

THE MITZVAH OF MINYAN

Adapted from the February 2007 KOL article by Donna Courtney.

It was a warm summer evening about 7:00 p.m. and I found myself in my car with a home-made loaf of banana bread on my way to the Centreville home of someone I didn't know. As I got closer my heart was pounding increasingly harder. Why was I doing this? Who would be there? What would I say? I was on my way to a shiva minyan. This was the first time I would be going to participate in a minyan for a grieving congregant who I didn't know. As I arrived, banana bread in hand, I mustered up every last bit of self confidence that I had, and ventured up the walkway.

As the woman approached the door, I felt a small sense of relief. I recognized her from services. She wasn't really a stranger. I gave her a hug and repeated the words of consolation that I had practiced over and over. Then I saw Rabbi Nyer who was chatting with some people and I walked over and stood with them. As the service began, Rabbi Nyer's words were so comforting that I found myself becoming more and more relaxed. The familiar prayers and melodies also helped me to relax and I realized that I was in the midst of something very special. I was helping a person who was part of my temple family to remember her mother. I was a part of the sacred mitzvah of comforting a mourner. The Talmud says "These are the obligations without measure, whose reward, too, is without measure." One of these obligations is "to console the bereaved." It doesn't matter if the person who is bereaved is one of your close friends, merely an acquaintance, or a stranger. It also doesn't suggest that it's just a nice thing to do. We are told it is an obligation.

On the drive home I felt so fulfilled. The mourning congregant was so appreciative. She did not feel (as I had feared) that I was intruding on her in her time of grief. Rather, I had helped her feel more a part of the TBS family. And she and I are no longer strangers. We chat every time we see each other at services or other temple events. So, the biggest surprise was that the reward that summer evening was actually for me. I had made a positive difference in someone's life.

By Kay Klein.

Recently, a fellow congregant, who is not Jewish, shared with me that her family, like mine, believed strongly that the mitzvah of attending a minyan is an important obligation. She had only attended a few minyans and when her Jewish mother-in-law died a few months before her daughter's Bat Mitzvah, the family was overwhelmed with grief. Although she knew that having a minyan in her home was important, she was nervous, anxious, and not entirely comfortable with having strangers in her home, especially at such a difficult time.

She said that when Rabbi Perlin arrived, with Kleenex and books in hand and lovingly explained how the service would proceed, she began to relax. Rabbi Perlin assured her that she had the choice of either sharing during the minyan service or just listening. Quietly and calmly, my friend described that this shared experience opened her eyes that the mitzvah of a minyan is much more than just an obligation. The support she and her grieving family felt during their time of loss was the ultimate act of caring for others. The shiva minyan provided an opportunity for her and her family to feel us wrap our arms around her. She noted that the minyan in her home gave her family exactly the support it needed to move from that moment of grief to celebrating the memory of her husband's mother and the joy of her daughter's Bat Mitzvah. Now, when our community asks for volunteers to help with a minyan my friend does her best to attend. She remembers how reassuring it felt to be the one who was being held and how important it is to be there to hold someone else. It is the essence of what it means to be part of our special TBS community -- to be there for others and to know that they will be there for you.

We on the Bereavement Committee encourage you to give yourself the opportunity to have the same fulfilling experiences that are described above. Please respond when there is a minyan – reach out, perform the mitzvah of consoling the bereaved with your community, and know that the biggest reward will be for yourself.