PSJC Hevra Kadisha

Taharah Manual

Second Edition

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# Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Preparation for *Taharah* 2

- Entering the *Taharah* Area 3
- Bringing in the Body 4

*Rehitzah* / Washing 6

- Order of Washing 7

*Taharah* / Ritual Purification 9

- Preparation for Purification 9
- Order of Purification 10

*Halbashah* / Dressing 11

- Order of Dressing 12
- Diagram of Knots 13

*Hashkavah* / Laying to Rest 14

- Order of Laying to Rest 14

Debriefing After *Taharah* 18

Songs and Chants 19

Notes on Specific Practices 23

Bibliography 24

Acknowledgements 25
INTRODUCTION

“Laying out the dead” is a time-honored ritual process, both spiritual and practical, that spans world cultures. In Judaism, this ritual process is the responsibility of the Hevra Kadisha (הברא קדישא), the Sacred Society whose members have presided for centuries over the burial practices of Jewish communities throughout the world.

There are five core practices that comprise the work of the Hevra Kadisha:

- **Sh’mirah** (שמירה): Vigil-keeping from the time of death until burial;
- **Rehitzah** (ריהצת): Washing the body to remove dirt and foreign matter;
- **Taharah** ( سواءה): Ritual purification of the body;
- **Halbashah** (הלבשה): Dressing the body in takhrikhim / shrouds (תקריכים);
- **Hashkavah** (חשכה): Placing the dead in the coffin (the actual “laying out”).

*Taharah*, the specific term for ritual purification, is also the word conventionally used to encompass all of the practices from washing to laying out the dead. This *Taharah* Manual is based upon the broader definition of *taharah*. The responsibilities of *sh’mirah* are presented elsewhere, in materials prepared by our *Hevra Kadisha* and others.

*Taharah* traditions have evolved over centuries and continents; the rituals are learned through practice and passed from one generation to the next. Over time, each *Hevra Kadisha* develops its own unique customs (*minhagim*) as appropriate to the values and needs of particular communities, in keeping with the general principles of *taharah*.

This *Taharah* Manual, like many others from which it has drawn inspiration and guidance, is another link in the chain of tradition. It is a work in progress, expressing our best understanding at this time of how to honor and care for the dead in our own community of Park Slope Jewish Center (PSJC).

Heartfelt thanks to all whose expertise and commitment are reflected in these pages; specific acknowledgements are listed at the end. This Manual was prepared under the supervision of Rabbi Carie Carter, and is offered in special tribute to all of the members of our PSJC community who have facilitated and participated in this sacred work.

*Rabbi Regina L. Sandler-Phillips*

*September 2005 / Elul 5765*
PREPARATION FOR TAHARAH

Taharah supply kits are kept with the rosh metahe/et, the leader of each of our men’s and women’s taharah teams. The kits should be checked between mobilizations for taharah so that supplies and materials can be replenished as necessary.

Before going into the preparation room, the team members gather in a meeting room of the funeral parlor where the rosh will share any pertinent information s/he may have obtained about the meit/ah (person who has died), including the Jewish name of the meit/ah, the circumstances of death, and the condition of the body. This is also a time to share and address any personal concerns that team members (especially first-timers) may have before beginning the actual taharah.

The basic rules of k’vod hameit (honoring the dead) are reviewed:

- Always refer to the meit/ah by her/his name (Jewish, if known).
- There is no conversation except as necessary to perform the taharah.
- Do not stand at the head of the meit/ah except when absolutely necessary.
- Do not pass anything over the body of the meit/ah.
- Follow the directions and decisions of the rosh. Any disagreements during the process should be aired and resolved later, after the taharah is completed.
- Details of the taharah are not to be discussed with anyone outside the team.

If sh’mirah (the vigil over the dead) is already in progress at the time of the taharah, the vigil-keeper/s on duty can continue to provide a sacred space for both the meit/ah and the taharah team by continuing to recite Psalms at a respectful distance from the room in which the taharah is performed.

At the end of the pre-taharah briefing, all members of the team stand and recite the following blessing together:

Source of kindness and compassion, whose ways are ways of mercy and truth, You have commanded us to act with loving-kindness and righteousness toward the dead, and to engage in their proper burial. Grant us the courage and the strength to properly perform this work, this holy task of cleaning and washing the body, dressing the dead in shrouds, and burying the deceased. Forgive us for any errors we may commit during this process. Guide our hands and hearts as we do this work, and enable us to fulfill the commandment of love. Help us see Your face in the face of the deceased, even as we see You in the faces of those who share this task with us. Source of life and death, be with us now and always.
Except where otherwise indicated, the prayers and passages in this Manual should be recited in Hebrew by a designated team member who is comfortable with the language and understands what s/he is reciting. If no such team member is available, the words may be recited by one or more team members in English. At the discretion of the rosh, some or all passages may be recited in both Hebrew and English.

