Laments & Kavannot for The Journey
How This Booklet Came to Be

The contributors to this booklet have been attending Kavod v’ Nichum’s annual North American Chevra Kadisha conferences for many years. Over the course of these years, we hear, from time to time, “There should be a blessing for entering the room of a goses.” Or “for the changing of a Shmirah shift,” etc. etc.

With the vision, nudging, encouragement and blessing of David Zinner, executive director of Kavod v’Nichum, and the urging of our colleagues, we wrote these prayers of our experience and our hearts. We owe a debt of gratitude for the many years of support and accompaniment and inspiration we have drawn from all of you.

There are many Kavannot yet to be written: for extended illness, for dementia, for a terminal diagnosis, for leaving the room of a goses, for entering the room of a niftarah, for gathering alone with the family of the deceased, for mourners who are not technically mourners according to Jewish tradition, for a necessary disinterment of remains, etc. etc. If you feel so moved, please contact RabbiMeirah@gmail.com, so we can prepare volume II.
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Fear

A Soliloquy

Fear is not the enemy
Fear is my direct line to faith
Fear keeps me awake
not only at night
Fear keeps me awake
in my awareness
Brightens the colors
intensifies the sounds
enlarges the images
informs my compassion
Fear is my companion
my direct line to faith
Why be afraid of fear?
It reminds me of the
preciousness
the fragility
of all that I hold dear...
except G!D
Fear is my direct line to faith
Why should I be afraid
of fear?
I
As Death Approaches

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Ani Shalom -- I am peace
Ps. 120

Like a candle wick fueled by its last drops of wax,
the goses flickers with diminishing life.
Any disruption could speed or slow
the extinguishing of the flame.
As I enter this temple of holy anticipation,
may I bring peace.
Let there only be gentle sounds, gentle touch,
and gentle words
in this sacred liminal place.
May the neshamah, whose journey
to the Other Side has already begun,
feel great freedom, great support,
to depart at the ideal moment,
and not one beat sooner or later.
May I deeply feel my gratitude to God,
for this opportunity to be present.
May this quiet time find anchor in peace,
wholeness, oneness,
the Holy One of Blessing.   Amen

Entering the Room
of the Goses/Gosesset

Rabbi Meir used to compare a dying man to a flickering lamp: the moment one touches it, he puts it out. So, too, whoever closed the eyes of a dying man is accounted as though he has snuffed out his life.

Tractate Mourning 1:4

May the glow of your neshamah be reflected in the faces of those you love.

MF
**Vidui - Final Confessional Prayer**

Holy One of Blessings, Source of all Being and Becoming,
Here I am; naked before you in humbleness and gratitude;
Fully aware that the measure of my days is in Your hands.

Whether or not it is my time to leave this body
I ask that my soul receive a complete healing.
When it is my time to return to You unfettered by physical form
I ask that my accomplishments here on Earth be for a blessing
    to those who follow,
And the record of my many frailties and failings
be buried with my body,
So that my soul can return to you pure, as it was given to me.
May my actions in this lifetime, for good or ill, be as compost
    fed back into the Wholeness
So that all I take with me into my soul’s next journey
    is whatever wisdom I have been able to accumulate by
Your grace.

El Shaddai, HaMakom, Anochi Full Source,
Now and always I lay my life at your feet.
Bless the Source of All Life
And may Your abundant blessings
    nurture and sustain All Living Beings with Shalom.

**The Moment of Death**

Compassionate Mistress of the Universe,
You are a Mystery;
This life on Earth is a mystery.
The veil between life and death is so very thin.
One moment life and all her gifts—
The next, life has vanished.

Holy Parent,
Bless ____________
Grant her/him ease as s/he travels to her/his new station and new way of being.

The ancestors delight to greet you with joy
Angels are purposefully guarding your way.
Angels are purposefully guarding your way.
Angels are purposefully guarding your way.
Angels are purposefully guarding your way.
Angels are purposefully guarding your way.
Angels are purposefully guarding your way.
The ancestors delight to greet you with joy.
They protect you on your journey.

