

Thoughts on Sitting Shivah

Yom Yerushalayim, 5784.

May they uplift the neshamah of imi morasi, Dinah bas Zushe Eliezer, hk”m.

I have had the zechus to teach the “Life Cycle” course at RIETS for 20 years, covering the pastoral and halachic aspects of life from pregnancy and birth through aveilus, yud beis chodesh, and hakamas matzeivah. Recently, as I sat shiva for the first time, many people commented, “it must be so different when you are actually the avel.” I was relieved to find that much of what I have advised talmidim about the mindset of an avel was accurate. My guidance, drawn from masters like R. Maurice Lamm, R. Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky, and (lehavdil?) Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross, seemed sound. It was reassuring to feel that I had been providing quality advice to young rabbanim.

However, there were aspects of the shiva experience that I hadn’t fully grasped until I went through it myself. I’d like to share some of these insights with you, as I will with my future talmidim at RIETS, in the hope that they might be helpful. These are my thoughts – and in some cases – experiences – alone, but I welcome your consideration and your comments.

Hilchos Aveilus are Complicated: Despite decades of advising congregants, I was surprised by how often I had to look up halachos during shiva. From sha’as petirah through the end of shiva, there are more issues than one can imagine—many of which people hesitate to bring up with a Rav. There are books available, but something even more comprehensive yet personalized is needed. I aim to work on this within the RCA.

Learning Mussar during Shiva: I’ve always viewed the heter to learn mussar during shiva (and on Tisha b’av) as almost too good to be true. I might not spend all afternoon learning inyanei churban or aveilus on a given Tisha b’av, and always felt that being able to pull a mussar sefer off the shelf was like “cheating.” During Shiva, however, I started learning from R’ Itzele Blazer’s *Kochvei Or*. Not only did this learning not distract from the Shiva process, but as the Rav famously explained in “Sitting Shiva is Doing Teshuva,” it became an integral part of the process.

Taking Short Breaks: I have always recommended that my baalei batim list certain hours as “off-limits” for visitors so they can eat and rest. Personally, I felt bad doing this, knowing that many travel long distances to pay a shiva call. I thought I could manage quick meals and bathroom breaks nonetheless. It didn’t turn out that way. Yes, as a public figure, I certainly received a large number of visitors, but every avel could benefit from short, set times off for themselves. A few 30-minute breaks would have helped without overly inconveniencing visitors.

Phone Calls during Shiva: I’ve always found it difficult to pay a shiva call by phone. Now I understand it’s equally hard to accept nichum aveilim over the phone, especially with

others present. If the goal is to let someone know you're thinking of them, a message during shiva can be as meaningful as a call. Then call *after* shiva, even a few days later, for a more meaningful conversation.

Coming to Shul on Shabbos during Shiva: This was harder than I expected. Moving several years ago from my Shul family in Holliswood to a shteibl in Long Island did not help with my feelings of isolation. Regardless, the sense of not relating to anyone around me was intense. I did not feel comfortable to leave the shiva home just because Shabbos had arrived and summoned me outside. My fellow mispalelim were kind and respectful, but their banter and joy, while appropriate for Shabbos, made me feel out of place. I could not wait for davening to end so that I could return to the safe embrace of my family and (somber) home. As a Shul Rav, I didn't fully appreciate the difficulty of the Shabbos of Shiva – nor, as I'll explain, how hard it would be after Shiva. ...

Getting up from Shiva: I've *always* taught my talmidim that getting up from Shiva is particularly challenging. The quiet that descends after the last shacharis minyan forces aveilim to face an existential loneliness and sorrow masked by the tumult of the previous days. It's important to "get a family up" from shiva, spend time with them that morning, and I guide my talmidim extensively on what to say.

This initial reentry is especially hard with the loss of a spouse or child but still challenging for other losses. The avel must stay on the rabbi's radar for quite some time.

Despite my own teachings, reintegrating into life after Shiva was unexpectedly difficult. My mother's passing was sooner than expected but not atypical or tragic. We have all seen, or unfortunately experienced, monumental loss that one would expect should completely overwhelm. In my situation, my mother suffered little and lived a very meaningful life.

Yet, the world of Shiva takes a person out of this world. I've spoken about Hilchos Aveilus and the soul's journey after death, explaining that the souls of the living and deceased are united in a powerful way after death (listen [here](#)). But I didn't appreciate what leaving society for a time to focus on my family's loss would mean for reentry. Shiva is, of course, not a vacation - it is most exhausting. But it takes one away from life, and allows one to *reflect* on life – and death – more than even the most extensive break.

Many of you who have lost parents have comforted me this week, confirming that my experience is the norm. I better appreciate the gadlus of the period of Shloshim and its restrictions, which match what I'm feeling. One example: Even if one is encouraged to venture back into the world, one's outer appearance sends a message: "I'm not quite ready to be part of your world." It's important to explain to aveilim that Shloshim *affirms* the difficulty of reintegration and that they need adequate time for healing.

These thoughts are not a call for help or an opportunity to vent. You don't need to send therapist names—I have my rolodex (and use it). I'm blessed with wonderful family, friends, and colleagues like many of you, and the Shiva process was, be'ezras Hashem, most healing. But if these insights can help you lead your flock or be helpful if you, chas ve'shalom, experience a loss, then it will have been worth the effort to share them.