Guide to Tahara l’Nefesh

Women’s Edition

The highest act of gemilut chasadim (acts of loving kindness) is that which is done for the dead, for there can never be any thought of repayment.

Tanchuma Vayechi 107A

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Blessed be the works of your hands, O Holy One.

Blessed be these hands that have touched life.

Blessed be these hands that have held pain.

Blessed be these hands that have nurtured creativity.

Blessed be these hands that have embraced with passion.

Blessed be these hands that have tended gardens.

Blessed be these hands that have closed in anger.

Blessed be these hands that have planted new seeds.

Blessed be these hands that have harvested ripe fields.

Blessed be these hands that have become knotty with age.

Blessed be these hands that have cleaned, washed, mopped, scrubbed.

Blessed be these hands that are wrinkled and scarred from doing justice.

Blessed be these hands that have reached out and been received.

Blessed be these hands that hold the promise of the future.

Blessed be the works of your hands, O Holy One.

—Diann L. Neu, from the book Earth Prayers
Dear Tahara team member,

One of the most basic principles in Jewish law is “pikuach nefesh” — saving a life. For ages we have known that, if a human life is in danger, under certain circumstances, it is acceptable to break the rules of Shabbat, fasting, and keeping kosher. Throughout our history Jews have fought to survive in many ways, including hiding their religion from others by converting. We have long been taught to celebrate every moment of life. We are reminded of this at every simcha as we shout, “l’chaim!”

Today we have come face to face with a new, frightening challenge. As COVID-19 exponentially spreads to all corners of our world and increasingly takes the lives of those we love, we find ourselves physically separated from friends, family, and community. Members of Chevra Kadishas throughout the world are working to figure out how to ensure the safety of their membership while continuing to honor the deceased through our ancient final life cycle ritual, tahara.

As this is being written, funerals, shiva minyans, and daily services are being broadcast around the world via video sharing platforms. We are fighting in every way we can devise to still be a community, to give each other strength, and observe our rituals. In the face of profound adversity filled with the unknown, we strive to persevere.

We, the members of the community Chevra Kadisha of Portland, Oregon, Chevra Kavod haMet, have modified our existing procedural tahara guides and created a new, modified ritual called “tahara l’nefesh”. This adapted tahara ritual, performed at a distance from the deceased, has been crafted with the utmost care for the neshamah.

Water is central to the tahara purification process. In times when we are not able to perform a complete tahara for an individual we try to use water in some manner, whether it be limited immersion, pouring or sprinkling. We encourage you to pour water in this modified ritual as well. You could find a space outside where you could pour water directly into the earth. Or, pour water into a bowl which you will later give to the earth.

And because we cannot be present with the deceased, we have also asked funeral home staff to sprinkle soil from Israel inside the aron, put a retired prayer book (destined for burial) in the aron, and in lieu of using tachrichim (which in our case is made locally) cover the deceased with a tallit.

As we find ourselves at a distance from the meta, we have incorporated some suggested visualizations which aid us in focusing our minds and hearts on the spiritual, more foundational aspects of tahara.

Take this opportunity to rely on the strength of community. The collective focus of your tahara team will offer the neshamah of the deceased the comfort it needs in this time of confusion and transition. Put your every intention into the steps and prayers the same way you do when in the tahara room. You will know that you have done all that you can, in this time of pikuach nefesh, and the soul will be comforted. Families and friends who mourn their lost loved ones during this time will know that their community came together and did what it could, to do what it has always done.

In blessing and hope for courage and strength,

Chevra Kavod haMet
Portland, Oregon
Before We Begin the Tahara Ritual

Team members should be assembled together, either in person employing social distancing as may be required, or connected via a video sharing platform or via phone.

