with other family members, helping those beyond the immediate family rescript the future. On this level, the halakhah, Jewish law, provides boundaries, a space, to enable mourners to reorient themselves, even as we act out our disorientation.

During shiva mourners collide with clusters of the deceased's life: clothes, favorite pictures, furniture, hobbies, the accumulated stuff of life. In this collision, we are pressured to make an accurate measure of our distance from the departed, to locate our own life by reorganizing the very place we always met. In this way, we connect with reference points for reorientation, for learning where we are now and the direction we will be taking.

The deceased's soul is “present” in the deceased's home, hovering over the sadness and kindness. Jews of every kind, over a wide span of centuries, in a variety of Jewish communities, have found this idea comforting. In a contemporary sense, however, we can also see that the deceased's home – or the mourner's home – is the most natural place for us to reset our inner compass. Within the compressed experience of shiva, and within the invulnerable shield of our homes, we can recover our bearings and reformulate our lives. Call it “Habitat Shiva.”

Adjusting the Focus

There is yet another way of appreciating the many-sided brilliance of “Habitat Shiva.” It is illuminated by our understanding of people, such as mourners, in transition. The anthropologist Victor Turner calls the transitional stage

“liminality,” meaning “threshold” – as “subliminal” means “below the level of consciousness.”

Using Turner’s concept, the mourner is a liminal person, literally on the threshold between one phase of life and the next. For example, in ancient tribal custom and often in modern practice, a person in transition from puberty to adolescence is in a state of liminality – living neither in the past nor yet in the future – and he or she exhibits strange characteristics common to all beings in a state of transition. In many cultures, liminal people may wear no distinctive dress that might reveal class or social standing, may not speak at all, may have no conjugal relations, may be mandated into total inaction, may allow their hair and nails to grow, and may exhibit no concern for social etiquette. the syndrome of liminality is characteristic of people in deep a transitional stage.

As mourners observing shiva, we are demonstrating a similar state of transition. We are no longer individuals belonging to a special class - we tear the fabric of our clothing to testify to that. We do not shave, we allow hair and nails to grow, we are bidden to be unconcerned with the niceties of etiquette – to not say hello or good-bye, but to grunt instead. We are forsworn from conjugal relations, and our posture guarantees passivity – we “sit” shiva. It is as though we were caught in a long, dark serpentine hallway between two well lit rooms. Before we emerge, we must brush aside the externals and everyday routines so that we can focus our acute awareness on surviving this transition and reaching the future. In a liminal sense, this hallway is a birth canal, a passage between one world and the next.

In this intermediate “no place,” housed in the habitat for healing, mourners begin to acclimate to a future without the deceased and adjust their focus to the new environment they expect to find when finally they emerge from shiva.

Maneuvering for Stability

There are strange hidden remedies crouching shyly in the

Suddenly, from the moment we return from the internment, we are channeled. To the grid of normal religious acts are added a cluster of customs specifically designed to express bereavement. The anonymous medieval author of *Sefer ha’Chinuch* says that the human purpose of these observances is that as mourners we act out our grief – not merely by expressing it through persuasion or right thinking but also by performing symbols and acting out the mood of grief, thereby weaning ourselves away from anguish. We go from the undisciplined savagery of death to the highly disciplined laws of mourning, and that is how we orient ourselves and return to family and society.

The Elastic Soul of Mourners

The elegant ritual of shiva is ingeniously designed to embrace not only the despair of mourners but the emotional and rational contradictions that are endemic to bereavement as well: denial and acceptance; solitude and shared grieving; silence and talkativeness; crying out against fate yet justifying God; and swinging wildly from spiritual negation on the first day to slowly realized spiritual affirmation on the days and weeks that follow. Shiva is superbly flexible, elastic enough to accommodate the wide variety of passionate responses to death, and halakhically tolerant of conflicting emotions and ideas.

This appreciation of the sometimes volatile nature of mourning is expressed by the halakhah’s form code, which, in circumstances such as death, is intentionally made malleable. The rabbis, it could be said, were strict in enforcing the leniency of bereavement. The otherwise firm religious laws of living had to be tailored for the comfort of mourners. Life could not simply continue to be business as usual. When reality became taut, the Sages taught the wisdom of relaxing the strictures.

The Rabbis realized that a person’s fiery emotions, passions, and hysteria could not be rigidly bound by

mourning. In truth, it is liberating because being home enables us to go back into our selves, to surround ourselves with people with whom we have affinity; and, what is more, much more, in this Habitat Shiva that encloses the start of our new life we begin to receive intimate guidance on every detail of mourning observance, an ancient tradition. Mourners are often at a loss over what is proper and appropriate, but Jewish law and tradition provide a strong hand that limits and guides, bringing enormous comfort.

Essayist G. K. Chesterton illustrates this beautifully. Picture a plateau the size of a small house ten thousand feet above sea level. There are five children and a ball in this space. Where on this plateau are the children? They are huddles in the center, and the ball is not in play because the children are afraid that as they chase the ball they might fall off the mountaintop. Out of nowhere a helicopter lowers a fence that encircles the plateau. Where are the children now? Playing ball from one ledge to the other. The fence protects them from possible catastrophe.