**Entering the Taharah Area**

Wash your hands (after removing any rings or bracelets) by pouring water alternately over each hand three times from a vessel, without reciting a blessing. Allow to air dry.

Put on gowns, booties and rubber gloves. These are universal health precautions, to ensure the safety of the living as well as to give equal and respectful treatment to each meit/ah, regardless of the cause of death.

Cut and tear sheets in preparation for covering and washing the body during the taharah. Be sure to prepare large sheets as well as smaller pieces, for covering the face as well as for washing.

Rinse and fill three large buckets with cold water for taharah, and saucepans or other smaller vessels with lukewarm water for rehitzah (washing).

Open the package of takhrikhim (shrouds) and prepare the aron (coffin). Remove 1/3 of the straw from the aron and put it aside, along with some of the afar (earth from Israel), with the small pillowcase that comes with the takhrikhim. The rest of the straw should remain in the aron, and about half of the remaining afar should be sprinkled over it.

Lay out the sovev (winding sheet) from the takhrikhim, draped over all four sides of the aron. If the sovev is not long enough to extend over the head and foot, turn it diagonally. If it is still too short, be sure it is draped over the head. If the meit/ah will be buried in a tallit (prayer shawl), lay out the tallit over the sovev near the head. It is customary to cut off one of the tzitziyot (ritual fringes) of the tallit in which the meit/ah will be buried.

Lay out the rest of the garments on the edge of the aron, placing them over the sovev in the reverse order in which they are going to be used: First the empty pillowcase, then the mitznefet (head covering), avnet (sash for the waist, also called a gartel), kittel (robe with collar), mikhnasayim (pants), ankle bands (sometimes called bendelakh), and the k’tonet (collarless tunic). If the meit/ah is to be buried in her/his own kittel, it should be laid out under the kittel from the shroud set after any buttons or snaps are removed.
Bringing in the Body

The body is brought into the taharah room feet first, and members of the taharah team gather around the meit(ah) to request mekhilah (forgiveness). Mekhilah will also be requested at the end of the taharah. If the person’s Jewish name is not known, use her/his full English name.

All recite the following:

________, daughter / son of ________ and ________, we ask your forgiveness for any distress we may cause you during this taharah. We will do everything possible to insure that you are treated with respect, and that all the elements of taharah are properly completed. Everything we are about do is for the sake of your honor.

Recite Hamol (Prayer for Compassion):

FOR A FEMALE:

Master of the universe, have compassion for ________, the daughter of ________ and ________, this meit(ah), who is the daughter of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah, Abraham, Issac and Jacob, Your servants; and may her spirit and soul rest with the righteous, for You give life to the dead and death to the living. Blessed are You Who forgives sins and transgressions of the dead of Your people Israel, upon petition. And also let it be acceptable before You, our Eternal God and God of our ancestors, to bring a circle of angels of mercy before the meit(ah), who is Your servant-woman, daughter of your servant-woman. And You, our Eternal God and God of our ancestors, Who is concerned with the poor, save her from all misery and from an evil day and from the judgment of purgatory. Blessed are You, Great One of kindness and Master of compassion. Blessed are You

(Continued on next page)
Who makes peace in Your heights, for Your servants and those who revere Your name. Blessed is the One who redeems Your people Israel from all kinds of tribulation with compassion. With compassion hide and cause to disappear the wrongdoings of this meitah, your servant. From burning fire save her, for she is in need of Your great compassion. And You, our Eternal God, are good and pardon all who call upon You. Blessed are You, great in counsel and Master of achievement in compassion; with the feet of the righteous men and women in the Garden of Eden may she tread, for that is the place of the upright, and God’s pious ones will be protected. Blessed are You Who imparts great compassion and forbearance to the dead of Your people Israel. Amen; may this be Your will.

(Continued on next page)

FOR A MALE:

Master of the universe, have compassion for ________, the son of ________ and ________, this meit, who is the son of Abraham, Issac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah, Your servants; and may his spirit and soul rest with the righteous, for You give life to the dead and death to the living. Blessed are You Who forgives sins and transgressions of the dead of Your people Israel, upon petition. And also let it be acceptable before You, our Eternal God and God of our ancestors, to bring a circle of angels of mercy before the meit, who is Your servant-man, son of your servant- woman. And You, our Eternal God and God of our ancestors, Who is concerned with the poor, save him from all misery and from an evil day and from the judgment.
of purgatory. Blessed are You, Great One of kindness and Master of compassion. Blessed are You Who makes peace in Your heights, for Your servants and those who revere Your name. Blessed is the One who redeems Your people Israel from all kinds of tribulation with compassion. With compassion and the many ways of petition and God’s pious ones will be protected. Compassion; with the feet of the righteous who call upon you. Blessed are You, great in counsel and Master of achievement in compassion; with the feet of the righteous men and women in the Garden of Eden may he tread, for that is the place of the upright, and God’s pious ones will be protected. Blessed are You Who imparts great compassion and the many ways of petition to the dead of Your people Israel. Amen; may this be Your will.

