

Kaddish has four letters.
Four canvasses on four stages of mourning.
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בס"ד



Not the cutting off hurts, but the being cut off.

Leo Vroman, Dutch poet.

The Four Letters of Kaddish

Oil on canvas, 2024. The canvasses are different in size:

1: 39.4 X 11.8 inches 100 X 30 cm

2 and 4: 31.5 X 11.8 inches 80 X 30 cm

3: 27.5 X 11.8 inches 70 X 30 cm

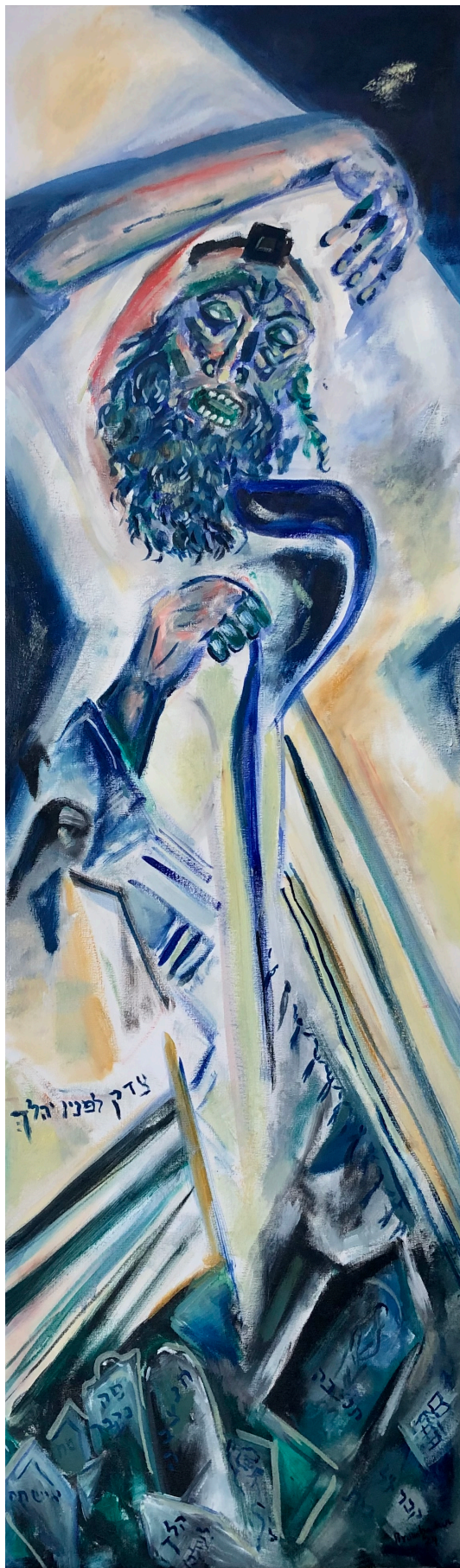
Painting is interpreting. Artists put thoughts and feelings on canvas the way they experience them or want to express them, their own or belonging to others, but seen through an artist's lens. Here are my four canvasses about mourning and saying kaddish.

After my father had passed away, I moved from Holland to Berlin for the second time. The first time I lived in Berlin was right after the Berlin Wall fell. After a few years of teaching at the Free University I moved to Brooklyn, where I remained for several decades. Now I am back in Europe. It was a time of big changes and lots of headaches. The pandemic was raging. After several sublets I found an attic studio in Berlin with windows at the South and the North, what more can an artist wish for. My father would have loved this. I wanted to honor him with a painted kaddish. I worked at the time on several projects, like the Izmir-Berlin canvasses, which you can read about in an other article in this blog.

I stocked up on blank canvasses. One of them, a long rectangle canvas of approximately 40 X 12 inches, inspired me to paint a big letter ק *quf*, the first letter of the וידי ק Kaddish. This is the prayer which one says daily for deceased close relatives for nearly a year. I was also reading Leon Wieseltier's book *Kaddish* which I had found in my father's bookcase.

My father was very old when he passed away. I had peace with that and so did he. I was fortunate to be present at his passing and we have had some very meaningful conversations a bit earlier. I was sad, but accepting that this is how life ends. For my grief-stricken mom it was worse and she would follow him into the grave within a year. I continued saying kaddish, now for my mom. Doing so in a community is very comforting. Strict corona measures had prevented a traditional *shivah*, but the rabbi in Berlin organized a *shivah* online, per Zoom. This way, friends who lived far away were able to join as well. Synagogue services were held in the big open space behind the synagogue building, with face masks and social distancing, but at least people were able to pray in a minyan and I could say kaddish.

Shortly after moving into my studio, I set up the first two canvasses of this Kaddish series, planning to dedicate a canvas to each letter, ו י ד ק and paint different stages of grief. They mustn't be exactly my own emotions or in that order, every person has their individual stages of grief, but most people can identify with these four paintings.



The first canvas is dominated by the letter \aleph *quf*. It is long drawn and rests on a stem, which makes it look unstable, even if one knows that Hebrew letters are written hanging against the line instead of resting on the line, like the Latin alphabet. The horizontal bar of the *quf* resembles a thick hanging cloud under which the stem stands upright but cannot escape without breaking up the letter. It expresses the initial sharp grief of a mourner standing unstable on his feet under the dark cloud of his grief. The stem of the letter is like a sharp pin, stabbing and pointing all the way down to the somber graveyard from which there is no return at the bottom of the canvas. The pain of being cut off hurts. The mourner feels bewildered and bereft. He throws up his right hand in despair in a raw gesture. He let the tallit, that is normally wrapped around him like a soothing and protective coat, slip off his arm which hangs like a limp branch over his head. The colors of this canvas are gloomy and the color contrast is sharp and has angles. The white between the stripes on the tallit is like flashes of lightning.