Leader, please ensure your team members:

• Are in the physical space they have chosen to perform the ritual.
• Have a vessel filled with water and another into which they will pour their water if not pouring outside.
• Have their portable hand washing area set-up or know which sink they will use.
• Have told anyone in the vicinity that they are not to be disturbed.

and:

• Ask them to write down the meta’s (Hebrew Name) or (English Name followed by “bat Avraham v’Sara”) and adhere it to their printed manual.
• Designate yourself or another team member as the Reader.
• Offer a suggested location to visualize performing the ritual, i.e. a meadow or stream.
• Remind everyone that to preserve her dignity, the meta would be covered with a sheet at all times, with the exception of the tahara itself.
• Answer any questions.

Leader, recite:

Preparing someone for burial requires from us the utmost in care and respect for that individual, for how we treat our dead reflects how we should treat everyone. We are aware of the holiness of our actions and the respect we will give the deceased. We are mindful that the soul of the deceased is with us in spirit. We will speak quietly and only as is necessary.

Together, mentally enter the Tahara space.

Suggested Visualization, read slowly by the Leader

We are together, outside in a forest wilderness. The heavens, though high above, feel closer, clearer. Before us the flow of a stream stumbles around the rocks, creating the sound of mayim chayim, living waters. These waters have been here for generations, cutting a smoothly curved path through the surrounding trees. The air is crisp, fresh and a wonder of purity. The wind, carrying melodious birdsong, brushes against our skin with a gentle reminder that nature is everlasting.

While we see each other in this sacred space we also see the power of the life cycle resting before us. The meta is covered in a white cloth, as though in peaceful slumber. But we know the neshamah is restless, confused and frightened by the separation from a part of itself, and the fear of what may come.

We are community and together we will comfort and accompany the neshamah on every step of this journey. We will lovingly prepare her to meet her G-d, who is our G-d, and the G-d of our ancestors.

Remember

Pikuach nefesh

The preservation of human life takes precedence over all of the other commandments in Judaism.

One is not merely permitted - one is required to disregard a law that conflicts with life or health.

It is not virtuous to observe laws at the risk of one's life. Such conduct is regarded as foolish, even as sinful.

The Sages described this stubbornness as a “piety of madness.”

from The Language of Jewish Life by Jason Aronson.
Preparing Ourselves: Mechilah

*It is essential to note that the m’taharim (team members) address the meta directly, implying that the deceased’s neshamah (soul) is present and aware of what is happening, a well-established belief in Rabbinic theology. We are not simply performing a ritual on a body, but we are concerned with the transition that the neshamah is making.*

― Chesed Shel Emet: The Truest Act of Kindness

In silence put on your head covering, such as a kippah.

While being mindful to maintain silence, and remembering that the neshamah is with you in spirit, proceed to where you will wash your hands.

Use a small hand washing pitcher or cup to ritually wash your hands, without reciting a beracha (blessing). Pour some water on your right hand and then on your left. Do this two more times. (Right-left-right-left-right-left).

Allow your hands to air dry completely.

Once you are ready you may return to your tahara space and again visualize standing with the met. While holding this manual in one hand, you may imagine placing your other hand on the met to offer comfort.

Together, recite:

*(Hebrew Name) or (English Name followed by “bat Avraham v’Sarah”), we stand here ready to prepare you for your final journey. We ask your forgiveness for any distress we may cause you during this tahara. We will do everything possible to ensure that you are treated with respect, and that all the elements of Tahara are properly completed in accordance with our local custom. Everything we do is for the sake of your honor.*
Preparing Ourselves: Chamol

Chamol (prayer for the meta): We recite our first prayer to G-d, on behalf of the meta.

Together, recite:

G-d of all Creation! Have compassion for (Hebrew Name) or (English Name followed by “bat Avraham v’Sarah”) for she is a daughter of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. May her soul and spirit rest with the righteous, for You give life to the dead and bring death to the living. Blessed are You who pardons and forgives those who have sinned and transgressed, the dead of Your people.