**REHITZAH / WASHING**

The *meit/ah* should be on her/his back with feet facing the sink. If possible, elevate the head of the table by tilting the table upwards. Be sure that the drainage hole at the foot of the table is over the sink, so that the water used for washing or during the *taharah* flows directly into the sink.

Unwrap and undress the body and cover it with a large sheet. Place the head upon a headrest; the head should be protected from falling at all times during the process.

**As the body is uncovered and examined, recite Vaya’an Vayomer (Zekhariah 3:4):**

And [the angel of God] raised his voice and spoke to those standing before him, saying: “Remove the soiled garments from him”; and said to [the High Priest]: “Behold, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you in fine garments.”
With the face and genitals covered, carefully survey the body and inspect for blood and other bodily fluids, as well as for wounds, abrasions and other conditions of the skin. Prepare a biodegradable bag to hold any bloodstained material. Within reason, all bloodstained bandages, clothing, rags, etc. should be collected for burial in this bag, which will be placed in the coffin at the foot of the meit/ah and buried with her/him.

Any problems to be addressed, such as bandages, tubes, open bleeding, etc., should be identified at this time. All foreign materials should be removed UNLESS this is deemed likely to produce excessive bleeding or otherwise threaten the integrity of the body. The principle of k’vod hameit (the honor of the dead) is our ultimate concern. Problems should be resolved under the direction of the rosh, who may consult with a more experienced rosh or rabbi outside the taharah room if necessary.

**Order of Washing  ודר רוחיצא**

For our purposes, the “personal space” of the meit/ah extends above the body and over the head; this is where the neshamah (soul) is traditionally believed to hover during the period before burial. We respect this soul-space by not passing any materials or utensils over the body; we take care to pass them around the table instead. Similarly, we take care not to stand over the head of the meit/ah, except as necessary to support the head when washing or turning the body.

We begin at the top of the body and work downwards. Uncover only the portion of the body being washed, and then re-cover it. Begin by pouring water on the hair and washing the face with a cloth, around the eyes and nose and behind the ears, taking care not to pour water directly on the face or into the mouth. Proceed to wash the neck and right shoulder.

The right side is washed before the left, and the front is washed before the back. Clean the fingernails and toenails with toothpicks, and remove any nail polish. After washing from head to toe on the right side, cross the right leg over the left leg at the ankle and turn the meit/ah onto her/his left side to wash the right side of the back. Do the reverse for the left side. The head should always be supported when turning the body.

Respectfully clean the genital and rectal areas. Consult with the rosh about any excessive or repeated discharges of bodily fluids.

Collect any blood that flows from the body with the material on which it flowed (washcloths, etc.) in the biodegradable bag designated for this purpose. It will later be placed at the feet of the meit/ah in the aron.
As the body is washed, recite one of the following passages from the Song of Songs:

FOR A FEMALE: *Hinakh Yaffah* (Song of Songs 4:1-5, 7):

How beautiful you are, my beloved friend: your eyes are doves from behind your tresses; your hair as a flock of goats that trail down from Mount Gil’ad. Your teeth like a flock of sheep that rise from the washing-pool, that are all matched with no break among them. Like a crimson ribbon your lips, and your speech is pleasant; like a pomegranate is the curve of your cheek from behind your tresses. Like a tower of David your neck, raised in splendor; a thousand shields hang upon it, shields of the warriors. Your two breasts as two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that graze among the lilies. You are all lovely, my beloved friend, and there is no flaw in you.

FOR A MALE: *Rosho Ketem Paz* (Song of Songs 5:11-16)

His head is fine gold; his heaps of curls are black as a raven. His eyes are like doves at water-brooks; bathing in milk and fully set. His cheeks are like a bed of spices, towers of sweet herbs; his lips are lilies that drip with flowing myrrh. His arms are gold cylinders set with gems of topaz; his abdomen is polished ivory set with sapphires. His legs are pillars of marble, established upon fine gold; his appearance is like Lebanon, a man like cedars. His mouth is sweet, and all of him is delightful; this is my beloved and this is my friend, daughters of Jerusalem.
When the washing is completed, pour the remaining water from the pans down the table to clean it. Dry the meit/ah and the table with separate pieces of cloth sheet, and place a fresh sheet over the body. Once the washing is completed, all team members should discard their rubber gloves and wash their hands again, without a blessing, and put on a fresh pair of rubber gloves.

**TAHARAH / RITUAL PURIFICATION**

**Preparation for Purification**

If three buckets (representing 9 kavim, or approximately 24 quarts) have not yet been rinsed and filled with cold water, they should be at this time.

