



# THE STAGES OF JEWISH MOURNING: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

By Lori Palatnik

## How to cope with the emotional and spiritual issues a person faces at this difficult time.

Judaism provides a beautiful, structured approach to mourning that involves three stages. When followed carefully, these stages guide mourners through the tragic loss and pain and gradually ease them back into the world. One mourner said her journey through the stages of mourning was like being in a cocoon. At first she felt numb and not perceptively alive, yet gradually she emerged as a butterfly ready again to fly.

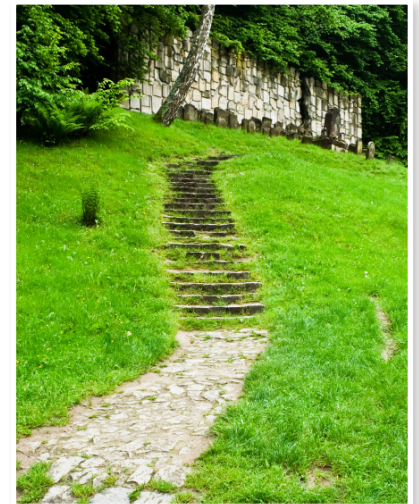
The loss is forever, but the psychological, emotional, and spiritual healing that takes place at every stage is necessary and healthy.

## STAGE ONE: SHIVA

After the burial, the immediate mourners return to a home called the “shiva house,” to begin a seven-day period of intense mourning. Shiva is from the word *sheva*, which means seven. This week is called “sitting shiva,” and is an emotionally and spiritually healing time where the mourners gather together, and friends and loved ones come to comfort them with short visits referred to as “shiva calls.”

A person sits shiva after having lost a parent, spouse, sibling, or child. All other loved ones are also mourned, but the observances of shiva do not apply.

Ideally all of the direct mourners sit shiva in the house of the deceased, for it says, “Where a person lived, there does his spirit continue to dwell.” Thus the presence of the person who has passed away is strongest in his own home. But one may sit shiva in any home. Particularly, a home of one of the direct mourners will be filled with the spirit of the loved one who is now gone. Memories will come easily there, and part of the comfort of the week of shiva is sharing such memories.



It is best for mourners to move into the shiva house together for the week. If this is not possible, designate one home as the shiva house, and those who cannot sleep there may leave after dark to go home, and return to the shiva house early in the morning.

Mourners should ideally not leave the shiva house at any time. Others must take care of any errands or outside commitments for them. To be seen during the day in public would force one to put on a “public face” which is inappropriate during this time. When family, friends and neighbors help out during the week and provide for the needs of the mourners, an atmosphere of love, caring and kindness is created. This helps to soften the pain that the mourner so deeply feels.

With some exceptions, a mourner refrains from going to work during the week of shiva. Consult your rabbi if pressing financial matters are at hand. Again, shiva is a deeply personal time of reflection, coming to terms with loss and grief, and contemplating the inner spiritual dimensions of life. The workplace draws our thoughts and feelings outward, thus if at all possible, should be avoided.

## SITTING SHIVA

From the time of death until the conclusion of the funeral, the primary focus and concern is on the care of the deceased and the burial preparations. The care for the departed before burial, the eulogy, the actual burial – all are done to honor the one who has died, and not to comfort the mourners.

However, once shiva begins, the focus shifts to the mourners. The mourners experience a week of intense grief, and the community is there to love and comfort and provide for their needs. This is a critical point, for if one must feel the heart-wrenching pain of grief and loss, it should be done at a time when all those around are there to help and comfort.

The laws of mourning have the purpose of focusing a person on their own spirituality. We experience an overall feeling of physical discomfort as we totally focus on the soul of the one who has departed. We de-emphasize our own physicality by not pampering our bodies, so we remember that what we are missing at this time is not the physical person who is gone, but the essence of who that person was, which of course is their soul.

The overall focus throughout the week is: I am a soul, my loved one is a soul.

