

The Therapeutic Function of Shiva

Joyce Slochower

In memory of my father, Harry Slochower, with gratitude to Dr. Sharon P. Kaplan and Minyan M'at.

Most of us know only too well that the death of close loved ones, whether dreaded or wished for, is a profound and wrenching experience. This is especially so when we lose a central and irreplaceable relationship—a parent, sibling, spouse, or child. Deaths like these affect our lives in profound, not necessarily temporary ways. Our immediate experience of loss reduces our capacity to be involved in the world of real relationships or activities and may permanently alter our sense of our place in the world.

Loss of this magnitude requires that we allow ourselves to mourn. Mourning is a process whereby death is directly addressed—the mourner expresses grief about the loss, sorts out memories and mixed feelings about the death, and lives through a temporary depression. Ultimately, the work of mourning allows us to give up the lost relationship as a real, alive one, while forming and preserving an internal relationship to the deceased person in all its complexity.

Jewish tradition has provided us with a remarkably detailed, and, I believe, a brilliant structure within which to address death—the customs of *shiva*. Yet few Jews outside of traditional communities fully observe these customs, and many are completely unfamiliar with *shiva* rituals. This should not be particularly surprising: Death continues to be a subject that is treated gingerly by contemporary culture, very much reinforcing our own natural discomfort with such pain. It often seems easier simply to get on with life and to relegate traditional mourning observance to the antiquated customs of our grandparents' generation. We may view as excessively restrictive and time consuming the requirement to set aside a full seven days (*shiva* means seven), during which we withdraw from the world and face our loss. In fact, for many, "sitting *shiva*" has come to describe a brief social after-

noon following a funeral, during which the mourners provide a spread for the guests. Such a setting is actually antithetical to the intent of *shiva* observance and, I am convinced, is most unlikely to facilitate mourning. Yet the traditional laws of *shiva* have become inaccessible and even alien to many of us.

The very complex Jewish laws of mourning outline aspects of observance from the moment of death and for a full eleven months thereafter. (Norman Lamm's 1988 book, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, describes mourning ritual in detail and is an excellent reference.) One sits *shiva* only for a parent, sibling, spouse, or child—those with whom we have the most irreplaceable of relationships. The mourner first concretizes his/her loss in the custom of *Keriab*: At the moment of death or at the funeral, a tear is made in the mourner's outer garment. This will be worn throughout the week of *shiva*, which formally begins when the mourner returns home from the burial. The mourner washes his/her hands before entering the home (this symbolizes a cleansing following contact with death). All mirrors (traditionally associated with vanity) are covered. Those who gather at the mourner's home join the mourner in a symbolic meal of condolence. The community, not the mourner, provides this meal, which includes foods associated with life such as bread and hard-boiled eggs. The mourner lights a memorial (*yahrzeit*) candle that will burn for the seven-day *shiva* period. Traditionally, *shiva* lasts for seven days, throughout which time the mourner remains at home unless the *shiva* house is elsewhere and the mourner cannot reside there for the week.

The laws of *shiva* alter virtually every aspect of ordinary social behavior for both mourner and visitor. The mourner's grief is concretized in a variety of ways: he/she does not wear leather shoes (traditionally associated with comfort and vanity). The mourner neither bathes nor changes clothing, especially the rent garment. The mourner does not use cosmetics, cut his/her hair, or engage in sexual contact. The study of Torah is also forbidden, since such study is believed to bring joy. The mourner is free to walk, stand, lie, or sit but only on a low stool or chair. Contrary to popular belief, the chair need not be hard or uncomfortable. Instead, the low seat sym-

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bolizes the mourner's lowered emotional state. The mourner does not rise in order to greet the visitor; in fact, the front door is left ajar to free the mourner from this obligation. The mourner is excused from all household tasks (cleaning, etc.) and does not prepare or serve food for others or him/herself. The mourner is thus freed from all social obligations and distractions and is expected to be involved solely with the mourning itself.

