

Shiva Prayers at this Difficult Time

By Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg

Judaism teaches us to honour the deceased at a funeral and comfort mourners at a Shiva (*nichum aveilim*).

In these difficult and probably unprecedented times, we have no choice but to conduct Shiva prayers by Zoom or other online or phone communication. We appreciate that this cannot be compared to the solidarity and comfort shown by friends gathering together at the home. But in these weeks, health, safety and following Jewish law and the law of the land to protect all of us takes priority.

The best method for arranging a Shiva is probably for a tech-minded member of the family or friendship group to create the Zoom link and send round the invitation, publicising it through the Synagogue if that is wanted as well. Otherwise the synagogue can create the necessary link or phone line.

A full Minchah or Ma'ariv service can be held on Zoom. This may be followed by one or more family members or close friends speaking words of affection and appreciation about the person who has sadly died. This may precede or follow the Memorial Prayer and the Mourner's Kaddish.

In terms of Zoom protocol, it works best if the service leader says words of welcome, then asks everyone to mute themselves, except for one or two key parts of the service, for example, the first paragraph of the Shema and the Mourner's Kaddish. Online services are best lead relatively slowly with most of the prayers spoken out loud.

Everyone else should be on mute while words of affection and appreciation are shared by the family.

The service should close with a traditional greeting by the leader, such as *Hamakom Yenacheim* – May God bring you comfort (among all the mourners for Zion and Jerusalem.)

With small groupings of family and very close friends, it is possible to share memories and stories together as a collective

conversation, without the need for people to mute, so long as a leader acts as moderator.

At this juncture, with apologies, we can probably facilitate one or two nights of shiva prayers. After that, we encourage everyone to join our daily Shacharit and Maariv online services to say Kaddish.

Eulogies

We are planning to establish an online space where people can place the eulogies they have given, if they are comfortable in doing them. Sharing a *hesped* or eulogy is part of *kvod hamet*, respect for the person who has died. Tributes by family and friends are always moving, often colourful and sometimes humorous. They enable us to appreciate the person, his or her life story, family, values, wisdom, interests and foibles. They help all of us, near and far, carry the memory of someone special in our hearts. We plan to add a link so that people can add their consolations, greetings and further memories of that person.

The Mourners Kaddish

The Mourner's Kaddish should certainly be recited if there are ten people present virtually. But in these difficult times, I have followed the view expressed to me at the outset of my career by Rabbi Dr Louis Jacobs, that he would never not allow someone to say Kaddish. He was thinking of funerals and perhaps Shivas. But, in these days, when people have no other options and nowhere else to go, I would allow – and encourage – one Mourner's Kaddish to be said at the close of a Shiva, or any other service, even if there is no (virtual) Minyan.

Memorial Services

When the situation improves – may we all see that day in health and safety – we will do our best to arrange memorial services and offer proper opportunities to remember with respect and affection those who have died and show true solidarity to all who mourn . As it says in the Kaddish, *hashta baagalah uvizemn kariv*, may this time come swiftly and soon.

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