B’yado askid ruhi -
I place my soul in Your Open Hands,
Mother of all, Mistress of all Hidden and Manifest,
First Source and Center.
II

For the M’taharim

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**Donning Protective Clothing (PPE)**

Holy One,
Every morning we praise You
   And thank you for our miraculous bodies:
   That intricate lacework of systems
      that preserves,
      by Your grace,
   That mystery we call life;
      the vessel of our souls.

We are about to intimately encounter life’s opposite:
   The mystery we call death.

In order that we may engage in transforming
   that which is most tamei, to tahor,
We don this thin layer of protective clothing
   to honor the life you have given us;
   to make a distinction between our life force
      and death, as we draw so near to it.

Blessed are You Who causes death, yet makes alive
   And continually sprouts forth salvation.

ברוך אתה ה` מלך ומי התנ תורה ומשמיה וישעיהו

Baruch atah Adonai, Melech meymit
   u’m’chayeh, u’matzmiach yeshuah.

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**The First Taharah**

Powerful One,
Grant me strength and courage
   to step closer to Your Presence
As I begin to perform this mitzvah
   of Taharah for the first time.

Let me feel the awe
   of this nexus between death and life
When we are ever closer to You.

Remind me how fortunate I am
   to be able to comfort the soul
   of this niftarah/niftar
      and her/his family through this ritual.

Sustain me with your strength,
   as I work in unity
      with my sister/brother
         metaharot/metaharim;
Those of us who perform the steps to transform
   the tamei to tahor.

I proceed by your blessing.

Others of the team: Amen
Taharah For a Child

Giver of Life and Death,

As we tend to the body of this young child,
this truly pure soul
whose time in this world was so brief,
May our tears and our work
be received as holy offerings.

May our care of this young Niftar/ah,
this tender bud of the Jewish people,
Flower into only more love
as we care for her/his soul
and her/his family
At this time of their devastation,
At the death of their hopes and dreams
for their child’s future.

May we all be blessed with peace.

Amen.

For a Victim of Murder

God of our Broken Hearts,

Steady our hands as we tend
to this ravaged body and holy soul.

Help us to quell our horror and anger and fear
as we embark on our sacred work.

Compassionate One,
Give us strength as we prepare
this martyr for her/his burial.

May our loving care of our dead bring
a cleansing from the desecration of hatred.

May our loving care of our dead
be a reflection of the light of our Torah.

May our loving care of our dead
bring comfort to her/his neshama
and to our own,
to the neshamot of their families and friends,
to their communities
and the Jewish people.

Amen, Selah.
Blessing of the Hands After Taharah

This ritual has been adapted from Clinical Pastoral Education.

Instructions: using coconut or other oil scented with lavender oil, approach a fellow/sister m’tahaer and ask them if you might give them the blessing of the hands. If they consent, take one of their hands, palm up, into your own, and place a fingertip of the scented oil onto their palm, and gently massage it in, repeating with their other hand. At the same time, look into their eyes, and slowly, with awareness of the presence of the Holy, say:

May these hands be blessed for the care they give.

May these hands be blessed for the mitzvoth they perform.

May these hands be blessed for the holiness they embody.

Then, taking your time, place their hands together in “praying style” and place your own on the outsides of theirs, and finish with:

May there be a great blessing on these hands.

Returning to the Mundane After a Taharah

Great Mystery,
We have just been so near to You—
In timeless time
    wherein the distinction between our aliveness and death is stark.

We give thanks to You,
Creator of Life, Arbiter of death,
    for your faithfulness in us
to allow us entry into this sanctified place.

Help us bring our refreshed awareness out into the world
    as we venture forth into the street
to return to our everyday lives.

Help us see the preciousness of every life,
    human, animal and plant,
Every moment we are graced to remain alive.

Our gratitude is so deep.
Reclosing a Casket
after a Necessary Opening

V’lo yavo-u lirot k’vala et-hakodesh
vametu

They shall not watch while the holy things of the sanctuary are being covered, lest they die. BaMidbar 4:20
III
Shmirah

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For the Mitzvah of Shmirah

As I prepare to serve as shomer/et for this Niftar/ah,
May I watch over this Niftar/ah
and his/her neshamah
With a pure heart and a focused mind.

It is my honor to be able to provide this holy service
and to be present to the Mystery.