Reader, recite:

Therefore, may it be Your will, G-d and G-d of our ancestors, to encircle messengers of mercy around the deceased, for she is Your servant and daughter of Your servant. And You, Holy One, and our G-d and G-d of our ancestors, who are concerned with the poor, save her from all misery, from a day of evil, and from unending judgement. Blessed are You, great in loving kindness and provider of mercy. Blessed are You who makes peace in the high places for Your servants and for those who revere Your name. Blessed is the One who redeems the people Israel from all suffering through mercy. In mercy, the transgressions of this deceased, Your servant, will be hidden and forgotten. Deliver her from unending sorrow, save her for she needs Your great mercy. And You, Eternal our G-d, are good and forgiving to all who call upon You. Blessed are You, mercifully great in counsel and grand in achievement. May she tread with the feet of the righteous in the place of deepest contentment, for that is the place of the upright. G-d protects the feet of the pious. Blessed are You who gives great mercy and abundant grace to the deceased of Your people Israel.

Together, recite:

Amen. May it be G-d’s will.
Ana Elohei: As the prayer for our service, we ask G-d to give us strength, keep us from harm, and give us heightened awareness of what we are doing.

Together, recite:

G-d of loving kindness and compassion, all of whose ways are loving kindness and truth, You have commanded us to practice loving kindness and truth with the dead and to attend to their burial, as it is written, “you shall surely bury her.” (Deuteronomy 21:23).

Therefore, Eternal our G-d, may it be Your will to give us courage and strength to do our task, this heavenly task, as appropriate, whether in performing tahara for the meta, or in dressing her, or burying her. And keep us from any injury or obstacle such that the work of our hands not be disrupted.

Sustain in us the statement: ‘One who observes a mitzvah encounters no evil’ (Ecclesiastes 8:5). Establish for us the privilege of the mitzvah of gemilut chesed v’emet, that it fills our days with goodness. And may G-d’s loving kindness be upon us forever.
Preparing the Meta: Rechitzah (Ritual Cleansing)

Kavanah

Leader, recite:

The Rechitzah is the next phase of our ritual. Now is the time we visualize assisting the meta with her physical preparations so she is ready to put physical cares behind and advance to the spiritual tahara. Let us remember how we would cleanse and groom the meta so she is ready for her purification. We would do our work by carefully lifting the white sheet and then replacing it after completing our tasks so as to preserve her dignity.

O G-d help us to take the first step in preparing (Hebrew Name) or (English Name followed by “bat Avraham v’Sarah”) for her last journey. As we do so, may we be aware of treating this holy neshamah with great dignity and respect.

Take a few moments to imagine this step.

Reader, recite:

And the angel of G-d spoke in a loud voice to those who were standing there, saying, “Remove the soiled garments from the High Priest,” and the angel said, “Behold, I have removed the soiled garments from the High Priest, and I have removed your iniquity from you and I will clothe you in fine garments.”

(Zechariah 3:4)
Hinakh Yaffah (How Beautiful You Are): We praise the neshamah as we prepare for tahara.

Reader, recite:

How beautiful you are, my friend, how beautiful!
Your eyes are doves behind the thicket of your hair,
Your hair, like a flock of goats trailing down Mount Gilead.
Your teeth are like a flock of ewes that come up white
from washing, all of them alike, all shining and present.
Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon and your voice so sweet.
The curve of your cheek like a pomegranate hidden behind
the thicket of your hair.
Your neck is a tower of David built to perfection, a thousand
shields hang upon it, all the armor of heroes.
Your breasts are twin fawns, twins of a gazelle, pasturing
among the lilies.
You are all-beautiful, my friend, there is no blemish in you.

(Song of Songs 4:1-5, 7)

Kavanah
Leader, recite:

Just as (Hebrew Name) or (English Name followed by “bat Avraham v’Sarah”) was created in God’s image, and beautiful while alive, so may we continue to recognize the beauty of her neshamah.

