

Virtual Shiva

A virtual *shiva* cannot replicate the meaningful experience of a potentially week-long *shiva*. However, it can provide comfort and help preserve some wonderful memories that will help sustain you during your mourning process. As we say, “memories are a blessing.”

Zoom (and other video conferencing) experiences with more than a few attendees need to be moderated, and this is especially important for the emotional experience of *shiva*. To make the *shiva* experience meaningful to those in mourning, a moderator/MC is needed and preparation is a must. Simply having people call in and express their condolences, one after the other, and chat about themselves may not provide the desired comfort to the mourners.

The virtual *shiva* experience can be tailored for the audience. One approach is to have a storytelling (or “celebration of life”) session for family and a separate one (or more) for the community. In particular, it may be helpful to have a family-only session the evening of the funeral. This session will surely yield some wonderful stories that you can tell in a more public session. You may hear stories that you have never heard before or you may hear different versions of the same family stories that can be quite enlightening.

The act of telling these stories over and over is part of the mourning process.

Start with an agenda/plan that might consist of **some** the following:

1. Welcoming
2. Ground rules
3. Opening poem such as [“We remember them”](#)
4. Short eulogy by one or more people
5. Stories
6. Open comments
7. Slide show
8. Twenty-third Psalm
9. *El Maleh Rachamin* (if you have someone who can chant it)
10. *Kaddish*

Start out with a plan and adapt it as necessary. If you discover that you are still hearing wonderful stories and you are at the 50-minute mark, you might just jump to a final *Kaddish* when your time is up.

Consider starting with a short eulogy that focuses on key themes of the person’s life. The idea is that people will build on these themes with their comments and stories. Your eulogy will help jog thoughts and memories that others can present.

To avoid putting people on the spot, try doing a private chat with those who might be uncomfortable speaking before calling on them. It will be clear who these people are. Others are fine to just call on. If your family has a “loose cannon” who might tell an unhelpful story, try arranging in advance which story that person will tell.

At the beginning of the *shiva* announce some ground rules:

1. We are here to honor the memory of <name> by telling stories about his/her life. Let's save catching up on your life or your family for another time.
2. Feel free to come and go as you please. Don't feel like you need to "get the floor" to say goodbye before you leave. Just wave or make a comment in the chat area.
3. Please practice good Zoom etiquette by muting yourself appropriately so background noises and conversations don't disturb this *shiva*. Don't be that person.

As with Hearing Men's Voices (HMV) sessions, when people start to stray from the topic at hand (remembering the deceased), remind them that you really would like to talk about <their topic: ie, their family, politics, temple issues>, but time is short and you want to focus on stories about the deceased. Then jump right into a story or call on someone (possibly pre-arranged) to tell a story. Remember, not everyone has the emotional intelligence to understand what is appropriate in this type of social situation.

During a traditional *shiva* stories are shared with a variety of family members, but not everyone hears the same stories and it is difficult to remember all the wonderful comments. One of the advantages of the Zoom *shiva* is that you can record the Zoom session of the stories about your loved ones. This could lead to a new ritual of listening to those stories as part of a Yahrzeit tradition, either together with family members or individually. It can be a great source of comfort knowing that those stories are preserved even if you don't feel the need to re-watch them again. Give one or more people the job to remind you to hit the "record" button. You can also make someone co-host and assign them the responsibility of handling the recording.

When attending a virtual *shiva* follow the ground rules yourself and, in addition, when people are signing off and it is mostly family remaining on the call, don't linger, sign off. At that point in the *shiva*, the family is probably just waiting for all the non-family members to sign off so they can have a family-centered conversation.

The pandemic has forced us to develop new paradigms of observing many Jewish rituals. Some of these paradigms add value to our existing observances and will endure long after we have a vaccine (baruch Hashem) for the virus. Virtual *shiva* is one of those observances. It provides a way of involving people around the world and a method of recording important family stories that can provide comfort to mourners for many years to come.