Introduction

This paper reviews some halakhic issues related to offering condolences to the bereaved on Shabbat. I have found that many people are under the misconception that such condolences are not permitted on Shabbat, and my interest in dispelling this rumor was the genesis of this study, which I started a few years ago but never completed.

It goes without saying that extreme sensitivity is called for when analyzing and implementing the laws and practices regarding comforting the bereaved. The particular needs of an individual must always be considered and may well override the general rules that I discuss below. In addition, my analysis here comes with the important caveat that I am not a mental health professional and therefore my insights in that regard should be considered that of a lay person. I hope that I will receive feedback both from mental health professionals, experienced clergy, and those who have suffered losses in the past with their insights regarding what I write below.

I pray that the learning and the acts of kindness toward the bereaved that this study may inspire be a merit for my father.
Section I: Nihum Avelim On Shabbat

a. Nihum Avelim Is Permitted on Shabbat, But Prevalent Contemporary Ashkenazi Custom Is Not to Make a Shiva Visit

The Babylonian Talmud is clear that consolation of mourners is permitted on Shabbat:

ב"ה (Trans. Soncino) Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 12a-b

And Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said thusly in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel ... and we do not console mourners nor visit the sick on the Sabbath according to the academy of Shamai, but the academy of Hillel permits doing so.

The Rabbis taught: One who enters to visit the sick person says: “The Sabbath is what prevents us from crying out, and healing will (alt: “and may healing”) soon come.” Rabbi Meir says, “She, i.e. the Sabbath, can be compassionate.” Rabbi Judah says, “May the Omnipresent (alt: “The Omnipresent will”) be compassionate toward you and toward all the sick of Israel.” Rabbi Yose says, “May the Omnipresent (alt: “The Omnipresent will”) be compassionate toward you among the sick of Israel.” Shevna, a man of Jerusalem says upon his entering, “Peace,” and upon his exiting, “The Sabbath is what prevents us from crying out, and healing will (alt: “and may healing”) soon come, God’s (lit. “His”) compassion is great, and have peaceful Sabbath rest.” … Rabbi Hanina said: With difficulty they, i.e. the Rabbis, permitted consoling mourners and visiting the sick on the Sabbath.

The Jerusalem Talmud, on the other hand, may indicate a different approach to nihum avelim on Shabbat:

The Jerusalem Talmud Moed Kattan 82b

Rabbi Ya’akov bar Idi said in the name of Rabbi Hanina: Did they not say “there is no mourning on Shabbat,” why did they say to pay respects (lit. “to show him face”), out of respect.

Most commentators I have seen on this text of the Jerusalem Talmud understand this text to imply that while one may/should visit a bereaved person on Shabbat, one stops short of delivering formal words of comfort on Shabbat.

2 See the text of R. Yoseph Kappach’s comment on Rambam below at page 17 relating to whether such statements should be understood as prayer or as statements of reassurance.
Did they not say “there is no mourning on Shabbat,” – to offer condolences – and why did they say to pay respects – on Shabbat - out of respect.

It is clear that the opinion of the Jerusalem Talmud that there is no consolation of mourners on Shabbat, but rather out of respect for the mourner the rabbis instructed that one may/should visit him and pay him respect of joining in his sorrow out of respect. However, we do not console on Shabbat because there is no mourning on Shabbat. … but this is not the opinion of the Babylonian Talmud on Shabbat 12.

And I saw in the responsa Yahin u’Boaz part 1, one who asked Rabbi Tzemach, of blessed memory, regarding the ancient practice in Constantinople, which is our widespread custom, that we do not console mourners on Shabbat or holidays, but they did have a custom to sit with him (i.e. the mourner) in his house in order to ease his sorrow from upon him particularly through sitting with him but without words of consolation … and the Sage Rabbi Tzemach, of blessed memory, disagreed with the practice based on the Babylonian Talmud … however it is well-known that in Constantinople and the entire Byzantine empire, the eastern Roman empire, their practices were in accordance with the Jerusalem Talmud….