## ARRANGING THE SHIVA HOUSE

The physical set-up of the shiva house includes the following:

**MEMORIAL CANDLE** – A person’s soul is compared to a flame, since each person brings light into the world. And just as one can take from a flame to light more candles without diminishing the original flame, so too a person can give of him/herself, touching many lives, without ever being diminished.

The wick and the flame are also compared to the body and soul, and the strong bond between them. And just as a soul always strives upward for what is good and right, so too a flame burns toward the heavens.

Thus a memorial candle is lit in the shiva house and remains burning publicly 24 hours a day throughout the entire week. When you look at the candle, remember that your loved one’s soul is eternal. This thought can help bring light into the darkness in which you are now immersed.

**CHAIRS** – The people sitting shiva are required to sit low as a sign of mourning. Funeral homes often provide chairs with shortened legs for this purpose. One can also remove the cushions of a couch or chair and use that. Some have the custom of actually sitting on the floor. This is a physical symbol of the loneliness and depression that a mourner feels.

Regular chairs should be placed in front of the mourner, so visitors paying a shiva call can sit close and provide emotional comfort. (see “Paying a Shiva Call” below). (hyperlink to anchor below)

**MIRRORS** – It is proper to cover the mirrors (with sheets, or fogged spray provided by the funeral home) in the shiva house for the following reasons:

During shiva, a mourner is striving to ignore his/her own physicality and vanity in order to concentrate on the reality of being a soul.

A mirror represents social acceptance through the enhancement of one’s appearance. Jewish mourning is supposed to be lonely, silent; dwelling on one’s personal loss. Covering the mirrors symbolizes this withdrawal from society’s gaze.

Prayer services, commonly held in the shiva house, cannot take place in front of a mirror. When we pray, we focus on God and not on ourselves.



Physical relations between a husband and wife are suspended during the week of shiva, and thus the need for physical beauty is removed.

**SHOES** – A mourner should wear either stocking feet or slippers not made of leather. This symbolizes, again, the disregard for vanity and physical comfort.

**One who is mourning should also refrain from the following:**

- Bathing or showering for pleasure (one can do so for cleanliness)
- Wearing make-up and anointing (with creams, perfume, etc.)
- Getting a haircut (applies for the first 30 days)
- Nail trimming
- Wearing freshly-laundered garments for pleasure (can be worn for cleanliness)
- Wearing new clothes
- Washing clothes

## AFTER THE CEMETERY

Immediately upon returning from the cemetery after the burial, and before entering the shiva house, the mourners and anyone else who attended the burial perform a ceremonial washing of the hands (using washing stations provided by the funeral home, or buckets and a cup).

When one has come in contact with death, it is proper to pour water three times over each hand (alternating hands each time) in order to focus on life. Water is the source of all life, and thus we pour it over our hands as a physical act that has spiritual ramifications.

The first thing the mourners do upon entering the shiva house is to sit down to a “meal of condolence.” This meal should be provided by neighbors or the community, in order to show the mourners that those around them wish to provide consolation.

Another deeper psychological reason lies behind this gesture, for it recognizes that mourners, having just returned from the heavy trauma of the burial, may harbor a death wish for themselves and not want to go on any more without their loved one. The meal they must eat speaks to that part of them and says, “No, you must go on. You must affirm life and live.”

**This first meal is eaten silently, and includes the following:**

Bread – considered the sustenance of life

Hard-boiled eggs – a food that is round, like the cycle of life

Cooked vegetables and/or lentils (lentils are round)

Coffee/tea

All other meals during the shiva should ideally be prepared or sent by others. The mourner always eats sitting low.



## TIMING OF SHIVA

The seven-day period of mourning begins immediately after the burial. Thus, the first day of the shiva is the day of the burial. If the funeral was on a Tuesday, the last day of shiva is the following Monday. If a Jewish holiday (for example, Rosh Hashana) falls during the seven days, shiva ends the afternoon just prior to the holiday. In such a

case, it is considered that you mourned for seven days, even though it was cut short.

