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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Reform Judaism is the official voice of the Union for Reform Judaism, linking the institutions and affiliates of Reform Judaism with every Reform Jew. *RJ* covers developments within our Movement while interpreting world events and Jewish tradition from a Reform perspective. Shared by 305,000 member households, *RJ* conveys the creativity, diversity, and dynamism of Reform Judaism.

DEAR READER

Do Not Abandon *Shivah*

In the last 24 months, both of my parents have died. This wrenching loss was devastating—as it is for all of us who feel the terrible isolation of losing those who were the first people that we ever loved and who, more than anyone else, shaped what we were to become.

The pain is still with me, of course. But with the help of my wife and children and the support of my synagogue community, I confronted the reality of death and found the strength I needed.

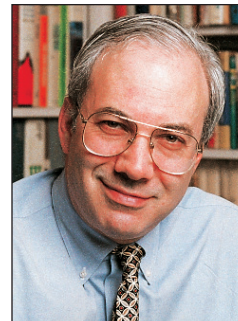


PHOTO BY HENRY CROSSMAN

After each death, the *shivah* at my home was especially important. *Shivah*, meaning “seven,” refers to the seven days following the funeral. During this time, as called for by Jewish tradition, friends and members of the community came to visit and offer consolation. It was an opportunity for me to talk about my parents with others and think through their influence on me and how I would cope with their absence. Observing this ritual prevented me from doing what I might otherwise have been tempted to do: rush back to work and “get on with my life.”

Shivah is not actually seven days, since the day of the funeral counts as the first day and the last day is observed for a symbolic hour in the morning. Nonetheless, since the first three days are considered the most intense period of mourning, many Reform Jews have chosen to observe *shivah* for three days only. But what concerns me are the growing numbers of Reform Jews who decide to observe *shivah* for one night following the funeral or to dispense with it altogether, insisting that they do not need *shivah* at all.

Our members, of course, are entitled to choose their own patterns of Jewish observance and to mourn as they please. Still, I worry that many of those who avoid *shivah* are not being entirely honest with themselves. “My loved ones would have wanted me to move on,” they say. But I can’t help feeling that they, like so many in our culture, are attempting to deal with the pain of death by banishing it from their minds.

This is not the Jewish way. The best way to honor the dead and cope with loss, Judaism wisely teaches, is to set aside time to do so when we are freed from other responsibilities. Our grief-stricken hearts cannot quickly shake off the pain of death, no matter how much we may pretend they can. Reaffirming life and returning to a normal routine require time and, above all, the support of community that *shivah* entails.

Let us not abandon *shivah*. Instead, let us approach it creatively, beginning a conversation with our spiritual leaders on its meaning for our time.

Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie
President, Union for Reform Judaism

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