A *shiva* caller operates under similarly unusual rules. A *shiva* call is considered its own good deed and obligation (*mitzvah*). In traditional communities, such calls are paid by most of the mourner's community, whether or not they were personally involved with the mourner. Callers generally come unannounced at any time during the day or evening. The purpose of the *shiva* call is explicit; to support the mourner in his/her grief by offering an opportunity to speak about the loss and by sharing with the mourner memories of the deceased. *Shiva* callers are not permitted to greet the mourner; instead, they wait until the mourner notices and greets them. Conversation must be initiated by the mourner, who may choose to speak of the deceased, of other things, or to remain silent. The caller does not, however, attempt to distract the mourner unless the mourner indicates such a need. Thus, at times, the caller may simply sit silently with the mourner; at other moments, the caller may be engaged in conversation of more or less emotional depth. The caller, who is not expected to stay long, does not say good-bye, and instead utter a traditional phrase, "May G-d comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." The mourner does not respond to this farewell and remains seated when the caller leaves.

At the end of the seven days, the mourner "gets up"—resumes daily activities in most respects. However, during the subsequent thirty days (*shloshim*), certain activities (such as attending parties) designed to bring joy are curtailed. Many male mourners refrain from shaving throughout *shloshim*. This represents a most powerful and visible expression of bereavement. In fact, for a full eleven months following a death, the mourner is expected to acknowledge this loss concretely by saying Kaddish daily, and, in the case of a parent's death, also limiting social activities and festivities.

When my own father died last year, I sat *shiva* for the first time and found it to be an extraordinarily reparative experience. As a psychoanalyst, I was struck by the degree to which the *shiva* situation evoked many of the most healing aspects of psychoanalytic treatment. Although psychoanalysis is popularly viewed as a situation in which the analyst offers interpretations to the patient, I believe that non-interpretive aspects of the therapeutic situation play a critical role in the treatment process. D.W. Winnicott, who was both a pediatrician and a psychoanalyst, described this dimension of psychoanalytic experience as a "holding en-

vironment." The psychoanalytic situation holds the patient figuratively, by protecting him/her in ways that allow a full experience of the self to develop. The analyst who provides a holding environment functions not as an interpreter of the patient's experience, but as a reliable, available, potentially empathic presence who communicates confidence in their mutual survival. When the analyst maintains a holding stance, subjective responses to the patient are contained by the analyst to establish an emotionally protective setting within which the patient can expose private experience, often for the first time.

In thinking about what it took for me to assimilate my father's death, it became increasingly clear that the structure of *shiva* created a therapeutic holding environment that tremendously facilitated this task. From the moment he died, I derived comfort from the knowledge that my own community rather than strangers were caring for his body. At the cemetery, I experienced something simultaneously raw and essentially real as my family, according to custom, shoveled earth upon the unpretentious pine casket. The denial of death was impossible, and the shock was intense.

I returned home to the comfort provided by my community; I was both protected from and deprived of the external distractions that might be viewed as relieving the pain of loss. I did not work, or shop, or cook for myself or my family. Yet I was far from alone; a stream of *shiva* callers appeared who set aside their own concerns and allowed me to talk about my father when I needed to and about other things when I did not. They came and left unrequested, and so freed me from the burden of having to ask for the company that I did not always know I needed; at the same time, they made it possible for me to retreat in privacy when I wished to do so. They made sure that there was a minyan so that I could say Kaddish and provided a meal for Shabbat. Many *shiva* callers brought food; few ate mine. Some were close friends or relatives; many were more casual acquaintances, yet most made it possible for me to talk, to stay with the feelings of loss as long as I needed to. Their traditional farewell offered the comfort of community, reminding me that I was not alone in this experience. I emerged from this very intense week of remembering exhausted but relieved. My recovery did not end there, but was steady, and at the end of the year I found myself largely at peace with this loss.

How did *shiva* help? I was forced to express my grief in multiple concrete ways; my shoes, clothing, lowered chair, etc., underlined my state of mourning and interfered with the possibility of "putting on a face" (false self) to the world. Yet the community's visits, even people's parting words, required no acknowledgment from me. The *shiva* custom requiring that I speak first, for exam-

ple, facilitated a direct response to me and to death by the community by making it harder for us to escape into social convention. The prohibition against ordinary greetings and farewells was awkward for many of us, yet it served as a compelling reminder of the visit's non-social nature.

Taken together, what at first appears to be a rigid set of rules creates an environment designed to facilitate mourning by creating an emotionally protective setting that is reminiscent of the analytic holding environment. The community of *shiva* callers collectively provides this hold, which is symbolized by both concrete care and emotional space. The *shiva* setting makes a demand on the community: to permit the mourner to use people within the community without regard for the community's needs. In this sense, the mourner is permitted to express and experience the self in a way that mimics many aspects of the psychoanalytic holding situation.