If a person passes away during a holiday, the burial and shiva are done when the holiday is complete. If one passes away on Shabbat, the burial is done the next day.

When Shabbat falls during the shiva, it is counted as one of the seven days of mourning, but one does not mourn publicly. This means that the outer signs of mourning (covering mirrors where others can see, sitting low, wearing no make-up, wearing mourner's garments, etc.) are suspended, because the joy of Shabbat overrides even public mourning. The outer signs of mourning are suspended before the beginning of Shabbat so that a person has time to properly prepare (shower, dress, etc.). On Shabbat, people sitting shiva mourn in their hearts. On Saturday night, the shiva resumes.

## PRAYER SERVICES

Prayer services are held in the shiva house, not in the synagogue. One reason is to insure that for the week of shiva, the mourners do not have to leave the home where they are best able to fully experience the mourning process. They do not have to dress up to go out, or put on a public face for anyone. The services come to them.



It is certainly appropriate and poignant to have services in the home itself, for the center of Jewish life is the home. This is the place where Jewish values are passed down. This is where family celebrations take place and where joys are shared. It is also where pain and loss are shared. It is where Judaism lives.

Traditional services are usually held in the morning (Shacharit) and in the late afternoon (Mincha) and evening (Maariv). Between the Mincha and Maariv services, it is appropriate for someone to share some thoughts from the Torah, in memory of the departed. It is good to pay a shiva call during these times, because a quorum of people is needed to conduct the service and for the mourners to recite Kaddish.

## PAYING A SHIVA CALL

When one pays a shiva call, the focus is on comforting the mourners in their time of greatest grief. Traditionally, one enters the shiva house quietly with a small knock so as not to startle those inside. No one needs to greet visitors; they simply enter on their own.

Food or drinks are not laid out for the visitors, because the mourners are not hosts. They do not greet the visitors, rise for them, or see them out.

When entering the house, you should not greet the mourners. In fact, it is best to come in silently and sit down close to them. Take your cue from the mourners. If they feel like speaking, let them indicate it by speaking first. Let them lead and talk about what they want to talk about. It is best to speak about the one who has passed away, and if you have any stories or memories to share with the mourner, this is the time to do so.

This is not a time to distract them from mourning. Out of nervousness, we often make small talk because we do not know what to say. Don't fill in the time talking about happy subjects or inconsequential topics like politics or business.

Often, the best thing to say is nothing. A shiva call can sometimes be completely silent. If the mourner does not feel like talking at that time, so be it. Your goal is not to get them to talk; it is to comfort them. Your presence alone is doing that. By sitting there silently, you are saying more than words can. You are saying: "I am here for you. I feel your pain. There are no words."

And sometimes there aren't any. Here are examples of things *not* to say:

- "How are you?" (They're not so good.)
- "I know how you feel." (No you don't. Each person feels a unique loss.)
- "At least she lived a long life." (Longer would have been better.)
- "It's good that you have other children," or, "Don't worry, you'll have more." (The loss of a child, no matter what age, is completely devastating.)
- "Cheer up – in a few months you'll meet someone new." (He/she has just lost the other half of their soul!)
- "Let's talk about happy things." (Maybe later.)

Remember that speaking about the loved one they lost is comforting. It's alright if they cry; they are in mourning. It is all part of the important process of coming to grips with such a loss.

You should not overstay your visit. Twenty minutes will suffice. When other visitors arrive and space is a concern, it is certainly time to leave.

Before leaving, one stands up, approaches the mourner and recites, "*HaMakom yenacheim etchem betoch sha'ar aveiliei Tzion v'Yerushalayim*" – May the Almighty comfort you among those who mourn for Zion and Jerusalem. One can read this phrase from a sheet of paper.