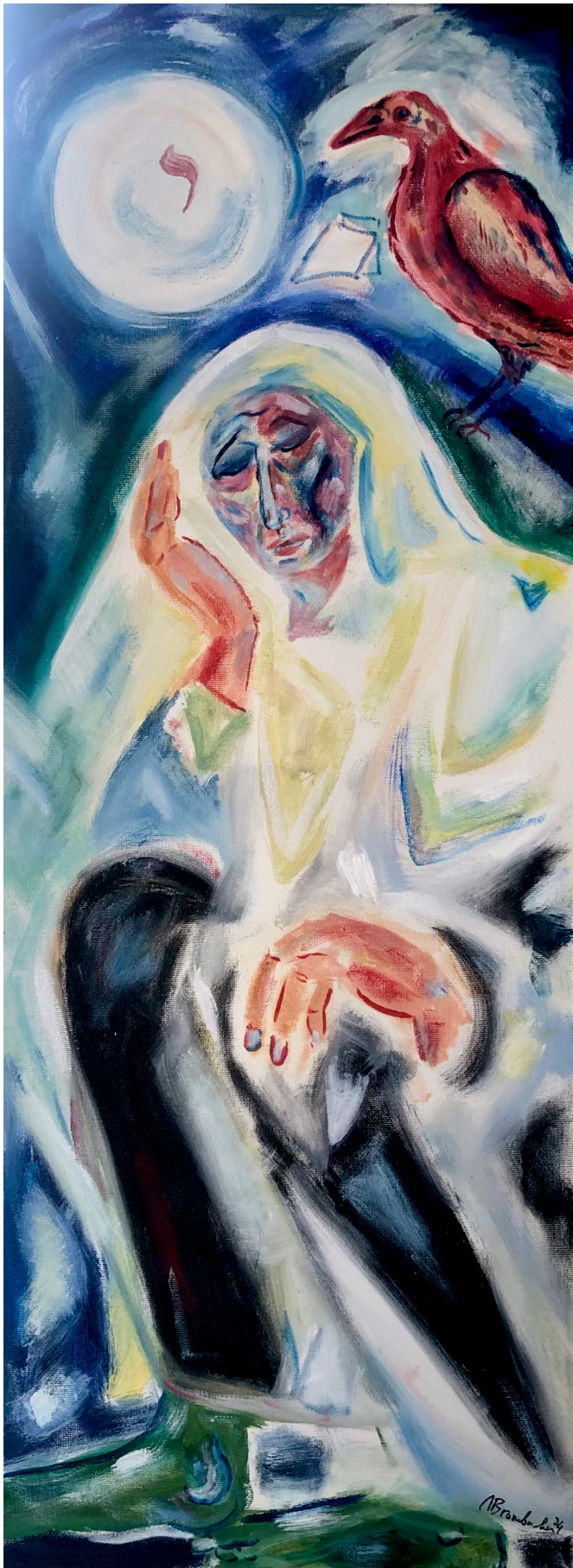
However, that first raw stage of bewilderment does not last. It morphs into the piercing red and raw purple of anger, even in the graveyard. In the second canvas, the grieving woman is wrapped in



a tallit, but she voices her abandonment hot like fire, why did you, the deceased, leave me behind?

She leans on the horizontal bar of the letter ד *dalet*. Just like the *quf*, it does not look like a stable construction, it is resting on one stem. The graveyard is filled with people who “abandoned” her, they look up from under their stones but cannot soothe her. But this stage, too, will pass. There are blossoming trees in the graveyard. Life goes on, new leaves and fruit will grow.

After the first and second paintings were more or less finished, I did not continue working on them or start planning the next two letters. I was busy, had many other commissions and projects to take care of, and the two nearly finished canvasses just stood in my studio. Only recently I bought two more rectangle shaped canvasses. They remained blank for a while. Some projects are waiting patiently for a few years and will be finished when the time is ripe. This is one of them.



The third letter of the kaddish is a 'yud', a small letter with big significance. Its numerical value is ten, which has many connotations in Judaism. The letter itself is part of the Ineffable Name, which is often spelled not in full but as double *yud*. In this canvas, this letter expresses the first signs of resignation, even acquiescence, of the mourner. The death of the beloved person is a fact, a done deal, and the pain of being cut off changes from sharp into a dull nagging loss, like a healing scar that hurts but doesn't sting and burn anymore.

Many thoughts float around in the mind of the mourner, memories, wisps and shards of conversation. It hurts and comforts her at the same time. She is sitting down quietly, wrapped in a tallit, a cloak of sadness without visible stripes, comforting and shielding. The dark-red bird and the sheets of paper symbolize her memories. There are no flaming colors in this painting anymore, like the bright red in the second canvas

This painting shows no graveyard. One remembers the person as they were during their life. The death



of a beloved gets its own spot in the life of the mourner, and continuously saying kaddish certainly helps the process of coming to terms.

The mourner in the fourth canvas is alert, saying kaddish, wrapped in a tallit. Here eyes are wide open. Here, too, there is no graveyard. Kaddish comforts, we say it for those who passed away before we do. We hope that after we will pass away others will say kaddish for us. Saying kaddish for nearly a year helps one cope with loss and think of the person one lost. The circle in the top left shows the letter ψ *shin*. It resembles a flame of hope and is generally a symbol of (the Name of) HaShem, certainly in my paintings. Every kaddish is different. In a different article I will show the kaddishes I created right after the attacks of 9-11 in New York.

*Shoshannah Brombacher
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