And in Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer at the end of chapter 17 we learn that Solomon saw … which makes it explicit that we console mourners on Shabbat, so how did Beth Shammai and the Jerusalem Talmud sustain (explain?) this tradition of Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer? However, in Tractat Soferim at the end of Chapter 19, published by Haygar, this is its text, “in
accordance with Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkenus, who said Solomon saw … and built for Israel two gates, one for grooms and one for mourners and people who were excommunicated and on Shabbats people would gather … to bestow kindness to each, i.e. to newlyweds and mourners, and when the Holy Temple was destroyed, the sages instituted that grooms and mourners come to synagogues in order to bestow kindness to each … bestowing kindness on mourners after the cantor finishes the Musaf prayer, he walks to the door of the synagogue and finds the mourners and all of their families and says the following blessing …” and here no mention is made in Tractate Soferim that they would console or say to him, i.e. to the mourner, “he who causes his name to dwell in this house will console you,” as indicated in Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer, which would be an essential point that could not be left out if, indeed, such things were said. Therefore, it seems that even at the time of the Temple there were different opinions in this regard … And in Babylonia, Rabbi Hanina said that even according to the opinion of Beth Hillel the permission to console mourners was granted with difficulty.

And what I wrote above, that the nature of “pay respects,” on Shabbat out of respect for the bereaved, means visiting and sitting with the mourner without words of consolation is also implied … since there is no mourning on Shabbat how can it be permitted to say words of consolation, would we commit the transgression of mourning on Shabbat “out of respect,” rather, indeed, the matter is as I have written … And another proof to my explanation is that in all the places in the Jerusalem Talmud and midrashim when they speak of consoling mourners they use the words nehama and tankumim, i.e. words of consolation, and not mar’eh loh panim, i.e. to show one’s face.

Alay Tamar argues that the Jerusalem Talmud allows visitation of mourners but not formal words of consolation, as opposed to the Babylonian Talmud which allows (however begrudgingly) words of consolation. He argues that the similar practice known in Constantinople in the 15th century was influenced by the Jerusalem Talmud. He further argues, based on a sensitive but perhaps speculative read of the differences between Prikei D’Rabbi Eliezer and Avot d’Rabbi Natan that...
the varying traditions regarding whether consolation of mourners on Shabbat is permissible stretches back to the days of King Solomon.

Alay Tamar’s read of the Jerusalem Talmud, though fairly strong, is not absolutely certain. I would argue that the author musters all available evidence to prove that the phrase (here translated as “to pay respects”) is used to distinguish between that act and the act of formal consolation but is aware that his evidence is less than iron clad. In this regard, I found the following comment of Ritba interesting. In this comment, Ritba is dealing with the final day of the shiva period, which generally ends early in the day when morning visitors leave the shiva home. 9

From this we learn that one who buries one’s dead on Sunday may not terminate it, i.e. shiva, on the eve of Shabbat as some practice in a few places, it is Friday and Shabbat does not cut off shiva. 11 And on the day of Shabbat there are no consolers, and moreover it is forbidden to do so, i.e. to console, publicly, and with difficulty they permitted an individual to pay respects on Shabbat (see Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 12b), but rather the mourner holds on his own and practices the private elements of mourning during the entire Shabbat and at night he is permitted on his own to end shiva since by that point it is the eighth day. 12

Ritba’s statement that permission was begrudgingly granted seems to echo the words of Rabbi Hanina in the Babylonian Talmud who indicates that the permission to console mourners on Shabbat was begrudgingly given. His statement also demonstrates that in practice people were not receiving visitors on Shabbat. Ritba uses the phrase to indicate actual acts of consolation (and perhaps Ritba understood the Jerusalem Talmud to be of the same opinion as the Babylonian Talmud, presuming his use of the phrase was meant to echo the Jerusalem Talmud).

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9 Chidosis ha-RitevahMasheces Moed Katan Daf Yit 87a

10 Ritba on Mo’ed Kattan 19b

11 Chidosis ha-RitevahMasheces Moed Katan Daf Yit 87a

12 Note that there are many more lenient opinions as to when shiva ends if the 7th day is on Shabbat. See e.g. R. Yoseph Kappach’s comment on Mishneh Torah Laws of Mourning 6:10, footnote 11 where he argues, for instance, that one should wash with hot water on Friday night in this situation.
It is also worth noting that Ritba indicates that general practice in his community was not to visit mourners on Shabbat, though his statement that “public” acts of consoling mourners are forbidden implies that he agrees that technically private acts of consoling mourners is permitted.  

In any event, halakhah clearly permits consoling mourners on Shabbat:

Rambam Laws of Shabbat 24:5

And we visit the sick and console mourners on Shabbat.

Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayvim 287:1

We may console mourners on Shabbat, and so too we may visit the sick.

Note that the commentaries on Shulhan Arukh continue to discuss exactly what should be said to a mourner on Shabbat, a topic which we will address in section 3 below, beginning at page 15.

