

What to expect when you go to a Minyan

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. Members of the Temple B’nai Shalom Bereavement Committee offer assistance to our Rabbi and grieving families for Shiva Minyans. We encourage all members of the TBS community to come together in support of this mitzvah and offer the following pointers for those that may have never attended a Shiva Minyan.

1. Most Minyans for Temple B’nai Shalom members are hosted in the home of the family (or online via Zoom). They are almost always held in the evenings.
2. The announcement listing the time and location of a Minyan is distributed to the membership through the weekly e-mail and/or electronic mail.
3. A Minyan is a religious ceremony for families in grief and attendees should dress accordingly. Business casual is appropriate for both men and women.
4. While not mandatory, attendees typically bring a dessert such as cake, cookies, pie, bread or fruit to serve at the Minyan. Some bring a meal for the family to store in the freezer for another day. The Bereavement Committee, working with the family, ensures that coffee, soda, paper products and chairs are available.
5. Please arrive at the house at least 10 minutes prior to the service. This allows you time to speak with the family and offer your condolences. Feel free to walk into the house--ringing the door bell or waiting to be admitted is not necessary. A member of the bereavement committee will greet you as you enter.
6. Knowing what to say to a mourner can be difficult. In “The Art of Making a Shiva Call”, Ron Wolfson suggests that you can be silent, allowing the mourner to open the conversation. Offering a hug, a kiss, a handshake, or an arm around the shoulder speaks volumes about caring. He also suggests that mentioning the deceased by name is always appropriate.
7. The Hospice Volunteer Student Manual (Nowack) suggests that the following clichés should be avoided such as: “I know how you feel.” “We are never given more than we can handle.” “It’s God’s will.” “I’m sorry.” “Call me if there is anything I can do.” “She lived a good, long life and it was her time to die.” “You must be strong for your children.”
8. If your children are connected to the family, it is appropriate for them to attend the Minyan. Explain to them that a Minyan is similar to a Shabbat service and requires the same etiquette as they observe at TBS.

9. The Rabbi starts the Minyan service promptly. If you arrive after the start of the service, a member of the committee will meet you at the door, offer you a prayer book, and guide you to an empty chair or open space.

10. Our Rabbi uses the “Gates of Prayer for Weekdays” and “At a House of Mourning” for the service. It is a TBS custom to share the reading as the Rabbi moves around the room. Individuals are asked to read a paragraph in English to take an active part in the service. If you do not wish to read, just look to the next person and they will take the assignment. The Rabbi will explain this process beforehand so that everyone feels comfortable.

11. During the prayer service, the Rabbi will give one or two of the family members an opportunity to share a story or re-read their funeral remarks.

12. The Minyan ends with the Mourner’s Kaddish and a blessing. Generally the service lasts about 30 minutes.

13. It is considered an obligation to join the family in eating the refreshments immediately after the service. During this time, it is appropriate to offer condolences to the family. Most guests depart 10-20 minutes after consuming refreshments and speaking with the family. Relatives or very close friends often stay later. It is important, however, not to become a burden to the mourners by overstaying.

14. It is considered inappropriate to take food from the home of the bereaved following a Minyan.

15. Committee members will assist the family in cleaning up. It is helpful if attendees place their trash in the appropriate containers, help collect prayer books and help to stack any folding chairs.

16. Your presence means a great deal to the grieving family, even if they do not know you.

More than an Obligation – Personal Comments

“I believe attending a Minyan is a privilege. I am grateful when the grieving family allows me to enter their home to hear intimate stories of love and to collectively transition their heartbreak to acceptance through prayer. I never leave a Minyan without feeling more attune to what is important in life and re-committed to living more Jewishly.”

“When I first joined TBS I was hesitant to attend Minyans as I could not read Hebrew and I didn’t know any of the mourners. When a friend’s parent died, I attended my first Minyan. It was so clear how important this was to the family and I was made to feel comfortable very quickly. During the service I was only asked to read an English paragraph if I wanted to and the service was very familiar to me, not unlike Shabbat services. I now attend Minyans regularly whether or not I know the family. That sense of doing something of value continues. Sometimes we are a large group; sometimes there a 5-10 of us, sometimes all attendees are

TBS members, at other times we are in the minority. In every situation I feel important, valued and that I have done my small part in comforting a family in grief.”

If you would like to help at a Minyan, please call the temple office. Better yet ... come join us at the next Minyan and feel “reward without measure.”