May my service as Shomer/et provide comfort
to the neshamah of this Niftar/ah
even as it elevates my own neshamah.
May the family of this Niftar/ah be comforted in
knowing that their beloved is not alone
in this holy and liminal time.

May my loving service bring peace to us all.

Changing of the Shmirah Shift

And he dreamed,
And look!
A ladder standing on the Earth, and its top reached the Heavens
And look! The angels of God are ascending and descending on it.
Gen 28:12

Just as The Holy One sent angels in shifts
to guard Jacob as he began his journey
to a new life,
So are we your angels,
here to guard you and to comfort you
as you go your way to a new life.
You are not alone.
We will stay with you until you
are tucked back into the Earth
from which you were fashioned.

Then Adonai formed the Adam from the dust of the Earth,
and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,
and the Adam became a living soul.  Gen 1:7
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For the Aveilim

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Preventing a Home for Shivah
(recited by family, friends, neighbors)

Oh, Holy One of Blessing,

At this liminal time of __________’s death,
I am filled with tears
   at the loss of life.

In the frenzy of making funeral arrangements,
I am blessed to step forward,
   knowing there is much to be done
   to honor our grieving (friend, cousin, etc.)

Guide me to mindfully prepare the house of the mourner
and to arrange their environment in the traditions
that will hold and support them in love throughout
the period of shivah.

May __________’s Soul feel welcomed to return home,
one last time in Olam HaZeh before ascending
to Olam HaBa.

May my selfless efforts bring a droplet of comfort
and healing to the mourners
as they take on their new role without their beloved
__________.

Preparing Food
for a House of Mourning

As I prepare and cook this meal,
may I keep in my mind and my heart
the holy purpose of providing comfort
to these mourners.

May the work of my hands
provide strength for their bodies
and solace for their hearts.

May a sense of community
provide some comfort
in this time of devastation.

May the Source of Nourishment
be with these mourners,
sustaining them now and always.

ESB

JM
Lighting the Seven Day Shivah Candle

Oh Holy One of Blessing,
Source of Light and Illumination,
As I light this shivah candle,
May I be reminded that __________’s neshama,
their soul,
is like the flame,
having brought light into the world.

May their light illuminate a part of me
and never burn out.

Throughout these first seven days of sitting shivah,
Let this candle be a reminder
that each flicker of the flame
is a spark of memory.

In the quietude of contemplation,
anchor me in the truth of my feelings.

This candle is a symbol, a reminder for me
to be still, to listen to my breath,
to feel the sorrow
that streams from my tears.

May I find comfort and consolation
in the flickering light
as I surrender to the brokenness
of my own bereft and bereaving soul.

May my neshama find solace
and lift my prayers
with radiant light
that flows from the heavens above.

Holy One of Blessings, may I know that one day
I will find my way
from mourning to dancing.

For now, shelter me in your loving embrace
as I watch the candle burn.
Rising From shivah

Dear Holy One of Space and Time,
I call out to you with trepidation. One week has passed. . . a cycle of seven days have I sat in the reality of ____________’s death. In the stillness, my mind wanders to the mundane, the tasks being untended, the distractions of conversations that have filled the room. . . and then back to wondering how I will continue my journey without my dear ____________.

As I prepare myself to reenter the world, I acknowledge life is no longer the same. My heart has now been pierced with the pain and loss of ____________’s presence as I watch the flickers of the shivah candle extinguish, a sign that it is time to move beyond my sheltered space and enter the expansive miracle of life. Oh Holy One of Blessing, my Beloved Companion and Comforter, embrace me as I plant my feet on your Holy ground. Lift my eyes and my arms to the rays of light that fill the world into which I am about to walk.

I open the door of my home of solitude, of constriction, of tears and prepare to exit into the majesty of your Creation. May I be guided to breathe in the air of love, captured in the sounds of the chirping birds, the rustling leaves, the laughter of children. With each step, grant me the courage and strength to breathe in the mystery of this next phase of my journey. With each breath, may I gingerly walk this new path without ____________, accompanied by her/his memory. Guide me as I walk around the block to return renewed and ready to embark on the continuation of my process of grief for the next 23 days. May I be comforted in knowing that each day ____________’s Soul is ascending to Olam HaBa.

