



In Our Hearts Project

פרויקט בליבנו

Supporting Jewish families and  
community after child loss

# A Guide to Supporting Bereaved Families During Shiva & Beyond After the Loss of a Child



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The Jewish way of life is rich with many beautiful and meaningful traditions. Making a shiva call, which means visiting the house of a mourning family, has been practiced by the Jewish community for thousands of years. Making a shiva call is an expression of love and support to the mourner, albeit a sad and sometimes difficult experience for you. It is most important to remember that the purpose of the shiva visit is for you to give comfort, love and support to the mourners.

The loss of a child is an extremely unnatural life cycle occurrence. The loss is devastating for the nuclear family, causing immense pain and shattering the world they knew. Making a shiva call to this house of mourning can be intimidating and challenging. However, it is one of the most important things that you can do for the bereaved family.

## This Guidebook

The goal of this guidebook is to help direct you - the family, friends and community of the mourners - to make a nurturing, loving shiva call. While we all have an innate need to say something to take away the pain of the bereaved family, in reality that is impossible. Your role is to support the reality of their pain and remind them that they are not alone.

The advice offered in this guide is based on the personal experiences of individuals who themselves have lost a child. They share practical suggestions from their own shiva experiences of what is most comforting and *what should and should not be discussed*.

Grief affects everyone differently. We welcome comments and suggestions from the experiences of others that would enhance this informational guide.



## Visiting A Family that Has Lost a Child

**Please come.** Don't be intimidated that you don't know the family well, or that you don't know what to say. Your attendance at shiva is a warm expression of support and love from you individually and from the community as a whole. It can provide some comfort. Even if the shiva house is very crowded, the mourners feel and appreciate your presence. *Your attendance at the shiva is an act of respect to the deceased child, and love and support for their family.*

If you are a close friend, please go often: **just be there.** Even if the mourners don't interact with you every time you come, they know you are there, and your presence is a source of support and strength. One bereaved family described how every evening their closest friends came and sat in the back row at the shiva house. They described what a comfort it was to look up every night and see the love and support in the friendly faces.

### Don't Say... Do Say...

**Don't** claim to understand or have the answers as to why this tragedy befell our child.

**Do** share anything personal you can remember about our child. Hearing stories about him/her and your experiences with him/her is a meaningful source of comfort to us, the mourners. You might have a memory that we don't have. Sharing personal memories of the deceased is extremely meaningful. Writing down those memories either by email or just in a note that you leave at shiva would be a much appreciated gesture.

**Don't** tell us you know how we feel because you recently lost an elderly parent. We understand that losing a parent is a very difficult loss - albeit a natural loss. Losing a child is not part of the natural life cycle, making it impossible to equate the two losses.

**Do** cry with us. Any genuine emotions are a great comfort. Please give us compassion, not pity.

**Don't** offer cliches such as "time will heal," or "G-d only gives you what you can handle," or "he's in a better place," etc. These comments are not comforting to us, the mourners. Using those cliches sounds like you are trying to "make sense of the tragedy" or "make it better." There is nothing that can make the reality better for those who have lost a child. Trying to make it better feels like you are minimizing our loss. *Any sentence that begins with the words "at least" should be avoided.*



**Do** understand there are no answers, rationalizations, or understanding when a child has died. But as family, friends, and community, you can support us unconditionally. Come to the shiva house, make sure we have a minyan, feed us, hug us, and cry with us.

**Don't** tell us "things will never be the same." Deep down we know that and we are scared.

**Do** listen when we speak and if someone says, "things will never be the same," empathize with us, cry with us, hug us.

**Don't** ask questions such as "What happened?" or try to fill in the gaps of information you have regarding our tragedy. It might not be what we want to talk about.

**Do** follow our lead. Listen and contribute to the conversation that we have started. **If there is silence, that is ok.** We are taking comfort and strength from your presence.

**Don't** offer to share pictures, videos, drawings, etc. about our child if you're not going to follow up. One person said they would share details with us about what our child liked to read in school, but never did. We always wondered if there were one more piece of our child that we could have connected to if they had followed up.

**Do** share stories and anecdotes about our child. Feel free to bring pictures and any other items that would connect us to our child.

