

## PROPER CONDUCT AT A HOUSE OF MOURNING

Rabbi Larry Rothwachs  
Congregation Beth Aaron

The wise King Shlomo wrote: “[There is] a time to be silent and a time to speak” (*Koheles* 3:7). For most of us, learning to master the art of silence is no easy task. One can find numerous examples where our Rabbis have placed great value upon the acquired trait of silence, identifying it as a virtue worth aspiring towards.

If it is general truth that silence is virtuous, it is undoubtedly true in a house of mourning. *Chazal* teach that there is nothing of greater value in a house of mourning than silence (*Brachos* 6b). Thus, it is particularly disturbing that so many well-intentioned individuals fail to conduct themselves in accordance with this principle. I have decided to briefly outline the main guidelines regarding communication in a house of mourning. This is not intended to be a thorough analysis, nor will I attempt address the myriad of issues and complexities one may encounter in these situations. This brief set of guidelines is meant merely to lay out and concretize the ideal state of conduct in a house of mourning.

The *halacha* (*Shulchan Aruch*, *Yoreh De'ah* 376:1) prohibits a visitor from initiating any conversation with a mourner. This includes seemingly innocuous comments such as “how are you?” or “I am so sorry.” Rather, the visitor must wait for a cue from the mourner. Only then is he permitted to speak. It is not unusual to observe great Torah scholars (who in all likelihood possess something substantive to say) enter a house of mourning, remain for a few minutes and leave without saying a word, other than the traditional recital of “*ha-makom*.” Such a visit should not be viewed as a failed attempt to console the mourner. Quite to the contrary, one’s mere presence and sincere expression of concern can be profoundly comforting (even to a total stranger!).

The following list of “Do’s” and “Do Not’s” is intended to serve as a short guide for one who seeks to comfort mourners in a proper and meaningful way. Not surprisingly, the *Torah* guidelines provide an excellent framework through which a mourner can experience grieving in a manner that is healthy and ultimately therapeutic.

### “DO NOT’S”:

- 1) Do not try to distract the mourner from his/her mourning. Diverting the mourner’s attention is not the objective of a *shiva* visit and can often make the mourner uncomfortable.
- 2) Do not tell jokes or make jestful comments in an effort to “cheer up” the mourner.
- 3) Do not ask the mourner for details relating to the death. Despite our burning curiosities and, at times, confusion regarding conflicting accounts that we have heard, it is highly inappropriate to ask questions about the circumstances of death.
- 4) Do not ask intrusive questions regarding personal issues and family matters, even as they relate to the deceased.
- 5) Do not chastise or even mildly preach to a mourner who expresses anger at G-d or questions basics of belief. Do not offer explanations as to why (you believe) the deceased suffered in his life or why his suffering was purposeful. Similarly, one should never describe the timing, manner or circumstances surrounding the death as a “blessing.” These points, in particular, are the most difficult of all because, according to many, the

visitors should ideally assist the mourners to be “*matzdik es ha-din*” (accept the decisions of G-d as just). More often than not, it would be best to save important thoughts and perspectives on suffering, theology, etc. for a more appropriate occasion, unless one is certain that the mourner will be comforted by his words. “When in doubt, do without.”

- 6) Do not discourage a mourner from crying, no matter how excessive one may feel it is. Mourners (during *shiva*) should never be encouraged to suppress their grief.
- 7) Do not tell a mourner that, with the passage of time, everything will return to normal.
- 8) Do not say to the mourner “I know how you feel” (even if you feel you really do). At times, the mourner may suggest an association between his suffering and yours, but that should never come from the visitor.
- 9) Do not carry on any side conversations with other visitors. Even the simple exchange of formal greetings with other visitors is inappropriate at a house of mourning (as well as a funeral). If others in the room are indulging in personal side-conversations, my participation remains inappropriate.
- 10) Do not stay longer than necessary. If there is not much conversation taking place, one needn’t remain in a house of mourning for more than a few minutes.
- 11) Lastly, PLEASE do not enter a house of mourning with a cell phone that has an audible ring tone.

#### “DO’S”

- 1) Do LISTEN (without interruption) to whatever expressions of grief, concern, sorrow, anger, etc. are shared by the mourner.
- 2) Do show concern for the mourner through facial expressions that reflect the concern and sadness that you feel. It is okay for a visitor to cry along with the mourner.
- 3) Do allow the mourner to talk about the deceased. One may gently even initiate such conversation, but do not push too hard if the mourner does not respond to your initial cues.
- 4) Do speak about the deceased’s goodness and fine character and the positive traits that he possessed. Do share personal anecdotes that reflect the above points.
- 5) Do speak about how the deceased lived. All too often, a disproportionate amount of time is devoted to how the person died. Repeating these descriptions can be very taxing on the mourners. Naturally, a mourner will be more easily uplifted when the conversation deals with the deceased’s actions when he was alive and well.
- 6) Do attempt to tactfully restore a conversation that has been sabotaged by another visitor who has tried to distract the mourner.
- 7) Do remember that the purpose of a *shiva* visit is to comfort the mourner, not oneself. If one leaves a house of mourning saddened, that does not indicate a failed mission.

As mentioned above, this brief set of guidelines is not meant to address every set of circumstances that may arise. I hope, however, that it does remind all of us that whereas it may be relatively easy to enter a house of mourning, properly fulfilling our mission is no easy task. May *Hashem* grant us the wisdom and strength to fulfill this great *mitzvah* in the most proper and effective manner.