As I embraced my beloved _______________,
May I continue to embrace your everlasting love and the values & experiences you bestowed to me
As I walk again into life.

Basting Together the Torn Garment

Source of Wholeness, as I tore this garment when my loved one died, so now I prepare to baste/sew the tear back together.

This garment will never be the same as it was before I tore it in the first expression of my shock and grief.

I don’t need a visible reminder of my loss. My life will go on and it will never be the same without my beloved.

This mending symbolizes that I put my trust in the One Who Heals.

May each stitch bring acceptance. May each stitch bring me closer to a sense of the Oneness of All.
Concluding Sheloshim

Esa Eina El Heharim, Me’ayin yavo ezri: I lift my eyes unto the mountains, from where will my help come?
Ps 121:1

It is now time for me to transition from my first thirty days of mourning and integrate more fully into the fabric of life. For thirty days, I have known the sorrow of grief, my heart yearning to have but one more moment with my beloved.

I look to you, HaShem, raising my eyes from the pits of the Earth to the Heavens above, I ask for your comfort and mercy. Embrace me with gentleness and peace as I commit to living my life with kedushah, holiness, in the name of _______________.

May I remember that on this journey of life, this is but one loss along the way. For thirty days I have lived in retreat and now must have the courage to take the next step into the mystery that awaits me.

Concluding Sheloshim

G-d of the Heartbroken, Only you truly know how I have been crushed by the loss of my beloved. Only you know how lost I have felt, how empty life seems, how hard it has been to talk with even my closest friends.

In this past month, only you know how I have wept every sleepless night. Every one of these thirty days, I have dwelt in pain, in separation and loss.

I have daily confronted the frightening reality that my life will continue, and that it—and I—will never be the same. I have been set apart by my grief.

But as hard as this time has been, I have also felt held by my community, according to our tradition, that allows me my sorrow. And our tradition also teaches that with these thirty days, intense mourning comes to an end.

I know that it is time now to begin to move from this space of devastation and protection back into my community and into the wider world. As I leave this sacred time, I thank you, El Male Rachamin, Compassionate One, for this precious womb-time of sheloshim. I ask for your continued shelter as I begin to make my way. May your compassion encourage me to be compassionate with myself and with others. May I learn how to live without my beloved. May I remember that you, and my beloved, are always with me.
Last Day of Saying Kaddish
for the First Year of Mourning

I’m thinking of you today, my ________,
because this is the last day
of saying daily Kaddish for you.

I have enjoyed this obligation.
It has been both sad and sweet,
To make time for thoughts of you each day.

It has been a time of standing with my fellow
congregants,
and laying out those rhythmic words: Yitgadal
v’yitkadash.

A time of wishing you release from Gehenna;
Of feeling somehow close to you,
and part of the process of burning off
all but the best of memories.

I am a mourner. I have been.
Today, I shift, though, from grief to memorial.
From current pain to memory past.

I have done what I could do for you, my _________.
Today, you are free to move on to God.
May your blessed neshamah go in peace.

Visiting A Grave

God, Source of All, Comfort of all who mourn, I ask for Your
comfort as I return to a place of emotional devastation. My
heart is filled with the pain of loss; I feel the sharpness of a
grief that will be with me until my own dying day.

At this time of year, when it is traditional to visit the graves of
our beloved dead, I ache with longing.
I feel so very far away, separated by geography and time
and by the reality that life does go on,
no matter how difficult it is to be without _________.
How I wish we could be together again
to talk, to laugh, to touch.
How I wish I could say “I love you” one more time.

In the midst of my sorrow at a life without _________.
I am grateful that I have been granted the ability
to know what it is to love and be loved in return.

As I light this candle in honor and memory
of my beloved__________.
I thank and bless you, God, Source of Life and Love,
for blessing us with the life we shared.
I ask you, God, to bless me with comfort and healing.