**Don't** plan memorial projects without us. During shiva we are mourning the loss of our child. We are still processing our new reality. It will take time for us to be able to think clearly.

**Do** understand that gathering the community to share zedaka/charity in our child's memory is a beautiful thing to do. If you want to organize a fundraising event while we are still processing our new reality, please consider using an existing non profit such as your shul, and earmark it for something that will be discussed with the family in the future when we are ready. Please remember that the family needs to be part of the decision, and that shiva is not the time for this discussion.

## If You are a Parent Who Has Lost a Child

If you are a parent who has lost a child, if you are feeling comfortable, please let us know that you have also experienced this same kind of loss. One of the painful emotions after loss is the lonely feeling of being singled out with this tragedy. Knowing that others have endured this same pain can help us. Meeting others that have experienced similar suffering and have found the resilience to carry on is a source of strength for us.



## Beyond the Days of Shiva

In the days, months, and years following the loss of a child, the bereaved are left to adjust to their new reality. *The pain never goes away.* The bereaved family must learn how to live their lives with the pain. The worst thing you can say to a bereaved parent is "it's been many years - it's time to let go and move on," or "haven't you gotten over it already?"

We, the family, never "move on." We move forward with a huge hole in our hearts. Continuing to be sensitive and nurturing to a bereaved family *is crucial no matter how many years have passed since their beloved child died.*

## Helpful Things to Do Beyond Shiva

Shiva has ended, but the mourning family is still in a fog, trying to make sense of their tragedy while negotiating their new life. It is extremely important for family and friends to continue to support the family both physically and emotionally. The physical and emotional needs of families will vary, but all benefit from a caring, loving community. Families with younger children may need help with carpools, homework, arranging playdates for their children, keeping the household functioning, etc.

Families with older children may need family and close friends to check in, not only with the parents but with the siblings as well. They too have to adjust to a new reality.

All families benefit from help with daily household chores and errands, such as stocking the refrigerator and freezer, and making sure meals continue to arrive after shiva. Several families were deeply appreciative of a family friend who paid their bills and balanced their checkbook for the first three months after their loss. One mother said her friends made sure she was never alone for the first month and a half. Another mother reported, "I could only eat bagels during and many months after shiva. I had friends who brought fresh bagels to my house on a daily basis. Even after shiva had ended, the simple task of preparing a meal was very daunting." Please feel free to bring meals after shiva.

Talk about the child beyond the shiva while referring to the child by his/her name. If the family initiates a project in memory of their child, this is an ideal time to express your love and support by participating.

**Mark the date of the yahrzeit and birthday of the child on your calendar.**

Send a note to the family to let them know you are thinking of them on these particularly difficult days.



## The Grandparents' Pain

When a grandparent loses a grandchild, they are in a very difficult place. They have lost a dear and precious grandchild, and are deeply mourning, but they are not sitting shiva themselves. They are also suffering watching their own children so deep in pain over the loss of their child. If you are a friend of the grandparent, please visit them and be present for them. Take care of them, cry with them, hug them, and help them help the bereaved family.

## The Siblings' Pain

Please reach out to the siblings. Their world has been shattered. They lost a part of the only world they have known. Their sense of balance and security has been rocked. Their lives will never be the same. Ask them how they are doing. Offer them the same empathy and age appropriate support that you have offered their parents. They may not respond, but they will hear you. A hug, handshake, or a cookie go a long way to help a child find a bit of balance at this confusing and painful time.

## Listening , Learning and Love

This guide can only suggest different avenues of comfort as every bereaved family responds differently based on a myriad of factors, including the cause of death, their family relationships, coping skills, support systems, and the individual grieving process. There is no one size fits all for bereavement. Our goal is to share an understanding of the impossible so you can use your strength to support the family, whether it's being present, paying attention to what the family needs physically, learning what they respond to emotionally, and adapting as needed. Be patient. The family you love needs time to heal and learn how to live with a new reality. Knowing that you care and are willing to be part of their journey will make a tremendous difference in their ability to move forward.

This guide was written by bereaved families who have graciously shared their experiences during an extremely painful time in their lives. We encourage you, the reader, to share your experiences and thoughts as bereaved families and as friends of the bereaved. The more our community shares, the better we can support each other through the dark and difficult days after the tragic loss of a child.

