

First, Buy the Tissuesⁱ

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“Funerals,” I’m often told, “are for the living, not the dead.”

Judaism, though, doesn’t entirely agree. Our tradition teaches that we have two obligations when a person dies: *k’vod hamet*, honoring the person whose life has ended; and *nichum aveilim*, comforting the mourners. In addition to laying out those critical responsibilities, our sages decreed that they take place in order. When does the obligation to comfort mourners begin? Only when we have fulfilled our duties to the deceased.

Those who have attended traditional Jewish funerals have seen the transition in the cemetery. When a burial is complete, and *kaddish* recited, extended family, friends, and community form two rows. The immediate mourners pass through the center, while people on either side recite, “May God comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.” Those words mark the first ritual of comfort, and they are not uttered until the funeral is over.

The ancient rabbis taught that mourners could not find solace “while their dead lie before them.”ⁱⁱ Therefore, they decreed that we should not even make an attempt at comforting words while family members are consumed with immediate grief and with planning a funeral.

That rabbinic ruling contains great wisdom.

When we seek to comfort the bereaved, we would do well to begin in silence. Our presence brings comfort. When a dear friend has suffered a loss, our role is to be there. And to listen. Our job is to bring tissues, perhaps literally but surely figuratively. Let us be the shoulder to cry on. We must not imagine that we have words that will bring comfort at such a moment.

We take our lead from the mourners. If they want to busy themselves with arrangements, we may gently offer to help. However, mourners know their own needs best. One person may find comfort in assuring that the house has the right food, drink, and paper goods to accommodate expected guests, while others will be happy for us to take all that off their hands. Only if we engage our ears, rather than our mouths, will we know how best to help.

When we do speak, we begin with *k’vod hamet*, honoring the dead, that first obligation. We tell family members how much the deceased meant to us. The

qualities we admired. The actions we would seek to emulate. A warm story the family may not know. The presence we will miss.

Only one caution when we speak of the one who has died. We do not comfort mourners if we seek to substitute our memories or our grief for theirs. Even an imperfect marriage, or a strained parent-child relationship, is more intimate than a close friendship. When I prepare a eulogy, even of a person whom I adored and with whom I shared a deep relationship, I do not base my words primarily on my own experiences and recollections, but seek instead to hear the family and let them speak through me. People's relationships with their primary relatives come first, even if their perceptions don't match our own. When a dear friend has died, we must let our own family and friends be our comfort, while we tend to the grieving family.

We must not deny bereavement. Often, when death comes after intense suffering or deep dementia, or when it brings a peaceful end to a magnificently long life, we are tempted to pronounce the death, or the manner of dying, to be a blessing. Doing so, though, we are telling the mourners how to grieve, even suggesting that bereavement is inappropriate. We must resist that temptation, unless and until we hear the mourners pronounce that judgment for themselves.

Years ago, a woman in another city went to the hospital to visit her husband of more than sixty years. He was beset with the illness that would take his life only weeks later. When the wife got home from the hospital that day, somewhere between her garage and her back door, she collapsed, instantly taken from this world by a heart attack. I rushed to the husband's hospital bedside, only to find a visitor already seeking to console the newly-bereaved, still-hospitalized husband. "Don't cry," the other visitor callously counseled the weeping man.

We have all heard people say the wrong thing. We might have done it ourselves. I know I have. We may even be reluctant to visit a house of mourning, fearing that, if we do, we are likely to say something thoughtless. Or we just don't know what to say.

That's why I have entitled these words, "First, buy the tissues." If we show up with tissues – or yes, a tray of food, or grocery bags full of soft drinks, particularly if somebody already at the house has told us that those items will be welcome – we wordlessly announce, "I am here." The more we are present, the more comfort we bring. The more we are ready to do whatever the mourners

need, the more comfort we bring. The more we honor the departed, the more comfort we bring.

Last year at this season, Nina Kampler wrote about how her community had helped her after the tragic death of her son, five days before his twenty-eighth birthday: “It is more difficult to drown in self-pity when friends and relatives stand by to rescue you. It becomes impossible to feel isolated when you are surrounded by people who don’t stop calling, who bring flowers and tins of cookies and teddy bear hugs, who text daily even if you don’t respond, who show up at your door laden with overflowing bags of groceries, who open your closets to set your table with china and silver because they know it tastes better when it is not served on paper, who memorize your Starbucks order. . . Our sorrow is diminished, spread out, shared: The power of our people is the engine that pulls us forward.”ⁱⁱⁱ

One day, each of us will sit on the mourner’s bench. When it’s our turn, let us find comfort in the presence of friends who show up at our doors with tissues. Until then, let us ever be ready to make ourselves available as human handkerchiefs. Then, let us all find comfort.

Amen.

ⁱ Title inspired by Rabbi David Ingber, who uttered this sentence in a different context at a High Holy Day Seminar during the Rabbinic Torah Seminar of the Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 9, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Pirkei Avot 4:23.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nina Kampler, “The Double Yizkor,” *Tablet*, October 10, 2016.