May the blessing of __________’s life
give me the courage to make a blessing of my own.
May I go forward from this time in renewed strength
and peace. Amen.
When Placing Stones on a Grave

When Placing Stones on a Grave

Thereupon Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar.  
And Jacob said to his kinsman, “Gather stones.”  
So they took stones and made a mound; 
and they partook of a meal there by the mound. 
And Laban declared, “This mound is a witness between you and me this day. May the Lord watch between you and me, when we are out of sight of each other.” 

Gen 31:45

Dear Beloved ___________________

As I set this stone on your final place of rest,  
know that I was here.  
I have not forgotten you.  
May the Lord watch between you and me  
as we are now out of sight of each other.

On Washing Hands When Leaving the Cemetery

With this washing, I leave behind the past and re-embrace the present.  
With this washing, I depart this place of death and re-enter life.

Ushavtem mayim b’sason, m’mainei hayeshuah.

Joyfully shall you draw water 
from the fountains of redemption.

Isaiah 12:3
Verses for Consecrating Jewish Cemeteries

Part of the ritual for consecrating a space as a Jewish Cemetery involves walking around the complete circumference with a Jewish community, reciting sacred verses. (Or pausing once per circuit to recite a verse.) Here are some suggested verses, in lieu of the traditional ones.
Collected by Rabbi Me’irah Iliinsky

1) And Sarah was one hundred and twenty seven years old. These were the years of Sarah’s life. And Sarah died in Kiriat-Arba, that is Hevron, in the land of Canaan. And Avraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her. And Avraham stood up from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Het, saying,
“I am a stranger and a sojourner with you Give me possession of a burying place with you, So that I may bury my dead from before me.”

Gen 23:1-4

3) Thereupon Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. And Jacob said to his kinsman, “Gather stones.” So they took stones and made a mound; and they partook of a meal there by the mound. And Laban declared, “This mound is a witness between you and me this day. May the Lord watch between you and me, when we are out of sight of each other.”

Gen 31:45

4) Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it.” Shaken he said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and that is the stairway to Heaven!”

Gen 28:16

And Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died, and she was buried beneath Beth-El, under the oak, and the name if it was called Alon-Bachut, the oak of weeping.

Gen 35:8

5) (Jacob said) And as for me, when I came from Paddan, Rachel died unto me in the land of Canaan on the way, where there was still some way to come unto Ephrath; and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath, the same is Beit-Lechem.

Gen 48:7

6) (Speaking of Jacob) (Say that) His sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and they buried him in the cave of the field of Machpelah, the field near Mamre, which Abraham had bought for a burial site from Ephron the Hittite.

Gen 50:13
7) When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: “Moses! Moses!” He answered, “Here I am.” And God said, “Do not come closer. Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.”

Ex 3:5

8) Now the Israelites went up...out of the land of Egypt. And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had exacted an oath from the children of Israel, saying, “God will be sure to take notice of you; then you shall carry up my bones from here with you.”

Ex 13:19

9) For I, the Lord, am your God; you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy.

Lev 11:44

10) And Ruth said, “Entreat me not to leave you, nor to return from following after you, for wherever you go, I will go And where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, And thy God will be my God, Where you die, I will die and there shall I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death part you and me.”

Ruth 1:16-17
Glossary

Avel/Aveilim —s/p Mourners, mourners.

Gehenna — A netherworld place, where the deceased accounts for its life and has the final opportunity

Goses/Gosseset (m/f) — Person within days or hours of death; medically called “imminent” or “transitioning.”

Kedushah — Holiness

M’taharim — those who perform the ritual of Taharah. (see below)

Nefesh — The simple life-breath aspect of the soul of a person.

Neshamah — Most complex manifestation of the soul of a person.

Niftar/niftarah -(m/f) a deceased person, with the sense that the body has completed its work as a vessel of the soul.

Olam ha Ba — The World to Come.
Olam ha Zeh — This World we live in.

PPE — Personal Protective Equipment, which may include a combination of mask, gown, gloves, shoe coverings.

Shomer/shomeret (m/f) — a watcher, or keeper or protector. One who sits with the casket either for a shift or for the entire time between Taharah and burial.

Taharah — Ritual purification of a deceased person, done by a team, with the use of a specific pouring of water, prayers, special white garments, and great intention.

Tahor — ritually pure

Tamei — ritually impure

Vidui — final confessional prayer

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