Later sources note some concern about visiting people on Shabbat as well as certain Ashkenazi practices not to visit mourners on Shabbat. Magen Avraham notes the unfortunate practice in his time and place (17th Century Poland) whereby people tended not to visit during the week, instead visiting on Shabbat.

Magen Avraham 287

We read in the Gemara, “With difficulty they, i.e. the Rabbis, permitted consoling mourners and visiting the sick on the Sabbath,” … which is contrary to those who on all days of the week don’t go to visit other than on Shabbat. And also regarding a mourner one should say to the mourner …

It is not clear whether he is referring here to people who are visiting the sick, the bereaved or both. In regard to Magen Avraham’s comment, it is worthwhile to note the comment of Rabbi Israel Meir HaKohen in Beur Halakhah that Magen Avraham’s comment should not prevent one who has already visited someone during the week from making another visit on Shabbat.

Arukh haShulhan 287:3, discussing whether the standard greeting of mourners may be used on Shabbat ends his comments with the statement that "איננו נוהגים אולימ בצל חוכנה שבת" in our area.
(19th Century Russia) the practice is not to console mourners on Shabbat."¹⁷ The exact meaning of Arukh HaShulhan’s comment is unclear. In context, he seems to be implying that people would not say any words of consolation to mourners on Shabbat, though in addition, or in the alternative, he could be saying that shiva visits were not made or that no gesture of consolation at all were made. Similarly, Gesher Hayayim, explaining the practice of welcoming mourners during Kabbalath Shabbat before reciting Psalm 92 says, “שבקלולตน אתה מצא את מלכות עולם וטומנו, “they greet mourners on Shabbat public mourning ceases as well as consolation,” which may imply either that all acts of consolation cease on Shabbat or only that public acts of consolation cease on Shabbat.

¹⁸ Gesher Hayayim also states that, “ומכל מקום ולא עדיין לא phải דברים אלא ביוות"ר להלך לאהל ובח deterministic mishnah Arukh haShulhan, made.

²¹ The author of Shmirat Shabbat K’Hilkhatah apparently reads Gesher Hayayim and Arukh HaShulhan to be referring to a practice against visitation and not of words of consolation, writing in 287:3: nonetheless we do not practice today to go on Shabbat to the mourner in order to console him.” (emphasis my own) and citing both Arukh Hashulhan and Gesher Hayayim in support of that practice.²⁰ Mishnah Berurah is more clear that one may approach a mourner on Shabbat, writing in 287:3: "mosh'ma"ليلך צרעה ולך "the Sabbath prevents us from consoling’ is permitted.”²¹

b. Why Was There Any Concern About Nihum Avelim On Shabbat and Why Was It Permitted?

Nonetheless, it is necessary to explore on Shabbat what is the law regarding inquiring of the afflicted? Do we say that since he will go and see that he, i.e. the afflicted person has troubles, i.e. the visitor, will become upset and uproot his enjoyment of Shabbat, whereas the Merciful said “you shall call your Shabbat a pleasure,”²³ or perhaps since the master said, “anyone who goes and inquires of the afflicted is considered to have given him, i.e. the person in distress, life,”²⁴ therefore it is considered appropriate to visit the person.

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¹⁷ Arukh haShulhan 287:3 is quoted at greater length below, page 17 in the discussion of whether the standard greetings to mourners ought to be extended on Shabbat.

¹⁸ Gesher Hayayim Part 1 Section 20:5. Text from http://www.hebrewbooks.org/31174 p. 179. This text is quoted at greater length below, page 14 in the discussion of public acts of consoling mourners on Shabbat.


²⁰ Other parts of this comment of Mishnah Berurah are found below at pages 14 and 17.

²¹ Rav Achai (Acha) of Shabcha born ca. 680 CE, d. Israel 756. “Rav Acha's Sheiltot is the first known halachic work composed in post - Talmudic times for public use.” (Bar Ilan).

²² Isaiah 58:13.

²³ Thank you to my teacher Hakham Isaac Sassoon who corrected my translation here. Where Sheiltot quotes “the master” as saying that one who inquires of an afflicted person gives that afflicted person life, this is a reference to Sheiltot’s earlier use of that saying as a paraphrase of the story of Rabbi Akiva on the top of BT Nedarim 40a where Rabbi Akiva attends to his deathly ill student’s needs and the student says that Rabbi Akiva "תודה לך – you have revived me,” and Rabbi Akiva goes on to say that failure to visit an ill person is tantamount to spoiling blood.
There is general consensus that the concern regarding consoling mourners on Shabbat is that it might detract from the person’s enjoyment on Shabbat. Some of the explanations focus on the fact that a person might “cry out” in passionate prayer on Shabbat, which seems to be a verbal manifestation of the same emotional response. It is interesting to note that those explanations that mention “crying out” as a concern don’t seem to distinguish between visiting the sick, where crying out in prayer for healing might be expected, and comforting mourners, where, perhaps some form of plaintive prayer might have been expected in earlier custom (I haven’t researched this point at all).