In this statement God is referred to as *HaMakom* – "The Place." By saying this to the mourner, you are saying that God is everywhere, that we exist within Him – here and in the next world. The person who is gone is still connected to you, for you are together, contained within "The Place."

"Among the other mourners" speaks about the Jewish people. You are saying that we are family. Some people are close and some are distant cousins, but the loss of even one Jew makes us all mourners.

"Of Zion and Jerusalem" speaks of our collective mourning over the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the central point of the Jewish relationship to God that was destroyed by the Romans 2,000 years ago.

The mourner should nod or say "Amen," and you should quietly depart, making sure that the mourner does not get up to see you out.

Upon leaving the house of the mourner, it is customary to give charity in memory of the one who passed away, may his soul be elevated.



## GETTING UP FROM SHIVA

The seventh and final day of shiva is observed for only a few short hours, although this counts as a whole day. After the last Shacharit service, the mourners sit low again for a short time. Then those who have come to comfort the mourners say to them, "Arise." The comforters then say:

*No more will your sun set, nor your moon be darkened, for God will be an eternal light for you, and your days of mourning shall end. (Isaiah 60:20)*

*Like a man whose mother consoles him, so shall I console you, and you shall be consoled in Jerusalem. (Isaiah 66:13)*

The mourners acknowledge that the shiva is over by leaving the shiva house publicly for the first time, taking a short walk around the block with those who have come to comfort them.

The house that the mourners live in for the week of shiva becomes a house of mourning. It takes on an ambience of solemnity, filled with memory, contemplation, and meditation. But it is a house where people will continue to dwell. The concrete act of physically stepping outside, walking around the block, and coming back in, says that this house and our relationship with this house will now be renewed.

## STAGE TWO: SHLOSHIM

The first 30 days following the burial (which include the shiva) are called *shloshim*, from the word meaning “thirty.”

Most restrictions that applied to mourners during the seven-day shiva period are now lifted. For the next 23 days, mourners are allowed to leave their house and begin to work again. However, they should severely limit social engagements during this time, and certainly avoid festive outings where music is played. Mourners do not shave or cut their hair during this time.

One is still mourning, but during *shloshim* the laws allow for a gradual re-entry into everyday life. For mourners to get up from the shiva and jump back into a normal routine would not be healthy. They are still mourning, even though the intense pain has now become almost bearable. Moments of deep sadness and longing are to be expected, and having these few restrictions reminds them, and reminds the people around them, that this is a process that certainly isn't over.

After the completion of the *shloshim*, if mourners are mourning anyone but a parent, the official mourning now ends. That means Kaddish is no longer recited and they can resume activities without restriction.

Why 30 days? The Jewish calendar is marked by lunar time. As the moon waxes and wanes in a cycle, the 30-day period of mourning is an opportunity to emotionally come full circle. The process begins with the funeral and first days of shiva, when not even a glimmer of light is seen. As time goes on, the light slowly comes back, fuller and fuller. The 30 days is an important central cycle of time, a time to renew and to come to grips with a new reality.

Of course mourners still feel the pain of the loss, but Judaism recognizes that to a certain degree, the passage of time is able to ease and heal the pain. Being able to return to everyday life freely helps achieve this healing. The shiva was the worst period, the *shloshim* was very hard, and this stage is bad. In time, it will get better.

## STAGE THREE: THE ONE-YEAR PERIOD

During the 12-month period from the day of death (which includes the shiva and *shloshim*), only one who has lost a parent is still considered a mourner after the first 30 days with the restrictions discussed below. Why this extra stage of mourning only for a parent?

Psychologically and spiritually, our connection to our parents is the essential relationship that defines who we are as people. Therefore, the loss of a parent requires a longer period of adjustment.

This period of time guides us into a deep state of gratitude for all they gave and all they did. As children, we spend most of our lives in “taking mode,” and our parents, being parents, are almost constantly in “giving mode.” It is hard to say thank you from a taking perspective (that is why it's hard for our children to say thank you). In a relationship where it is the most difficult to show gratitude, this period of time helps us focus on recognizing the good that our parents desperately tried to give in the best way that they could.

