

During the course of the last several weeks, an unusual numbers of deaths have impacted our wider community – deaths of congregants, parents of congregants, a founding member of the synagogue and more. This unusual confluence of death and its attendant rituals gave me a chance to reflect in a more-intense-than-normal way upon how our congregation responds. During the sermon that I delivered on Yom Kippur morning, just before the Yizkor prayers, I focused, in particular, on the period of Shiva. Below, an excerpt from that portion of the sermon. I hope that you find these words not just meaningful but, also, helpful and instructive.

Another custom that is ages-old but also timeless is **shiva**. Shiva, frankly, is an institution, a Jewish custom, under attack. And even though our community is normally quite good at supporting others during Shiva, at showing up, we can do even better in actually carrying out the true purpose of shiva. I arrived at a shiva home - not terribly long ago - and a grandchild quickly pulled me aside – “Can we talk, rabbi?” “Of course.” It took us a little while to find a quiet spot, so noisy was this shiva home. “Rabbi, all of these people are here – and that’s wonderful - but they want to ask me about my job, about my husband and I don’t want to talk about those things! I want to talk... about my grandmother! Isn’t that what shiva is supposed to be about?” Yes... **Yes!!**

People who visit Shiva homes are sometimes afraid to deal honestly with the reason for shiva – to talk about death and loss, and to help console the mourners through acknowledging the death of a dear one and talking about the sense of loss which the family has just experienced.

The *Jewish Daily Forward* published an article last spring entitled, “Shiva Shifts Toward Shorter and Livelier Jewish Mourning for Dead.” The article perfectly describes trends that many of us see – a shiva that is shorter; food – over the top and not just for mourners, and the mood in the shiva house much less solemn, even – almost – like a party. The piece in the *Forward* quoted Lori Palatnik, a Jewish educator who suggests that recent changes in shiva practice actually do a disservice to the mourners. “The word shiva is related to the word meaning seven,” she writes, “the number seven in Judaism is very significant... [symbolizing] completion in this world, as in the seven days of creation.”

“The current trend to sit for only three days comes from the belief that it will somehow make the mourning **easier** because it won’t ‘drag it out’ - but that’s a mistake,” she explains. She tells the story that I could tell also - of an adult student of hers who decided to sit shiva for her mother for three days. She pays the mourner a shiva call and is troubled by what she saw. “If I hadn’t known that someone had died, I would have thought I had walked into a cocktail party, full of food, laughter and drinks.” She looks around for her student, and finally finds her in the kitchen, directing the hired waitresses. “I took her by the hand, sat her down and talked to her about her mother. I then told her that she didn’t have to do this — all the food, the drinks, the entertaining, and she answered: ‘I know, but everyone expects me to. No, we don’t – no you shouldn’t.

Several weeks later, the woman called Palatnik and admitted that sitting for three days had indeed been a mistake. At the end of the three days, her husband went back to work and

everyone expected her to just resume her life. “But I never had a chance to mourn my mother.” Yes, I know, the full Shiva period is long. In my mind, this isn’t about whether a family is QUOTE religious or not. This is about what a family needs. And part of the genius of Shiva, as I see, it is that you are supposed to be sick of it by the end; you are supposed to be ready for the next stage of mourning. Jonathan Sarna, professor of Jewish studies at Brandeis, observes that, sadly, many mourners don’t really have the time to mourn at these QUOTE ‘shiva’ receptions.” I say, make the time!

From these stories, I hope you see that we as a synagogue can continue to celebrate the lives of our beloved, but to do so in a way that truly comforts the mourners and meets their real emotional and psychological needs, that allows them to share stories of the family member as a pathway to grieve, to remember, and to heal – and not to serve as a host to a gathering where the atmosphere can easily be confused with a cocktail reception. I think that we, as a community, can redirect our efforts in this way. I hope you’ll agree – the granddaughter from this congregation will certainly agree – that our entire Jewish community can be reminded from time to time what Shiva is truly intended to do. All of us, together, can help lead and set the appropriate atmosphere of consolation – which will lead to healing – each time we visit a family sitting shiva.