• We may now visualize a clean sheet covering the meta.
Kavanah

Leader, recite:
To midwife a soul is the purpose of Tahara. As the central element of this ritual, the spiritual cleansing phase is perhaps one of the most simple of tasks, yet also, one of the most important...It is the goal to purify the deceased through the transformative power of water...We simulate the immersion into a flowing mountain stream—mayim chayim—living waters [with a continuous pouring of water].

From: To Midwife a Soul by Richard A Light

Repeat the hand washing in silence while maintaining your focus. Do not dry hands. No blessing is recited.

Reader, recite:
Rabbi Akiva said, “You are fortunate, Israel. Before whom do you purify yourselves and who purifies you? Our Creator in heaven. As it is said: “I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean.” (Ezekiel 36:25) And it says: “G-d is the hope of Israel.” (Jeremiah 17:13). Just as the mikvah purifies the impure so does the Blessed Holy One purify Israel.

A fountain for gardens, a well of living waters and flowing streams from Lebanon. (Song of Songs 4:15).

And The Eternal shall have washed away the soil of the daughters of Zion, and shall have purged the blood of Jerusalem from the midst thereof by a spirit of judgment and with a searing breath. (Isaiah 4:4).

And I will pour upon you pure water and you will be purified of all your impurities, and from all of your idols I will purify you.” (Ezekiel 36:25)
Preparing the Meta: Tahara (Ritual Purification)

- Please take your chosen full vessel of water and prepare to pour in a continuous flow. Even if you pour slowly, with a small amount of water, make sure to pour continuously.
- Choose how you will pour a steady stream. E.g. simulate the manner in which we do so when in person — right, left, right, left, head to toe, head to toe.
- When you are ready to begin, say, “ready.”

**Leader:**
Once everyone is ready, say, “Tahora hee.

Now everyone can pour and recite the following Hebrew a minimum of three times to remind everyone, including the neshamah, that the soul that remains with the meta until burial is pure, even though death has rendered the physical body tamei (impure).

**Picture**: Tahora hee (She is pure)

- Once finished with pouring, stop speaking.

- Once everyone is finished, recite below together.

**Together, recite:**

1 English: You shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I, The Eternal, am holy.

2 Hebrew: V'hitkadishtem vih'yitem k'doshim ki kadosh ani Adonai.

3 English: You shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I, The Eternal, am holy.

- Now visualize a clean sheet covering the meta.
Preparing the Meta: Halbashah (Dressing)

Kavanah

Leader, recite:

(Hebrew Name) or (English Name followed by “bat Avraham v’Sarah”), we stand here having completed the pouring ritual of tahara, and we will now assist you in the next step of your journey. We imagine preparing to dress you in plain, white garments, like the simple linens worn by the Kohen Gadol to enter the Holy of Holies, garments appropriate for your imminent journey.

Sos Assis: On behalf of the meta...

Reader, recite:

I will greatly rejoice in The Eternal, my soul shall be joyful in my G-d, for G-d has clothed me with the garments of salvation; G-d has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom puts on priestly glory and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (Isaiah 61:10)

And I said, “Let them set a pure headdress upon her head,” and they set the pure headdress upon her head, and they clothed her with garments, and the angel of The Eternal stood by. (Zechariah 3:5)

For as the earth brings forth her growth, and as a garden causes the things that are sown in it to spring forth, so the Eternal G-d will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations. (Isaiah 61:11)

And The Eternal will guide you continually and satisfy your soul in time of drought, and make strong your bones, and you shall be like a watered garden and like a spring of water whose waters never fail. (Isaiah 58:11)
Preparing the Meta: Halbashah (Dressing)

Reader, recite:

They are sacral vestments: bathe the body in water and then put them on. (Leviticus 16:4)

 Ezekiel 16:4

Bigdei kodesh hem, v’rachatz bamayim et b’saro ul’vasham.