Boards are now placed under the meit/ah so that the 9 kavim can flow freely over her/his body. 2”x4” varnished boards are dunked at each end into the buckets of water, and then placed under the body at the shoulders, hips, and ankles. Be sure that no part of the body is touching the table. The rosh will determine the best way for team members to support the head during the taharah.

**Before the water is poured for taharah, recite Amar Rabbi Akiva**

*(Mishnah Yoma 8:9 and related Biblical verses):*

Said Rabbi Akiva, “You are fortunate, Israel. Before Whom do you purify yourselves, and Who purifies you? Your Father in heaven, as it is said: ‘And I will pour pure water upon you, and you shall be purified’ (Ezekiel 36:25), and it says: ‘The mikveh / ritual bath of Israel is God’ (Jeremiah 17:13). Just as a mikveh purifies the defiled, so does the Holy Blessed One purify Israel” (Mishnah Yoma 8:9). A fountain for gardens, a well of living waters, flowing from Lebanon (Song of Songs 4:15). And I will pour pure water upon you, and you shall be purified from all of your impurities; and from all of your abominations I shall purify you (Ezekiel 36:25).
**Order of Purification**

The three buckets of water must be poured in a continuous flow over the entire body. This is the only time during the process that the body of the meit/ah is completely exposed, so there should be no unnecessary delay between uncovering and re-covering.

As soon as the sheet covering the meit/ah is removed, one team member begins to pour the first bucket of water over the top of the head, and before the first bucket is emptied a second team member begins pouring the second bucket of water down the right side of the body. Before the second bucket is emptied, a third team member begins pouring the third bucket of water down the left side of the body.

All team members recite the following three times as the third bucket is emptied:

**FOR A FEMALE:**

עזהonna נאה...עזהonna נאה...עזהonna נאה

*Tehorah hee*...*Tehorah hee*...*Tehorah hee.*

She is pure...She is pure...She is pure.

**FOR A MALE:**

עזהonna נאה...עזהonna נאה...עזהonna נאה

*Tahor hu*...*Tahor hu*...*Tahor hu.*

He is pure...He is pure...He is pure.

If there is any break in the pouring, the three buckets of water should be refilled and poured again in a continuous flow, and the recitation is repeated.

As soon as the three buckets have been poured in a continuous stream, cover the meit/ah with a fresh sheet. As the body is raised to remove the boards underneath, spread another fresh sheet on the table under the meit/ah as well.

Dry the body carefully with the sheets, and replace the top sheet with a dry one (the bottom sheet will be removed during the dressing process).
Before the meit/ah is dressed, recite Sos Assis
(Leviticus 16:4, Isaiah 58:11, 61:10-11 and Zekhariah 3:5):

Order of Dressing

Portions of Leviticus 16:4, which describes how Aaron is to be clothed as the High Priest, are recited after the meit/ah is dressed in each of the corresponding garments. It is our minhag (custom) to proceed according to the order of the verse, placing the head covering last. However, care should be taken to keep the face covered while the body is dressed in the rest of the takhrikhim.

1. The k’tonet (collarless tunic) is most easily put on as follows: Lay the garment face down on the body, with the head opening toward the feet of the meit/ah. One team member on either side inserts a hand into the end of the sleeve, reaches around and down through the bottom of the garment, and draws the hand of the meit/ah into the sleeve. The sleeves are drawn up until the armhole meets the armpit of the meit/ah. A third team member gathers up the garment near the head, the meit/ah is lifted at the upper body and the k’tonet is pulled over the head and smoothed down over the body, crossing the legs to turn the body as necessary.
The ties at the neck are wound four times while reciting Aleph, Bet, Gimmel, Dalet, and tied into two loop bows (see diagram on next page). **Recite:**

[You] shall wear a holy linen tunic.

2. The mikhnasayim (pants) are pulled over the feet of the meit/ah, and the k’tonet is tucked neatly into the mikhnasayim and smoothed down inside. Gather the pants at the waist and close the ties with four counted windings and two loop bows, as above. Tie each of the ankle bands the same way. **Recite:**

...and breeches of linen shall be upon [your] flesh.

3. The kittel (robe with collar) from the takhrikhim set is put on in the same manner as the k’tonet. Care should be taken when putting on the kittel that the sleeves of the k’tonet are grasped so that they will reach to the wrists.

If the meit/ah is to be buried in her/his own kittel, there are a few possible ways to put on this (open) kittel (over the previous one, if possible) after its buttons or snaps have been removed. Follow the instructions of the rosh.

4. The avnet / gartel is passed under the body as a belt, taking care that it remains flat and not twisted underneath. It is wound around 13 times by two team members counting Aleph, Bet, Gimmel, Dalet, Heh, Vov, Zayin, Het, Tet, Yud, Yud-Alef, Yud-Bet, Yud-Gimmel. The avnet is tied in a shin knot, with three loop bows (see diagram on next page). **Recite:**

...and a linen sash shall [you] tie.