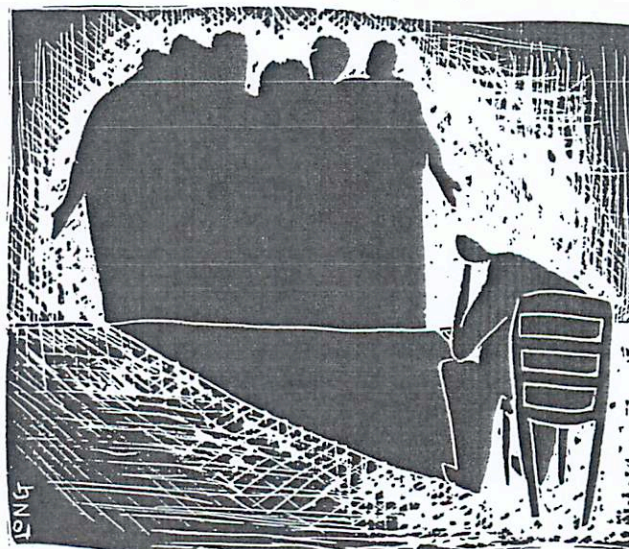
It was not until I experienced *shiva* as a healing process that I became aware of the ways in which *shiva* is often distorted. When the mourner's community is unaware of, or uncomfortable with *shiva* ritual, observance becomes a burden rather than a support for the mourner. The mourner in this sort of environment often feels obligated to entertain visitors and to distract them both from the uncomfortable knowledge that the mourner is in acute pain. I vividly remember a previous *shiva*, when those present (who were unaware of *shiva* tradition) sat in strained silence interspersed with self-conscious political comments as they ate a meal provided by the family. The mourner's grief had no place in this context, and "*shiva*" provided no relief at all.

Yet even those who are familiar with *shiva* rules may struggle with the obligation to visit the mourner, which requires us to tolerate our own anxiety and social awkwardness about facing death and encountering what may be an unfamiliar set of people and traditions. To enter a *shiva* house and not to greet anyone, to sit in silence (often among a group of strangers) waiting to be acknowledged, is an intensely uncomfortable experience. It can leave us wanting to fade away, to leave as quickly as possible, even to wish not to have come at all. To further complicate matters, the mourner will not necessarily express gratitude for our visit.

I have never paid a *shiva* call without some degree of discomfort; further, I have rarely found the visit to be what I expected. The "house of mourning" will be most variable; I have entered homes to discover mourners sobbing in grief, chatting about their own lives in an attempt to gain some emotional relief, or laughing in an apparently disconnected emotional state.

It shouldn't be surprising that different mourners respond to death differently, of course, depending on their

own tolerance for grief, and also depending on the nature of their relationship with the deceased. For some, death represents a shock too great to assimilate with overt grief. To the degree that a mourner is defended against the experience of loss, grief may emerge in a diverted form or may be apparently absent. When the mourner is someone with little tolerance for emotional experience, a powerful need not to experience grief may be communicated. The mourner may behave as if nothing is wrong, as if the *shiva* call were, in fact, a social visit. In paying a *shiva* call, then, we may feel puzzled, bored,



shut out, even judgmental of the mourner's apparent lack of grief. What do we do? How do we behave in such a context? Do we join in the social atmosphere, or sit silent, as if it is we who are grieving? *Shiva* custom would imply that we neither introduce nor distract from the subject of death. That is, we need to do our best to remain with the mourner as he/she is, and not demand that the mourner express real feelings. From my perspective, such a stance gives the mourner both space and potential contact. Eventually, this space may permit the mourner to feel safe enough to confront the loss and to connect to it in a fuller way.

To the extent that the mourner's own feelings about the death are complex and involve guilt about past actions or inactions, feelings of hatred toward the dead person, etc., the mourner is likely to experience expressions of concern ambivalently. When we pay a *shiva* call to a mourner in this state, our very care may intensify the mourner's guilt about felt failures vis à vis the deceased. At other moments, the caller's concern may frustrate the mourner by its inadequacy in the face of loss. The mourner may react to the caller with irritation, or respond with anger or guilt to expressions of sympathy that inadvertently evoke guilt. To say the "wrong thing" during a *shiva* call can be chillingly uncomfortable; an irri-

table mourner is hardly likely to relieve such feelings. It is far from easy to tolerate being unappreciated, unhelpful, or even hurtful to the mourner. Yet by remaining emotionally present but not intrusive, we communicate confidence about the mourner's ability to survive the difficult feelings generated by the grieving process.