Parents also represent values and ideals. They are God's representatives to us in this world. They try to impart in their own way essential tools for living. This extended period of mourning recognizes that the loss of such a relationship has deep spiritual ramifications.

After the *shloshim* period, life slowly begins to return to normal. Social engagements are allowed, but the pursuit of entertainment and amusement, especially where music is involved, is curtailed. One is allowed to actively engage in business activities. After the year is complete, one is not considered a mourner.

## ANNUAL REMEMBRANCES: YIZKOR



Yizkor means "remembrance" and is marked with a special service held in the synagogue on significant holidays:

- Yom Kippur
- The last day of Passover
- The last day of Shavuot
- The eighth day of Sukkot (Shmini Atzeret)

We stop on these major holidays to remember, because the holidays are expressions of the Jewish nation celebrating together. We realize that we are only here as Jews because of those who came before us, who made the decision to be Jews sometimes against all odds. The connection to generations past and loved ones gone is made at Yizkor.

In some synagogues, before the private Yizkor prayers, the congregation as a whole recites Yizkor for those who perished in the Holocaust, and for the soldiers who gave their lives for the State of Israel.

On the afternoon before these days, when ushering in the holiday, one should light a yartzeit candle at home in memory of the loved one. These candles burn continuously for approximately 24 hours, and are available at any supermarket or Jewish bookstore.

On the day of Yizkor, one should attend services in the morning. Midway through the service, those who have never been mourners will be asked to leave the sanctuary, while those who have sat shiva in the past will remain. Often someone will speak briefly, and then all recite prayers in personal tribute to their loved ones.

We pray that in return for our devotion and generosity, God should recognize the new source of merit for the soul whose memory is now influencing our conduct.

After the holiday is complete, be sure to give tzedakah, a charitable donation, in your loved one's memory.

## YARTZEIT

Each year on the Jewish anniversary of the death of a loved one, a proper commemoration should take place. If you are not sure of the Jewish date, contact a synagogue, yeshiva or funeral home and they will surely help you. Some people are careful to do the following:

Light a yartzeit candle at home the night before, because the Jewish day begins in the evening.

Give tzedakah in your loved one's memory.

Learn Torah that day. Read from a book about Judaism or Torah ideas, or arrange to learn with someone from the community.

Recite Kaddish. If you cannot, arrange for someone to recite it on your behalf. Call a local synagogue or yeshiva for help.

Sponsor a kiddush in synagogue on that day, or on the Shabbat that falls at the end of that week.

Fast from sunrise to sunset.

It is significant to note that in Judaism we downplay birthdays, never commemorating the date of birth of one who has passed away, yet we are careful to mark the anniversary of someone's death.

The Talmud compares this to a ship. How odd that we hold a big party when the ship is about to sail, yet when it arrives at its destination, nothing is done. It really should be the other way around.

Although the day of birth holds all the potential for the life that will be, the day of death is the marker of who we actually became. Our worth is measured according to how much of our potential was realized. Did we live up to who we were to the best of our ability in the time that we had?

When our loved ones die and go back to God, to their "port of call," we mourn not having them here with us, yet we remember what they were able to accomplish in this life. The yartzeit's annual commemoration is a time to feel the sadness – but also to celebrate who they were and the life they lived.

## UNVEILING OF TOMBSTONE

The erecting of a tombstone gives honor to the body that housed the soul. No tombstone is placed at the time of burial. Rather, it is the Jewish custom to erect the stone at a later date. Some do it right after the shiva, while others wait until sometime within the year.

Recently the ceremony – called *Hakamat Matzeivah* (raising up the stone) – has been referred to as an "unveiling." Those close to the family are invited to the gravesite where the mourners unveil the stone covered by a cloth.