5. **FOR A FEMALE:** The veil is placed on the forehead and tied at the back. The mitznefet (bonnet) is placed on the head and drawn down to cover the entire head and neck, with the hair gathered under the cap. Tie the bonnet with a bow, or using the method specified for the k’tonet (as above).

**FOR A MALE:** Fit the mitznefet (hood) over the head, making sure that the face and back of the head are covered.

**Recite:**

...and a linen headdress shall [you] don.
Diagram 13

A. Starting position for tying bands (twists).
B. Strip one of loops left over previous.
C. End of twisting, tightened.
D. Strip twist under and up through.
E. Strip twist under and up through.
F. Tightening a finished loop, which excedes.
G. Finished knots, with ends trimmed up.
H. This is the completed shdler for the

Parts and ankles.
I. This is the completed shdler for the neck.
At the conclusion of the dressing, recite the conclusion of Numbers 16:4, as well as the beginning of Genesis 43:14:

...these are garments of holiness, and [you] shall bathe [your] flesh in water and put them on. And may the God of nurturance give you compassion.

If the condition of the body is such that the ritual purification and dressing cannot be performed, the meit/ah is placed into the aron (see below) and wrapped in the sovev, and the takhrikhim are placed over the meit/ah in the same order as above, and on the parts of the body they would normally have covered. Follow the directions of the rosh, who may consult with a more experienced rosh or rabbi outside the taharah room if necessary.

HASHKAVAH / LAYING TO REST

Turn the table so that the feet of the meit/ah are facing the door. Bring the aron into the room and position it alongside the table, also facing the door, and then place the lid of the aron against a wall to the side. The sovev should already be laid out over the four sides of the aron, and the tallit (if the meit/ah is to be buried in one) laid out widthwise over the sovev, toward the head.

Order of Laying to Rest

Put a handful of straw and the designated portion of afar into the small pillowcase.

Place the pillowcase at the head of the aron and recite Vehu Rahum (Psalm 78:38):

And [God], being compassionate, will effect atonement for transgression and will not destroy, and has repeatedly turned back [God’s] anger, and will not arouse all of [God’s] wrath.

The details of the actual hashkavah will depend upon the condition and weight of the body, as well as the number of team members present to lift the body. Follow the directions of the rosh in lifting the meit/ah and placing her/him in the aron, as gently and respectfully as possible. Be sure the head is supported at all times.
Recite Velo Yavo’u (Numbers 4:20):

And they shall not come to see the covering of the holiness, lest they die.

straighten and arrange the takhrikhim and the ties neatly on the meit/ah. The remainder of the afar is then sprinkled over the eyes, heart, and genital area, taking care that no afar enters the nose or mouth.

Recite Vekipher Admato Amo (Deuteronomy 32:43):

Place shards of pottery over the eyes and mouth. Like the afar, the shards reflect the vulnerable connection between adam (humanity) and adamah (earth), to which the body will return in burial.

Wrap the tallit (if the meit/ah is to be buried in one) over the shoulders. Wrap the sovev over the head, the sides of the body, and the feet. Place the bag contained blood-stained materials at the feet of the meit/ah.

Recite Hinei Mitato (Song of Songs 3:7-8 and related Biblical verses):

Behold the couch of Solomon: sixty mighty men surround it from the heroes of Israel; each of them grasping a sword, learned in war; every man his sword upon his thigh, from fear in the night (Song of Songs 3:7-8).

FOR A MALE:

Birkhah yirah ve’rishmakh: Ya’ar u’ Pinin
Alakh Rishmah: Yishay u’ Pinin Alakh
Rishmah Le’Shalom:

May the Eternal bless you and watch over you.
May the face of the Eternal shine upon you and be gracious to you.
May the face of the Eternal be lifted toward you and give you peace (Numbers 6:24-26).

FOR A FEMALE:

Birkhah yirah ve’rishmakh: Ya’ar u’ Pinin
Alakh Rishmah: Yishay u’ Pinin Alakh
Rishmah Le’Shalom:
[Israel’s] branches shall spread out, and like the olive tree will be his beauty; and his fragrance like Lebanon (Hosea 14:7). Who are you, O mighty mountain? before Zerubavel as a plain, and he shall bring forth the cornerstone with shouts of “Grace! Grace!” upon it (Zekhariah 4:7). And now, let the power of my Lord be great, as you have spoken, saying (Numbers 14:17) ... But as truly as I live, the honor of God will fill all the earth (14:21).

All team members now gather quietly around the aron.

Recite Anu Mevakshim Mekhilah (Final Request for Forgiveness):

FOR A MALE:

און מבקשות מחילה מאחק אס לאkszון כפמי הכורדים, אובל עלינו כמכתב הנקודות

daughter / son of _____________ and _____________

we ask your forgiveness if we did not act according to your honor,
even though we acted according to our custom.