Linen breeches shall be on your flesh

Michn’sei vad yihyu al b’sara

And you shall be dressed in a holy linen tunic

Uk’tonet bad kodesh tilbash

And a linen sash you shall tie

Uv’avnet bad tachgor

And a linen headdress you shall wear

Uv’mitznevet bad tiznof

And may El Shaddai grant you mercy. (Genesis 43:14)

V’El Shaddai yiten lachem rachamim.

• You may now sing a quiet, simple niggun as you prepare to assist the neshamah on the next step of her journey.
Preparing the Meta: Halanah (Placement in the aron)

Kavanah

Leader, recite:
We stand here at this powerful, transitional moment. As no one is so righteous as to have never sinned, we pray for atonement for (Hebrew Name) or (English Name followed by “bat Avraham v’Sara”). We imagine your aron, the earth of Israel gently scattered within. A tallit covers you. A prayer book rests beside you. Within are the prayers that have been with you all the days of your life.

Reader, recite:
And they shall not come in to see the covering of the holy objects, lest they die. (Numbers 4:20)

וְלֹֽא־יָבוּ֖וּ לֵרוֹתָ֣ו קְוָלָ֑ה וַאֲדֹנֵ֥י הָאֱלֹהִים
v’lo yavo’u lirot k’vala et hakodesh vameytu.

And G-d’s earth shall atone for G-d’s people. (Deuteronomy 32:43)

וְכַֽהוֹר אֱדוֹמֵתָ֖ו עָמוֹן
v’chiper admato amo.

Together, recite:
(Hebrew Name) or (English Name followed by “bat Avraham v’Sara”), we stand here having completed our work. Please know that we have done our best to lovingly treat you with dignity and care to prepare you for your final journey. We ask your forgiveness for any indignity you may have suffered in our efforts to usher you from this world to the next, in this time of pikuach nefesh. We acted in good faith and did this work for the sake of all that is holy.

- We imagine the lid of the aron carefully placed and closed.
- We take a moment together to imagine our hands on the aron, as we offer comfort to the neshamah.
Concluding Blessings

Together, recite in Hebrew or English:

May G-d bless you and protect you.
May G-d deal kindly and graciously with you.
May G-d bestow favor upon you and grant you peace.
(Numbers 6:24-26)

A heroic, virtuous woman we have found.
She is more precious than rubies.
Her community depends on her, they never lack reward.
She does good and not evil all the days of her life.
She extends her hands to the poor; she reaches out her hands to the needy.
She is robed in strength and dignity; she confidently faces the future.
She opens her mouth with wisdom; loving kindness is on her tongue.
The generations upcoming praise her in emulation.
Many daughters have done worthily, but you excel them all.
Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain,
but a woman who reveres the Eternal, she shall be praised.
Give her of the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the gates. (Proverbs 31:10-31, selected verses)

Reader, recite:

Creator of the universe, we have just completed our act of gemilut chesed for (Hebrew Name) or (English Name followed by “bat Avraham v’Sarah”). We thank you for the strength and courage to perform this mitzvah to the best of our abilities during this time of pikuach nefesh. We appreciate participating in this sacred fellowship, and cherish the bond that brings us together. As we move from this holy space to our ordinary lives, let us take our strength from our G-d and from each other.

Kavanah

Leader, recite:
G-d, we now ask for assurance from You that this neshamah will be protected for eternity.

• Everyone now observes a moment of silence for private meditation and reflection.
In Conclusion

- Repeat the hand washing in silence while maintaining your focus. Do not dry hands. No blessing is recited.

**Suggested Visualization, read slowly by the Leader**

We are still at our stream, in awe of the connectedness we feel after completing our work. The spiritual bond that we feel so strongly between each other has pulled us physically closer to one another and we are able to hold hands and embrace. We can imagine the angels leading away the aron, accompanying the neshamah. We feel reassured that she is safe and where she is supposed to be. We have done our best and G-d will care for her. As they fade into the distance, we can hear the return of the forest sounds, the same we heard when we began.

