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## **Stories with a Twist** **[278]**

### **The Time Has Arrived for the Torah to be Silent** **(Insights into Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:7)**

With appreciation to Rabbi Uriel Romano for bringing this story to my attention



#### **Background to Our Story**

##### **Comforting the Mourners. A Practical Guide to Paying a Shiva Call**

**aish** - *A one-page primer on how to comfort a mourner.* By [Mrs. Lori Palatnik](#)

When one pays a shiva call, the focus is on comforting the mourners in their time of greatest grief. Traditionally, one enters the shiva house quietly with a small knock so as not to startle those inside. No one needs to greet visitors; they simply enter on their own.

Food or drinks are not laid out for the visitors, because the mourners are not hosts. They do not greet the visitors, rise for them, or see them out.

When entering the house, you should not greet the mourners. In fact, it is best to come in silently and sit down close to them. Take your cue from the mourners. If they feel like speaking, let them indicate it by speaking first. Let them lead and talk about what they want to talk about. It is best to speak about the one who has passed away, and if you have any stories or memories to share with the mourner, this is the time to do so.

This is not a time to distract them from mourning. Out of nervousness, we often make small talk because we do not know what to say. Don't fill in the time talking about happy subjects or inconsequential topics like politics or business.

Often, the best thing to say is nothing. A shiva call can sometimes be completely silent. If the mourner does not feel like talking at that time, so be it. Your goal is not to get them to talk; it is to comfort them. Your presence alone is doing that. By sitting there silently, you are saying more than words can. You are saying: "I am here for you. I feel your pain. There are no words."

And sometimes there aren't any. Here are examples of things not to say:

- "How are you?" (They're not so good.)
- "I know how you feel." (No you don't. Each person feels a unique loss.)
- "At least she lived a long life." (Longer would have been better.)
- "It's good that you have other children," or, "Don't worry, you'll have more." (The loss of a child, no matter what age, is completely devastating.)
- "Cheer up – in a few months you'll meet someone new." (He/she has just lost the other half of their soul!)
- "Let's talk about happy things." (Maybe later.)

Remember that speaking about the loved one they lost is comforting. It's all right if they cry; they are in mourning. It is all part of the important process of coming to grips with such a loss.

You should not overstay your visit. Twenty minutes will suffice. When other visitors arrive and space is a concern, it is certainly time to leave.

Before leaving, one stands up, approaches the mourner and recites, "*HaMakom yenacheim etchem betoch sha'ar aveiliei Tzion v'Yerushalayim*" -- May the Almighty comfort you among those who mourn for Zion and Jerusalem. One can read this phrase from a sheet of paper.

Upon leaving the house of the mourner, it is customary to give charity in memory of the one who passed away, may his soul be elevated.

### **The Text: Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:7**

...עת לקשות ועת לדבר, אינתתיה דרבי מנא דמכת בצפוריו, סליק רבי אבון לגביה למיחמיה ליה אפיו, אמר ליה לית מארי משגח אמר לן הדיא מילה דאורייתא, אמר ליה הא מטה ענתה דאורייתא דמחשי מתעלייה למשתקה.

*A time to be silent and a time to speak (Ecclesiastes 3:7)*

The wife of Rabbi Mana died in Sepphoris.

Rabbi Avun ascended to [Rabbi Mana] to show him [his] face, ie to console him.

[Rabbi Avun] said [to Rabbi Mana]: Does my master not pay heed to tell us a word of Torah?

[Rabbi Mana] responded to him [to Rabbi Avun]: the time has arrived for the Torah to be silent. It is now proper to be quiet.



**Explaining the Story** - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

### Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**?** *A time to be silent and a time to speak (Ecclesiastes 3:7)* Can you think of some examples of when it is a time to speak? What about when it is a time to be silent?

**?** What is the relationship between Rabbi Avun and Rabbi Mana?

**Bonus ?** Why did Rabbi Avun ask the mourner, Rabbi Mana, to say a word of Torah?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**Extra Bonus ?** Why did Rabbi Mana respond to Rabbi Avun: “the time has arrived for the Torah to be silent” as opposed to “the time has arrived for me to be silent” or “the time has arrived for you to be silent”?

### “The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts

**!** If the Torah, that has so much wisdom to share, has a time to be silent, so do you!



This short story tells us that because we have something clever to say, it doesn't mean we have to say it. There is a time to speak and a time to be silent. While most people don't have a problem with talking, sometimes (as a matter of fact, many times) people, even well-intentioned people, have a problem being quiet. In our story, Rabbi Avun, wishes to comfort his teacher

by inviting him to do what the teachers knows best: to talk words of Torah. Perhaps Rabbi Avun, like most of us, cannot withstand long periods of silence or perhaps he wants to ingratiate his mourning teacher by playing the role of a humble student eager to learn. Rabbi Mana cuts Rabbi Avun off by telling him that even the Torah knows when to take a vacation from talking, and so should he. By not teaching his student Torah, Rabbi Mana teaches him one of the most important lessons we can all embrace: master the neglected art of being quiet!