FOR A FEMALE:

און מבקשות מחילה מאחק אס לאkszון כפמי הכורדים, אובל עלינו כמכתב הנקודות

In silence, each individual team member then takes the time to ask forgiveness of the meit/ah, by name, for any errors of omission or commission on her/his part. Allow at least one FULL minute for this.

The designated team recitation leader ends the period of silence with singing (see SONGS AND CHANTS at the end). The rest of the team members may join in the melody, words, and/or listening, according to personal comfort level.

Place and secure the lid over the aron. Affix the Star of David, if available, toward the foot of the lid. The aron should not be opened again, except for private identification and leavetaking by those closest to the meit/ah before the funeral service.
Recite *Uvinso’a Hamishkan* (Numbers 1:51 and related Biblical verses):

And in the traveling of the Tabernacle, the Levites shall lower it, and in the pitching of the Tabernacle, the Levites shall raise it; and the stranger who approaches shall be put to death (Numbers 1:51). And it shall be, in the traveling of the *aron*, that Moses will say:

> Arise, Eternal One, and let Your enemies be scattered; let those who hate You flee before you (Numbers 10:35). No evil shall befall you, and disease will not approach your tent. For [God’s] angels will be commanded to guard you in all your journeys. On their hands will they carry you, lest you strike your feet upon a stone (Psalm 91:10-12). God will do battle for you, and you shall hold your peace (Exodus 14:14).

Wheel the *aron*, feet first, out of the *taharah* room to the place where the vigil-keeper/s will continue with *sh’mirah* until the funeral.

In taking leave of the *aron*, all team members recite together:

> House of Israel, come let us walk in God’s light.  
> The Rock of Israel has spoken and called the world into being, from the east where the sun rises to the place where it sets.  
> Peace shall come, and each of us shall rest in our appointed place.  
> For dust we are, and unto dust we return.  
> God has given, and God has taken away; may the name of God be blessed.

All team members return to the *taharah* area, remove gowns and gloves, and wash their hands one more time without a blessing. A wordless melody (*niggun*) may be sung during this time (see SONGS AND CHANTS below for possibilities). Otherwise, this should be done in silence to the extent possible, until the team gathers again for DEBRIEFING (see below).
DEBRIEFING AFTER TAHHARAH

All team members gather again in the meeting room of the funeral parlor to review and discuss the taharah that has just been completed. This is the appropriate time to share questions, perspectives, and feelings, and to clarify any points of confusion or disagreement that may have arisen during the process. Since each person is different, each team member should try to speak in terms of her/his own experiences, and to accept that others may have different feelings and perspectives. The rosh, rabbi and/or another experienced team member should monitor the discussion to ensure a basic level of acceptance and emotional safety for all participants.

In previous generations of Judaism, Jews sustaining direct contact with the dead were isolated by law and custom from various ritual and communal functions. Purification rituals for the living, along with specified waiting periods before resuming normal activities, date from the time of the Bible.

Although these laws and customs are no longer universally upheld, it is still true that participation in taharah is among the most powerful of human experiences. We believe it is essential to provide a transition space and time for all team members following each taharah, regardless of how many times individual members may have participated in the past. Like the initial briefing before entering the taharah room, debriefing should be considered an integral part of the time allocated to the taharah as a whole.

It is particularly important to have this sharing time because details of the taharah are not to be discussed with ANYONE outside of the taharah team. Our primary concern is to protect the honor and privacy of the meit/ah, with whom the team members have come into very intimate contact at this most intense and vulnerable time.

In the same light, the names of team members participating in a given taharah are not identified to surviving family members of the meit/ah, or to the community at large. This is to ensure that the sacred work of the Hevra Kadisha is maintained on the basis of hesed shel emet: kindness at the moment of truth, with no expectation of reward.

Members of the team are encouraged to stay in touch with their team leader/s and rabbi about any issues that may arise for them following the taharah. The members of our Hevra Kadisha as a whole are also honored publicly once a year, at our annual Hevra Kadisha dinner, as is traditional.

Following the debriefing, team members may choose to end the discussion with a niggun and/or a prayer before participants return to their usual routines (see SONGS AND CHANTS below).
SONGS AND CHANTS

Our use of songs and chants during taharah draws upon an established tradition in parts of the Jewish world, particularly among Sephardic Jews. We believe that singing is, first and foremost, a human birthright, and we do not approach it here from the standards of performance art.

Just as we sing lullabies to those who have recently been born into this life, washing and dressing them when they cannot do so for themselves, so we sing to provide a space of comfort for those making the transition beyond this life.

The singing also helps to center, calm and reassure the living members of the taharah team. In most cases, the designated team member who recites the ritual passages will choose the songs and chants. The other team members are encouraged to sing, hum, or listen to the various melodies, with or without words, according to each member’s personal comfort level and what helps each one to focus on the tasks at hand.