The ceremony is usually short. Psalms are recited, and people often share thoughts about the deceased. Some of the following ideas could be shared at an unveiling ceremony.

The Hebrew word for stone is *tzur*. This word is also used to refer to God. At this time, we remind ourselves that God is our rock, our strength, and support. He is our one constant, always there to comfort us at our darkest times.

A stone is also symbolic of eternity, like the cornerstone of a building, placed to last for all time. And what is eternal about our loved ones? It is their lasting qualities that we can still rely upon. Our loved ones live on because they affected us on the deepest of levels. We erect stones and remember what they erected in their lifetimes – their deeds, their character. They will never be forgotten.

A person is created in the image of God. This is not a physical image, but an image that is internal and ultimately eternal: a person's soul.

## VISITING THE CEMETERY

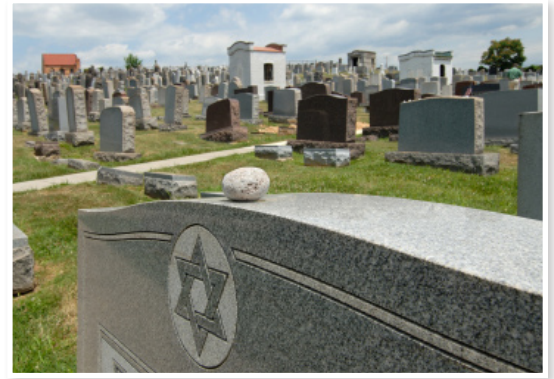
Although a person can visit the cemetery any time after the stone is erected, there are special days for visiting the grave:

- On the seventh day, after ending the restrictions of shiva
- On the *shloshim*, the 30th day of mourning
- On the completion of the first 12 months of mourning
- On the yartzeit, the anniversary of the death, every year
- The day before Rosh Hashana
- The day before Yom Kippur



Why these days? These are naturally reflective times when a person is focused on what is really important in life. Visiting the grave of a loved one opens us up and makes us realize that we need help in many aspects of life. We pray to God at these times and ask our loved one to be an advocate on our behalf.

The Jewish custom is not to bring flowers to the graves, but instead to place a simple stone on the gravestone itself. Rather than spend money on flowers – which do nothing for a loved one – it is better to give money in the person’s memory to tzedakah, which helps to elevate the person’s soul.



We place a small stone upon the gravestone as a sign that we were there – not so the person who passed away will know, for their soul already has awareness. But so that we will know. We, who are physical, need physical acts to express the reality that we are indeed there. The stone is the “calling card” of the visitor. Flowers die, but the small, simple stone, a symbol of eternity, represents our eternal devotion to upholding the memory of our beloved. Our connection lives on and will never die.

We give honor to the body with a proper funeral, only as recognition that the body had sanctity because it housed and served the soul. In the same way, the casket should be plain and simple, with the money allocated instead to spiritual things that will affect the person’s soul.

## GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT

The process of mourning is not easy, and the Jewish way provides a structure to let mourners feel their aloneness, separating them from the outside world and then gradually reinstating them back into society.

When people are in a state of grief, they physically feel a vacuum within them. This is the most painful state, because the essential drive of every person is the drive for fullness and completion.

The different stages of mourning allow us to come to grips with the loss. Eventually we realize that the empty hole is not nearly as deep or as vast as we initially felt.

Time does heal. But not because we are busy and the memories fade. With time comes objectivity. We realize that the person we are now is the result of the loved one we lost. The elements of our character, actions and values all result from this special soul and the experience of loss.

The body, being finite, does die. Yet the soul, the essence of our loved one, is eternal. The connection between us lives on. This reality begins to slowly fill the vacuum, but not completely. We can never fully grasp the eternity of the soul. There will always be that space inside. We are human beings who are limited in our capacity to truly understand the ways of God and the afterlife.

May the Almighty comfort all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

*Excerpted from Remember My Soul, by Lori Palatnik*