Despite my familiarity with *shiva* tradition, I have often found the *shiva* call to be painful or uncomfortable, especially when I was not personally involved with the mourner and/or the deceased. It was not until I sat *shiva* myself that I became aware of the powerful impact of people's visits during *shiva*. I felt "held" by these visits, by the fact that I could both count on my family and best friend to turn up each day, and by the calls of people I had never been personally involved with (including someone I had never met before). I had often hesitated to pay *shiva* calls to people I knew only superficially. Most paradoxically, I found these "superficial" visits to be extraordinarily moving; they made me aware in an immediate sense that I was part of something larger than myself or my grief. Some of these *shiva* callers followed Jewish tradition to the letter while others did not. What mattered was not the specifics of form but rather my sense that the caller had come to be with me during a period of intense grief.

For those readers who feel outside of traditional Jewish observance, then, I would like to urge you to consider the *shiva* process to be a gift that you can provide yourself when you face a death, and one that you can offer others in the same circumstance. The details of ritual observance are far less important than is the setting aside of a week within which to do little other than remember. As a mourner, allow others to do what they can for you and do your best not to entertain. Set out photographs of the deceased, or mementos that will make it easier for you and for others to enter the process of remembering. Try not to feed or serve others. Most important, make use of people's visits in the way that is best for you—no one cries all the time, and laughter is not prohibited. Simply living through a week of suspended life is therapeutic.

When contemplating paying a *shiva* call, consider visiting in the early evening if you prefer to be with a large social group, or during the day if you would rather talk alone with the mourner. Some people prefer to phone ahead and ask whether a particular time would be a good one. Take your cues from the mourner and remind yourself that your presence itself is of value, even if you don't know the mourner well. Many people feel uncomfortable about the formal farewell and simply say "may we meet again on a happier occasion." Finally, remember that you don't have to stay long; a half-hour visit is fine.

It is clear that the laws of *shiva* are largely designed for the protection of the mourner and make powerful demands on us as a source of support during *shiva*. To require that we

enter a situation perhaps unique in its social discomfort only to tolerate the difficult range of feelings evoked by a mourner is a considerable demand. *Shiva* laws do, however, take into account the vulnerability of the community. Interestingly, as *shiva* callers, we are protected in ways similar to the protection provided the analyst. *Shiva* calls are short, ordinarily paid not more than once by any individual. The mourner's larger community is expected to assume the ongoing obligation. The holding function of *shiva* is thus shared by the community, falling lightly on its individual members.

On the seventh day of *shiva*, the mourner must "get up," whether emotionally "ready" or not. The community is thereby automatically freed from further obligation at the end of the *shiva* week. Further, *shiva* is interrupted by Shabbat, and is actually cancelled by major holidays. These laws may in part reflect the community's need to remain involved in life, in joyous or religious events that supersede even the needs of the individual mourner. Like the therapist who ends sessions, takes vacations despite the patient's need for treatment, *shiva* laws place the mourner's needs within the larger context of community need. It is evident that the mourner may be quite unable to suspend grief just because Shabbat or a holiday interferes. To the extent that this failure in adaptation to the mourner's needs was preceded by a period of holding, however, it may be strengthening rather than traumatic. A break in the *shiva* experience may actually begin to draw the mourner back into life, much as a disruption in holding may facilitate an integrative process in a patient. There are times, however, when community needs do interfere and even prevent the grief process from fully unfolding. When a major holiday falls during *shiva*, the *shiva* period is actually cancelled. In such an instance, the mourner's need for a holding is overridden by the community's need to be involved in ritual observance.

Thus, while Jewish tradition views the mourner's needs as great, they are not paramount—they do not consistently override the needs of the *shiva* caller. It may be that the limits placed on the mourner's needs are actually what permit the community to tolerate the very great demand that is made of it during the period of *shiva* observance. It is, of course, not uncommon that the practice of *shiva* fails to hold the mourner, because either the mourner or the community cannot tolerate the discomfort generated by such an experience. *Shiva* cannot provide a holding in the absence of some degree of cohesive community, which is absent for many contemporary Jews.

Yet in the context of community, *shiva* laws meet an individual's temporarily intense need in its varied aspects while protecting the larger group. These laws are, in many ways, a brilliant pre-psychoanalytic adaptation to a universal human need, reflecting the capacity of society to provide a temporary holding for its members while also insuring that the community remains a going concern. □