And it is written...that three forces of the Holy Blessed One come among God’s cherished people in the power of chants, songs and praises....And it said that there is a chamber hidden above that cannot be opened except through melody / niggun....And the soul benefits from the melody as it is familiar with melodies of the song of the ministering angels and the song of the celestial wheels....And the melody when it ascends, ascends through six / sheish levels, and also when it descends, descends through six, and about this it is said: “His legs are pillars of marble / sheish” [Song of Songs 5:15].

Rabbi Aharon Berakhiah of Modena (1626)

Silence is golden, especially an intelligent silence, but that is when we are on the level of speech. A niggun / wordless melody is better than silence.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyadi (1745 - 1812)
The applications below are offered only as suggestions. For our purposes, the melody and kavannah (spiritual intention) are more important than the words, and often more appropriate without words.

FOR BRIEFING AND/OR DEBRIEFING:

The whole entire world is a very narrow bridge and the main thing is not to fear at all.

Kol ha’olam kulo Gesher tzar me’od Veha’ikar Lo lefakhed klal.

Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav (1772 - 1811)

FOR WASHING AND/OR DRESSING:

An angel weeps, an angel weeps, And bedecks the grass with dew; My beloved, my beloved, I long so for you....

A malekh veynt, a malekh veynt, Un badekt di groz mit toy; Libster mayner, Libster mayner, Ikh benk nokh dir azoy....

Yiddish Words and Music by Peretz Hirshbein

My beloved is mine and I am his, who shepherds among the lilies. Who is this coming up from the wilderness, Fragrant with myrrh and incense? You have won my heart, my sister, my bride. Awake, north wind, and come, south wind.

Dodi li va’ani lo Haro’eh bashoshanim. (2x)

20
How fine you are, my beloved...  
Your eyes are like doves from behind your tresses;  
Your hair is like the flocks that graze...As they trail down from Mount Gil’ad.

Hinakh yafah, rayati;  
Hinakh yafah, einayikh yonim  
Miba’ad latzamatekh  
Se’arekh ke’eder ha’izim...  
Shegalshu mihar Gil’ad.

Until the morning draws its breath and sighs,  
And all the shadows flee the rising sun,  
Set me as a seal upon your heart,  
As a seal upon your arm...

Ad sheyafu’akh hayom  
Venassu hatz’alim  
Simeni khakhotam al liekha,  
Kahhotam al zero’ekha...  
Ki azah khamavet ahavah.

For love is strong, stronger than death.

Song of Songs 4:1,2; 17, 8:6  
Melody by Yosef Mustaki / Singable English by Rabbi Regina L. Sandler-Phillips

FOR LAYING TO REST:

Durme, durme, hizhiko/a de madre  
Sleep, sleep, little mother’s child  
Sleep, sleep, without anxiety or pain

Sleep, sleep, little mother’s child  
Sleep, sleep, without anxiety or pain

Siente, djoya, palavrikas de tu madre  
Listen to the little words of your mother  
The words of Shema Yisrael

Las palabras de Shema Yisrael (2x)  

Durme, durme, hizhiko/a de madre  
Sleep, sleep, little mother’s child  
With the beauty of Shema Yisrael

Con hermozura de Shema Yisrael (2x)

Bosnian Ladino Lullaby as sung by Flory Jagoda

In the name of the Eternal, the God of Israel:  
On my right, Michael, and on my left, Gabriel,  
and before me, Uriel, and behind me, Raphael,  
and above my head the Divine Presence of God.

Beshem Hashem  
Elohei Yisrael (2x),  
Mimini Mikha’el,  
Umismoli Gavri’el,  
Umilfanai Uri’el,  
Ume’akahorai Rifa’el,  
Ve’al roshi  
Shekhinat El (2x).

From the traditional liturgy for the bedtime Sh’ma  
Melody (Yedid Nefesh) by Ehud and Sarah Zweig

21
Lay us down, Eternal One,
O our God, in peace,
And raise us up again,
O our Sovereign,
To life renewed,
to life restored.
And spread over us
the sukkah of Your peace,
And shelter us beneath the
shadow of Your wings.
Guard our going out
and our coming in
Unto life and peace,
from this time forth
and ever more.

Hashkiveinu Adonai
Eloheinu leshalom,
Veha’amideinu,
Malkeinu,
Lekhayim, lekhayim.
Ufros aleinu
Sukkat sh’lomekha,
Uvetzel k’nafekha
tastireinu,
Ush’mor tzeitenu
uvo’einu
Lekhayim uleshalom
me’atah ve’ad olam.

Hashkiveinu (2x)  Adonai elekha
Venashuvah (2x)  Venashuvah (2x)
Hadesh (2x)  Hadesh (2x)
yameinu kekedem.

