

Fixing Shiva

Rabbi Eliyahu Fink | finkorswim.com | March 5, 2014

About six weeks ago, I had the unfortunate experience of being intimately involved in a unique shiva. A member of our community suddenly lost a 4 month old grandson. The father of the child is a friend and peer of mine. Shiva was observed in our neighborhood as opposed to the home of the parents sitting shiva. All of these factors made the entire ordeal quite difficult and horrific but also provided a learning experience for me and an interesting study of human nature and character.

It was only a few days after the shiva that I received an email from a reader who was disenchanted with the shiva process. He had several complaints that rang true in the immediate wake of the recently completed shiva I had seen first hand.

I believe that people want to do the right thing when they go to shiva. They just don't really know what they should be doing at shiva. Mourners are going to be sensitive and mistakes are going to hurt them more than typical faux pas. Some of these faux pas were gloriously lampooned in this great video: [Shtick Yeshivish People Say At Shivas](#) I had a lot of time to think about shiva and people's needs during this time. Here are some of the ideas that have been swirling around my head.

When I was 15, a very close friend lost his sister. Over the next few years we talked a lot about death, his feelings, and dealing with it all. I'll never forget what he told me about what he considered the most meaningful and comfortable shiva visit. As 10th graders at Ner Israel, we were deathly afraid of our *Menahel*, Rabbi Yosef Tendler. He was the law and we were not the most law abiding of students. The way we felt about Rabbi Tendler reflected his reputation. He was tough, blunt, and scary. Rabbi Tendler came to the first day of shiva and my friend was not really in the mood to see a scary rabbi while he was mired in his own pain. Rabbi Tendler walked over to my friend so my friend rose from his seat out of respect. Rabbi Tendler moved closer and embraced my friend. They just stood there for a few minutes, wrapped in a warm hug. He didn't say a word. They just hugged. My friend started to cry and they hugged some more. Eventually, the embrace ended. Rabbi Tendler sat down and just listened to the mourners for a while. My friend does not recall Rabbi Tendler saying a single word. Years later, my friend related to me that Rabbi Tendler paid him the most comforting shiva visit of anyone. (Knowing Rabbi Tendler the way I do now, this was to be expected.)

This is really the key to shiva. Whether it is a figurative or literal hug, shiva visits are an opportunity for embrace. That's really what our role is in these moments.

Embrace means more than just what we should do, it also informs us about what we should not do.

People have a tendency to want to fix things. Problems bother us. Disunity and ambiguity make us uncomfortable. When people die, especially people who die under non-ordinary circumstances, it makes us uncomfortable.

Rabbi Tandler also used to say that when someone dies, people have a tendency to ask “was he sick?” as if that makes it all better. We have a need to come to terms with things in our own way. We don’t like just letting things be what they are, that is, confusing.

People want the mourners to tell the story of the deceased. They want to know how they died. They want to know the circumstances. They want to feel better about the confusing parts of existence. If they have an answer it makes them feel better.

But we don’t go to shiva to feel better. That would be a mistake. We go to shiva to comfort our brothers and sisters who are in pain. Alleviating your personal curiosity does not help the mourner one bit. That’s not an embrace. It’s closer to the treacherous embrace of Laban as described by the Midrash. Laban hugged and kissed Jacob to see if Jacob was carrying jewelry. That’s what it’s like when probe for details about the life or death of the deceased.

Sometimes visitors will even get into debates with the mourners. Whether it's philosophy, arguments about facts, questions about medical treatment administered to the deceased. or just side things that are really irrelevant. Shiva is not a time for intellectualism or debate. It's a time for emotion. It is a time for embrace. Shiva is a time for unconditional love. Discussions and Socratic questioning do not have a place at a shiva home. Practice listening. That's what mourners need. They don't need your personal opinions on anything. If they want your opinion, they will ask for it.

I've seen many people come to a shiva house and try to fix the mourners. They try to make the mourner feel better. They are being genuine. They try to tell a story or vort that will put everything in perspective and make sense out of it all. They imagine that the mourner will be comforted by their efforts. They think that they know what the mourner needs to hear in order to make their pain go away. It takes a special kind of self-confidence with a dash of narcissism to think that your pithy thought will fix everything.

This is not an embrace. This is fixing things. We can't fix it. Don't try.

Making matters worse is that the mourner does not actually want to be fixed. We have a misconception about the pain of mourning. We think it's best for the mourner to avoid the pain. We think that is the right path for them. It's true, the mourner is in pain. But the mourner needs to experience that pain. Shiva is their opportunity to be mired in the struggle

of dealing with mortality. When we try to fix it, we are really telling them that they should not be experiencing that pain. We are telling them that they need to be fixed. They do not need to be fixed. They need to be embraced. They need to be acknowledged. What we really say when we try to fix them, is that their feelings of pain are misplaced. They hear us saying that their pain is not important. They hear us not acknowledging their feelings. That's cold and more importantly, wrong.

The unspoken truth of these ideas is that mourners need one thing: Empathy. It's not easy to be empathetic. It's especially difficult when our own hearts are torn into pieces by devastating news. It gets even harder when we see the people we care about in such visceral pain. But that is the job of a shiva visitor. Put everything on hold and practice a few minutes, or more, of pure empathy.

Attempt to feel the pain of your friend. See if you can hear what they are saying. Elicit their feelings instead of facts. Show that you are genuinely concerned about them. Acknowledge their pain. Be liberal with hugs and expressions of love. That is what shiva is supposed to be about. An outpouring of love and support. It is not your chance to play armchair therapist to fix the mourner or amateur journalist to elicit all the facts and figures surrounding the death. Provide unbridled love and support. Be a listener. Be empathetic. Be what they need you to be. You might even find that this is helpful in other areas of your life.

I think shiva has great potential to help mourners. It also has great opportunities for us to practice empathy and love. We need to calibrate ourselves to meet these challenges. If make our shiva visits mindful of these ideas, I think we have a better chance of emerging from these tragedies and difficult times better than we were when we entered them.