

Just Between Us

Readers are invited to use this forum to express personal views and address issues of concern to fellow Jews.

Talk or No Talk?

By Rabbi Edward Davis

When my wife and I were first married, we traveled to England. Attending to mundane matters upon our arrival, I needed a haircut. I went to a barbershop in London and as I sat down in the barber's chair, he asked me, "Talk or no talk?" I had never heard that choice presented before, and I mulled over my options for a moment. I could either hear the barber talk — which would be part of experiencing England, considering his accent — or choose not to. I opted closer to my own personality, saying to him, "No talk." He proceeded to give me a haircut and kept quiet the whole time.

Since that trip 29 years ago, I hardly ever thought about the incident in the barbershop. Only recently, after attending a *shivah*, did I reflect on this notion. When we visit a house of mourning and approach the mourner, we are required to wait before speaking. We must allow the mourner to speak first. If he does not talk, then we are not permitted to speak. If he does open the conversation, only then are we allowed to speak to him. This really is the same option that the barber was giving me: talk or no talk.

The Talmud states, "Reward comes to the one who remains silent in the house of mourning" (*Brachot*6b). Some commentators say this "one" refers to the mourner himself, while others say it refers

to the visitor. Why be quiet? It is explained that it is necessary for the mourner to state his acceptance of the Heavenly decree. Similarly, others write that the mourner must first show his distress before one can begin to comfort him. I always felt that the requirement for the visitor to be quiet is to allow the mourner the option of remaining silent. Maybe s/he does not want to engage in conversation, wrapped up in his or her own thoughts of grief. It would be unfair for a visitor to intrude on the mourner's attempts to cope.


Often, what occurs in a *shivah* house is just the opposite: people begin to "overtalk." They engage in chatter, as though the object were to distract the mourner from his loss, rather than taking their cue from the mourner as to how the conversation should run. The purpose of a *shivah* visit is to offer comfort; and it's true that it is not always easy to find the right words. Rabbi Aron Levine notes in his book, *To Comfort the Bereaved*, that the decision of whether or not to speak at all should be left to the mourner.

We have a tendency to speak too much. It is not necessary for us to constantly have something to say. When a young man and a young lady go out on a date, there is a certain pressure to entertain each other and a silent lull may be perceived as non-interest. When the two people truly become comfortable with each other, the need to speak is not as great. After many years of marriage, the feeling of having my wife nearby is extremely reassuring.

I do not feel pressured to court her attention. When I am away on a trip out of town without her, I have trouble sleeping. I know that what keeps me from complete rest is her absence. This kind of relationship is greatly satisfying — and it is accomplished by one's presence, even in silence.

Needless to say, there are other times when there is no option of "talk or no talk." There are times when clearly the responsibility is to *not* talk. This is something that I need to remind myself of (as well as others) in *shul*, during *davening* or during the Torah reading, where silence is mandated. And yet we feel the necessity to fill the lulls of silence with the sound of our voices.

There are other times when I need to remind people that to articulate is necessary. Although God does read our minds, we are not permitted to absolve ourselves of our responsibility to dialogue with Him. It is not enough to "read" the *sid-dur* as if we are reading a book. It is required to articulate the words so that we hear ourselves speaking, though the person next to us should not be able to hear what we say. Hence I must talk and articulate my requests, my praises, my desires, and only then hope to feel Hashem's positive response.

Talk or no talk? Remembering this question is a good reminder to us that the options are ours. It is the daily decisions we make in answer to this question that make our lives empty or rewarding, filled with idle chatter or meaningful discussion. 

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