From the traditional evening liturgy / Music from a South African melody
as taught by Cantor Sue Roemer to Cantor Natasha J. Hirschhorn
Adapted and translated by Rabbi Regina Sandler-Phillips

May the words of my mouth
And the meditations
of my heart
Be acceptable
here before You
O God, my Rock
and my Redeemer.

Yihiyu leratzon
Imrei fi vehegyon libi
Lifanekha, Adonai,
Tzuri vego’ali.

Psalm 19:15
and the traditional liturgy

FOR THE CLOSE OF DEBRIEFING:

Return us, O God, to You
and we will return;
Renew our days as of old.

Hashiveinu (2x)  Hashiveinu (2x)
Adonai elekha  Adonai elekha
Venashuvah (2x)  Venashuvah (2x)
Hadesh (2x)  Hadesh (2x)
yameinu kekedem.

Lamentations 5:21

The songs here are among those selected for recording on Ma’avar: Jewish Melodies, Chants
and Songs of Passage and Transition (forthcoming; please visit www.waysofpeace.org for
more information).
NOTES ON SPECIFIC PRACTICES

1. **Hamol / Prayer for Compassion** (pp. 4-6): Corresponding to the three fathers, we invoke the names of all six mothers of Israel. Bilhah and Zilpah are mothers of four of the Twelve Tribes, and (according to rabbinic tradition) half-sisters of Rachel and Leah. It is particularly fitting that Bilhah and Zilpah be named at this juncture, since (a) as servant-wives in the Biblical testimony, they are most directly identified with the humble title of *amah* (servant-woman) invoked here, and (b) as near-anonymous attendants believed to play significant peacemaking roles in the family drama of the Twelve Tribes, they provide the clearest model for the anonymous attendants of the *Hevra Kadisha*. For an introduction to the Biblical and rabbinic sources on these neglected Biblical mothers, refer to *Who Knows Four? I Know Six!* by Rabbi Regina Sandler-Phillips (see below).

2. “Any problems to be addressed...” (p. 7): The main concern in deciding whether to remove specific bandages and tubes is how to minimize the flow of blood from the body. The *rosh* has access to specialized instructions, as well as to medical volunteers on call if necessary. It is understood that, regardless of specifics, we do the best we can for the honor of the *meit/ah*. Our requests for *mekhilah* (forgiveness) before and after the *taharah* help us to stay focused on our primary purpose.

3. “Boards are now placed under the *meit/ah*...” (p. 9): For when a *mikvah* is not available or appropriate. Although we make use of a *mikvah* available at our local funeral home, it should be noted that such prominent rabbinic authorities as Moshe Feinstein, Dovid Lifshitz and Moshe Heinemann hold that the pouring of nine *kavim* is more appropriate to k’vod hameit than is immersion in a *mikvah*. Refer to the discussion of this issue in *Tahara Manual of Practices* by Rabbi Mosha Epstein (pp. 28-29; see below).

4. “It is our *minhag* (custom) to proceed according to the order of the verse...” (p. 11): We recite Leviticus 16:4 in its entirety, which we believe to be appropriate in context. However, we do not consider the references to the linen garments of the High Priest to be a literal prescription for the *Hevra Kadisha*. Rabban Gamaliel’s directive (as recorded in the Talmud, *Moed Katan* 27a-b) that he be buried in flaxen garments is clearly presented in the context of rabbinic concerns “for the honor of the poor,” and is followed by Rav Pappa’s uncontested assertion that “nowadays, [burial] is customary even in hemp cloth worth one *zuz*!” Today, linen shrouds are the most expensive, and some authorities even countenance a two-class system whereby poor people are “permitted” to use less expensive fabrics. We believe that this negates the original concern.

The *Shulkhan Arukh* declares that “The dead is not to be buried in expensive shrouds, even for a prince of Israel. It has been the custom to bury in white garments” (*Yoreh De’ah* 352:1-2). The connection between the flaxen (Hebrew: *pishtan*) garments of Rabban Gamaliel and the linen (Hebrew: *bahd*) garments of the High Priest appears to be a later addition to burial custom; the recitation of Leviticus 16:4 is not found in *Ma’avar Yabok*. We try to uphold “the honor of the poor” by using muslin *takhrikhim* for every *meit/ah*. 23
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Sandler-Phillips, Rabbi Regina L., *Who Knows Four? I Know Six! Biblical Motherhood Reconsidered in the Stories of Bilhah and Zilpah / A “Starter Kit” for Jewish Educators and Egalitarian Prayer Leaders*. (Copies may be obtained through www.waysofpeace.org)


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Finally, in the sacred tradition of ilui neshamot (elevation of souls), we give honor to those members of our PSJC community whose deaths over the past decade have taught us how to move to the next levels of caring for each other. We hope to be worthy of the blessings of your memories.

Rabbi Regina L. Sandler-Phillips
September 2009 / Elul 5769

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Hebrew are by Rabbi Regina L. Sandler-Phillips.