

This week's parasha, Chaye Sarah, records the deaths of Abraham, Sarah and Ishmael. I read it, thinking of the recent losses our congregation has sustained – the deaths that have touched all of us so deeply. I have been to too many funerals over the past few months, made too many shiva calls, led a few minyanim. We have all cried together.

Our text gives us great advice on how to bury the dead – Abraham's purchase of a cave burial spot for Sarah teaches us to honor and respect the body that once housed a human soul. His remarriage and subsequent children teach us to continue our own lives, allowing ourselves to be happy and connected once more. But we are given no indication of what happens between burial and re-entry into life.

Here our tradition speaks volumes. The progression from death through shiva and sheloshim to yardzeit mimics the psychological progression through grief. Our ancestors were wise when they forbid mourners to dance for a specified period of time, when they allowed mourners to attend a wedding, but prohibited the party. It is too much to expect people to celebrate, to put their own sorrow aside.

But I wonder if we have lost too much as we step away from some of these mourning rituals. I know that many people expect mourning to end quickly, for the pain to abate soon. When we think of the biblical commandment to comfort the bereaved, we think of a shiva call, a memorial donation. But do we spend time with a person who is rebuilding their life? Are we available for the irrational, painful reality that our

friends face as they adapt to life with a spouse, parent, or friend?

It is enormously difficult for most of us to sit with another person's pain, and yet I believe, it is the greatest gift we can give another person. A silent touch, our presence, these are what the commandment demands of us. Our goal cannot be to help the mourner recover, but to be present as they navigate a new road.

Betsy Stone