

Comforting the bereaved: A Jewish perspective

A Review of *The Right Word*
by Rabbi Shawn B. Zell

A review of *The Right Word* by Rabbi Shawn B. Zell. New York: Vantage Press, 2008. 108 pp. (ISBN: 978-0-533-15854-6). \$11.95. Reviewed by Laurie A. Burke.

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The Right Word acts as a guide to those of the Jewish faith on how to offer verbal support to the bereaved. This book's usefulness would be sufficient if it stopped there, but it doesn't. The author extends his helpful insights to those of any or no faith since we all find ourselves from time to time in need of just the right words of comfort to extend to the bereaved.

The necessity for a book like this stems from society's need for directives in this realm of mortal existence. Since, inevitably, all will lose someone to death, eventually all will also grieve. Yet strangely, many of us do not know how to help others during this natural, necessary, and normal human process. Simply stated, not only do we in America feel a certain amount of repulsion when it comes to death itself and death-related conversations, but we also do not know what to say to those who have the death of a loved one thrust upon them. Unlike many others cultures, ours offers little in the way of

do's and don'ts to guide us in how best to verbally and emotionally support those who grieve. In contrast, Zell explains that the Jewish law does offer guidance by requiring specific things from both the "visitor" and the griever. In Judaism, the act of visiting those who have lost a loved one is called the mitzvah of *Nichum Aveilim*, and is accompanied by the following traditional statement of comfort: *HaMakom yinachem Ethchem b'toch shaar avalei Tzion V'Yrushalaim*, "May the Omnipresent comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." It is this greeting that is spoken to the bereft as they leave the graveside, and then again as comforters leave the Shiva house—the Jewish house of mourning. Interestingly, according to Jewish tradition it is the bereaved who should initiate conversation during mourning. Believing this to be every bit as difficult as it sounds, Rabbi Zell's intention is to offer appropriate methods of engagement between the comforters and those who need comforting. Accordingly, it is the author's stance that what is spoken to those who mourn is directionally powerful, toward increased solace or toward further loss and pain.

Each chapter of the text expounds on a different type of verbal interaction between those "sitting shiva" (a seven day period of intense mourning usually held in the home of the deceased where it is believed his or her spirit remains the strongest) and those who come to offer both their presence and words of comfort. In chapter one, Rabbi Zell wastes no time in tackling the easily recognizable, inappropriately insensitive comments that bereaved everywhere must endure. Perhaps, within the confines of the Shiva house, remarks such as "We all have to go sometime," and "I never thought he'd make it this long" somehow seem even more infelicitous. Apart from being clearly

unsympathetic, for the most part these statements lack value altogether; hence, as the Rabbi questions, why even make them?

In chapter two, entitled *Breaking the Ice*, the author explains why some type of method might be necessary for Shiva-house visitors to employ in opening up helpful conversation, especially when the death was untimely (the death of a young person) or unexpected (the death occurred suddenly without warning, i.e. fatal accident, suicide, homicide). Examples from this section can be grouped into two categories—those applicable if you knew the deceased or not, and those relevant when the deceased was quite well-known to the comforter. As an example of the former, “I wish I had the proper words” can exemplify much more effectively an aura of concern than “I really don’t know what to say.” The first forms a natural, positively spoken bond that aligns itself with the reality that the bereaved also have a wish—they wish they could wake up from this bad dream. At the same time that simple statement conveys the message that despite his or her meager attempts, the comforter is available and concerned, which opens up the door for the griever to respond in return, perhaps with a simple thank you or by making other needs known. More than the specific utterances, the meaning behind the words often speak volumes to the bereaved whose senses might be more fine tuned at this juncture of life than at any other time. To illustrate: this comment when spoken to the bereaved “All those people at the funeral...that was quite a tribute,” may translate like this—a) you [the comforter] made the effort to attend the funeral, b) your comment makes me and my family feel important and, c) in my distress I could not notice, but you have reminded me that my loved one was important to a large number of people.

One thing we Americans do seem to understand in relation to bereavement is that those who mourn can expect to be comforted. In *Melting the Ice* (Chapter 3), Zell reminds us that in this regard we can take our cues from the bereaved. As they respond to our presence or to our feeble attempts to break the ice, if we will take the time and put forth the effort, those who grieve will usually also give us everything we need to melt the ice (comfort them). Sometimes though, what they say to us makes us wonder how we could possibly help because we are unsure what kind of comfort they actually want. Quite frankly, their honest and penetrating questions or verbal expressions of pain are not always easy to absorb. An example of this sometimes comes when the bereaved express anger toward God. Such anger frequently comes in the form of rhetorical questions, those questions we instinctively know require no response yet in our state of helplessness feel obliged to provide. Yet, Zell attempts to let us off the hook by giving Chapter Four the self-explanatory title: *It's Not a Question, So Don't Provide Answers*. His choice of words serves to remind us of the massive amount of emotion that comes during bereavement and the bereaved's need to freely and safely let off some accumulated steam. The implication is that a seasoned and successful visitor will recognize and respect this need.

Not only will the comforter recognize the need simply to listen, he or she will also remain quiet even when *It Tears at Your Heart* (Chapter Five) to do so. Almost without exception, every death brings with it sadness, grief, and longing. To sit alongside and share in another's pain is rarely easy, and made especially difficult when levels of disbelief and anger are elevated. How should the visitor respond to displays of indeterminate anger? Zell minces no words in simply saying that silence is often the only

suitable response. Why? Because the bereaved are usually not up to conversation. Furthermore, for those of Jewish faith who rightly feel a sense of obligation in fulfilling the mitzvah of *Nichum Aveilim*, Zell wants to assure them that even in silence they still can.

In the final two chapters, the author reiterates that just because Shiva draws to a close that does not mean that the role of the visitor in the life of the bereaved must follow suit. Rather, he speaks of the *Perpetual Care* (Chapter Seven) or memorializing of the deceased by those who support the bereaved. One poignant yet practical example of making a public declaration that the life of the deceased did matter is to fund the planting of a tree in Israel, then to send a note to the family member letting them know. Acts such as this are especially meaningful on those occasions when the would-be comforter cannot make it to the Shiva house in person. As Zell reminds the reader, grievors often deal simultaneously with a number of emotional factors as they mourn. One of these is disappointment. Built-in expectations about who should have been at the funeral, who should provide comfort during Shiva, etc., prevail. Still, despite how we might fail the bereaved initially, there is still opportunity to make up for our shortcomings by making contact as soon as possible. Sending a card, donating a siddur (prayer book) in the deceased's name, or some other thoughtful gesture will be a meaningful contribution, assuring the mourner that he or she and the lost loved one have not been forgotten.

Although not coming from a spiritual tradition that mandates a specific set of commands governing how to comfort the bereft, I found myself “right there” with Zell as he described examples of social interactions that occur at the Shiva House—from those who offered both the “right” and the “wrong” word. I am confident that Jews can learn

something valuable from this brief but informative book about how to maneuver through the mitzvah of *Nichum Aveilim* in a way that is truly helpful to the griever. And the rest of us can learn more about Jewish bereavement practices while, at the same time, learning better ways to comfort our own bereaved friends and family, whatever their faith orientation.