The fact that the rabbis considered the emotional response of the consoler when deciding whether consoling mourners would be permitted on Shabbat by no means implies that this was the tantamount concern. To the contrary, the concern about the response of the consoler was overridden by the expected benefit to the bereaved, as eloquently expressed in the following two texts:

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26 Rabbi Isaac Alfasi (RiF) born 1013?Algeria?, d. Lucena, Spain, in 1103.
27 Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, Isaacides) b. Troyes, northern France 1040; d. Worms in 1105.
28 Rabbi Asher ben Jechiel born c. 1250 Germany, died 327 Toledo, Spain.
29 A few slightly later writers indicate that the concern regarding condolence on Shabbat was that giving/receiving condolences on Shabbat might be considered a form of public mourning on Shabbat, which is prohibited. See discussion in Section II below beginning at page 11, in particular the text of Raaviah at page 13. The same rationale is offered by Mardeci Masateh Moadlet Venu and and ומאמרך ממעד תחות מודם ק웠 הלוחות השועה באם רמי חתימי.
Nihum Avelim (Consolation of Mourners) on Shabbat
© 2019 Rabbi Noah Gradofsky
Version Date: 1/12/2019 10:47:36 PM
https://utj.org/viewpoints/videos/nihum-avelim-shabbat/

But the academy of Hillel permitted visiting the sick and comforting mourners on Shabbat because it is in the category of bestowing kindness, and moreover eases their, i.e. the mourners’, pain. And with difficulty they, i.e. the Rabbis, permitted consoling mourners and visiting the sick on the Sabbath for the reasons that we have explained, but the sages permitted it, as we have said.

ר’ יחזקאל מייזל בן ר’ א的母亲 הלוי ע”ה 1829 בברזיל, רוסיה. נ”ה 1908.
32 See Sha’arei Teshuvah on Orah Hayyim 287.
33 See text above p. 17.
34 Rabbi Mordecai Yoffe 1530–1612, student of Rabbi Moses Isserlis, the Ashkenazin glossator of the Shulhan Arukh.
because the importance of bestowing kindness is great,” end of quote, which demonstrates that the Levush also explained with simplicity that the halakhat was thus established that we don’t worry in this regard for the anguish of the visitor, because bestowing kindness is of great importance and overrides the concern for this anguish, and this is in accordance with the Sheiltot referenced above.

In any event, we can also learn from the words of the Sheiltot and the Levush that the halakhat is decided not in accordance with Rabbi Hanina that with difficulty they, i.e. the Rabbis, permitted visiting, but rather that it is permitted with ease in accordance with the plain implication of the words of the academy of Hillel who permit it, and not only that, but that there is in this a fulfillment of the commandment of bestowing kindness, which invigorates the sick person.

The Tzitz Eliezer goes as far as to say that Rabbi Hanina’s observation at the end of the Babylonian Talmud, that permitting visiting the sick and consoling mourners was a difficult decision is not an accepted opinion and is contrary to the opinion of the academy of Hillel expressed toward the beginning of the Talmudic piece. I am on the fence as to whether I agree with the Tzitz Eliezer on this point, but have little doubt about the beauty of his writing on this point. I would also add that it is probably of little consequence, philosophically or practically whether Rabbi Hanina’s statement is accepted. If it is, it is merely a demonstration of how important bestowing kindness on others is in that it led the rabbis to make the difficult call they made.

c. Conclusions

It is clear that halakhat permits consoling mourners, and even shiva visits on Shabbat. Clearly, a person should feel free to offer condolences to the bereaved on Shabbat. In this regard, it is worth noting that the rabbis presume that a person in mourning will benefit from consolation. Sometimes we may be tempted not to bring up a person’s loss for fear of calling the person’s attention to that loss. However, in all likelihood, particularly in the early stages of mourning, the person is thinking about the loss or is likely to do so anyway in the near future. On the other hand, not mentioning a person’s loss may seem like leaving the elephant in the room unaddressed, which may be particularly insensitive toward the bereaved. By offering condolences, we are far more likely to facilitate a person’s expressing and processing her or his emotions than we are to bring up negative emotions that aren’t already there in the first place. