A Guide for Comforters

There is one thing we never really prepare for, and have no prior experience of: mourning. True, all sorts of thoughts come up from time to time, but we push them away – and that is just as well. It is good that we are not experienced; good that it is not routine. So, for those who go to comfort mourners now and then, here are some tips drawn from all kinds of awkward – even amusing, within the limits of the sorrow involved – situations. The guide is written in the masculine form, but it applies equally to everyone.

- Comforting mourners is a great mitzvah. As the wisest of men said: "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men, and the living will lay it to his heart" (Ecclesiastes 7:2).
- When you hear about a funeral or a shiva, please help spread the word to other circles of friends. It is a real help to the family while they are busy with so many other things.
- If you can, help bring chairs, benches, low mourners' stools, a Torah scroll and the like – or ask the mourners what else they need.
- If some of the mourners live somewhere other than the house where the shiva is held, check exactly where they are sitting so you don't make the trip for nothing… Some of them sit in their own home for part of the time.
- If you are a man over bar mitzvah age, try to come and help make up a minyan. One minyan during the week is worth more than three hours at another time.
- When you arrive, you can simply open with "I was so sorry to hear."
- The comforter is allowed to speak first. Either way, try not to sit in long, awkward silence. Talk to the mourners.
- If you find yourself standing in front of the mourners, don't stay standing – offer your condolences briefly and look for a free chair. It really hurts the mourners' necks to keep looking up at a sharp angle.
- Don't sit far back if there is a free chair near the mourners. They are truly glad to see you and very much want to talk with you – without having to shout.
- If you have memories and stories of the person who died, share them with the mourners – and even sit down, write them out and send them. They long for every one of these stories. Any detail that seems small to you matters a great deal to the family.
- For those who don't know: in a religious family, Mishnah is studied between the afternoon and evening prayers (Mincha and Ma'ariv, between sunset and nightfall). During that time the mourners cannot give you their attention, so plan your visit to allow time to sit with them personally, either before Mincha or after Ma'ariv.
- Try not to come between 8–9 in the morning or between 14:00–16:00. Contrary to popular belief, mourners get hungry too – and it really is unpleasant to eat in front of the visitors.
- If you notice you have been left alone with the mourners, you may be "stuck" – say that you have to go. The mourners are not there to keep you company… and right now they would really prefer a few minutes of privacy.
- Better not to ask "how did he die." Ask "how did he live." It is far more interesting and a million times more important. You can learn about the person who died, and about the history of Israel too. Believe me, every person is a fascinating story with something to teach. You don't really have to ask at all – you can begin with "Was he ill for a long time?" and the mourner will decide whether he wants to tell you how it happened.

- Don’t start telling how your own parents or grandparents died. This is simply not the time, and right now it really, really does not interest the mourners.
- Don’t start chatting on the side with other visitors. Either talk with the mourners or listen to them. It looks bad – as if you are not interested in them, or they do not interest you.
- Don’t bring a gift. Or a plant. If you do want to bring something, it is customary to bring toilet paper, coffee, disposable cups and plates, nuts and seeds, dried fruit, drinks (water!!) – and some people simply bring money.
- A neighbors’ meal rota is a lovely, wonderful thing. There is no people like ours!
- If you didn’t manage to come during the shiva, they will still be glad to hear from you. Call or send a message – mourners are still mourning after the seven days.
- And if you arrive at the shiva, but the door is shut and there is a suspicious silence – they may not be asleep. The shiva may simply have ended yesterday…