Limitations keep us on a straight path, guide us, and require of us no effort. As Ralph Waldo Emerson observed, society's taboos are the guardrails on the bridge that spans the dangerous seas and prevent our drowning in our own excesses. So the mourners, limited to the confines of walls, family and friends, and constricted from the broad space of work and travel – the playing fields of society – are held firm, convalescing in familiar arms.

The second level is the “space switch” that we as mourners experience in the sudden change in the texture of religious observances from one day to the next. During the brief time between death and burial, all rituals are lifted from our shoulders. No prayers are required, no time-oriented, positive, religious practices need be observed, and even simple blessings are not permitted. We are encouraged to roam free over the day, possessed by our wild imaginings, suffused with gloom, and frenetic with the busyness of preparations.

shadows of Habitat Shiva that promote the healing of grief in curious ways. These remedies are implicit in the observances of shiva, though we may be unaware of them.

I was once trekking up the base of a mountain in Vail, Colorado, when I came upon a long creek and could not get around it. The water was frantic but shallow. I found a path of stones balanced on other stones by which to cross the creek. As I stepped on the stones, I found they were shaky and would tip from side to side. With every stone, I had to switch from one foot to the other, back and forth, until I found my equilibrium. I could never have maintained my balance standing still; I had to move in rapid tilts to get from one side to the other.

For me, this was a graphic illustration of how we must keep our balance in life as we cross troubled waters. While we need to hold our heads high, experience teaches that to restore our equilibrium and get through tumultuous days, we may need to tilt and adjust, tilt and adjust, until we get to firm ground. Jewish law uses this very paradigm for overcoming the tumult and disorientation of grief. Imperceptibly, it insinuated into the mourning process a surprising, even radical tilting of roles, of time, and of space.

Role Reversal

The medical breakthroughs of our age have altered the nature of dying, transforming it from catastrophic death to degenerative death. Lingering illness increasingly burdens relatives for longer periods of time – caring, worrying, calling, preparing, managing doctors and nurses, and transmitting daily bad news to other relatives. Even those mourners not directly involved in end-of-life matters carry the anticipation of this doomsday as a burden in their hearts for many months. At death, the busyness turns to frenzy, and survivors must make major decisions, arrange the funeral, notify family and friends, and deal with myriad details: with hospitals, mortuaries, synagogues and cemeteries.

Suddenly, the funeral and burial are over, the mourners

recede from the fresh grave. And, just as suddenly, the tables are turned – they become death’s victims and are at the center of concern, receiving all the compassion that until now was showered on the deceased. The transformation ritual is graphic and precise: Those at the gravesite form parallel rows leading out of the cemetery, and the mourners wend their way through the line, receiving the muttered greetings of consolation. Halakhah, Jewish law, made this specific moment a formal boundary in the burial ritual. Until the grave is covered and the internment is completed, every aspect, including the eulogy, must be directed to the deceased, the center of concern. But after the internment, everything undertaken must be supportive of the living.

The role of the survivors has dramatically reversed. The dying patient was the victim; now the mourners are the victims. The patient may have withdrawn gradually before death; now the mourners withdraw to the place of shiva. The patient may have been visited by the mourners; now the mourners are visited by others. The comforters become the comforted; the active turn passive; the ones who gave find themselves given to; those who fed the sick now find themselves being fed. In Biblical language, we go from *yekara d’shichva* to *yekara d’hayye* – shifting in a split second from “concern for the dead” to “concern for the living.”

This silent turnaround tilts mourners dramatically, forcing them to seek the equilibrium that will enable them to navigate through the turbulence and eventually stand again on firm ground.

Time Warp

Between death and burial, mourners experience compressed time – there is a breathless rush to do everything to perform burial the very same day, or the next. This time is compacted by no less than three biblical commands to avoid leaving the deceased unburied. The consequences of failure, according to

Torah, could turn into one of the most shameful moments of life, an infringement of the respect for the dead. Clearly, this is a time that is expected to be out of joint.

After burial, the velocity of mourning suddenly brakes. With purposeful suddenness, Judaism expands time and forces the clock to run slower. Shiva is slow paced, full of the listening, sitting, and chatting that requires much patience and much endurance. If the process of burial seemed fast, mourning seems too slow. Physically, we dispose of the dead in double time; psychologically we heal slowly. This time warp, built into Jewish mourning, allows grievers to heal at an emotionally healthy pace.

We are accustomed to the effect of jet lag on our internal clocks. It may both fatigue and energize in a crazy-quilt pattern. Similarly, mourning is a lag on our minds. Death is the cost of life; suffering the death of close friends and relatives is the cost of having them. At the moment of loss, everything seems out of joint, feelings seem unexplainable, weeping seems inopportune, and our internal clocks seem thrown into frenzy. We cannot, and should not, combat the strange surges of our emotions, nor do we gain much by trying to explain ourselves to others or to ourselves. Let grief run its course, as it must. It will win, and – if we let it do so – we will win.

Space Switch

For mourners, space, like time, also changes. It may be altered on two levels.

The first is physical. In the case of prolonged illness, there is the dramatic switch from the broad landscape of hospital and cemetery to the narrow confines of a private home. As soon as the parallel lines are formed by family and friends leading mourners away from the grave to the house of shiva, diffused space becomes organized space. We are warmly tucked into home with those dear to us. On the surface this narrowing would seem to be a limiting factor, restricting our