Customarily a team member would stay with the aron in the Tahara room, reading psalms, until the shomer arrives. The psalms may be found on the chevra’s website at www.ChevraKavodhaMet.org/psalms.

In this time of pikuach nefesh, if so moved, a team member may continue to offer the neshamah the comfort of the psalms. The team member may take as much time as they’d like to recite the psalms.

When the Tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down, and when the Tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up; any outsider who encroaches shall be put to death. (Numbers 1:51)

When the ark was to set out, Moses would say, “Advance, G-d! May Your enemies be scattered, and may Your foes flee before You!” (Numbers 10:35)

No harm will befall you, no disease touch your tent. For G-d will order the angels to guard you wherever you go. They will carry you in their hands, lest you hurt your foot on a stone. (Psalms 91:10-12)

The Holy One, the warrior—The Eternal is G-d’s name. (Exodus 15:3) The Eternal will battle for you, you hold your peace. (Exodus 14:14)
Afterward

Just as we entered the ritual space with kavanah, so we leave it. It is often difficult to return to our own lives after standing in the holy spaces between life and death, and we take this time to be with our companions in this journey. This is a good time to debrief on the experience if any members of the team feel the need to share personal thoughts and emotions. We offer these readings for a few quiet moments or reading aloud.

The eyes of all look to You expectantly, and You give them their food when it is due. (Psalms 145:15)

A person may plot out a course, but it is the Eternal who directs one’s steps. (Proverbs 16:9)

Indeed, one does not know what it is to happen; even when it is on the point of happening, who can tell that person? (Ecclesiastes 8:7)

What, then, can I count on, Holy One? In You my hope lies. (Psalms 39:8)

We set our hope on The Eternal, G-d is our help and shield. (Psalms 33:20) I look to The Eternal; I look to G-d; I await G-d’s word. I am more eager for The Eternal than watchmen for the morning, watchmen for the morning. (Psalms 130:5-6)

I long for Your deliverance; I hope for Your word. My eyes pine away for Your promise; I say, “When will You comfort me? (Psalms 119:81-82)

My eyes are ever toward The Eternal, For G-d will loose my feet from the net. Turn to me, have mercy on me, for I am alone and afflicted. (Psalms 35:15-16)

Safe and sound, I lie down and sleep, For You alone, O G-d, keep me secure. (Psalms 4:9)

You have made Adam little less than divine, and adorned Adam with glory and majesty; You have made Adam ruler over Your handiwork, laying the world at Adam’s feet. (Psalms 8:6-7)

O Holy One, our G-d, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth. What is Adam that You have been mindful of him (us) Mortal being that You have taken note of him (us). (Psalms 8:3, 5)
Appendix A: Glossary

Afar: burial soil from Israel
Aron: casket
Avnet: waist sash (part of the tachrichim/shroud)
Beracha: blessing
Dam nefesh: blood that is directly connected to the cause of death
Halanah: placing the meta in the aron
Halbashah: dressing the meta
K’tonet: shirt with no collar (part of the tachrichim/shroud)
Kavanah: holy intention
Kippah (pl. kippot): skullcap
Kittel: overshirt with a collar (part of the tachrichim/shroud)
Mayim Chayim: living waters
M’taharim: team members
Mechilah: prayer of forgiveness
Meta: deceased, f.
Met: deceased, m.
Michnasayim: trousers (part of the tachrichim/shroud)
Mikvah: ritual bath
Minhag: local custom
Mitznefet: head covering (part of the tachrichim/shroud)
Neshamah: soul
Niggun: wordless melody
Rechitzah: washing
Sherbloch: shards
Sovev: wrapping sheet (part of the tachrichim/shroud)
Tachrichim: shroud
Tahara: ritual cleansing
Tahora hee: she is pure
Tallit: prayer shawl
Tamei: impure
Tzitzit: ritual fringes of a tallit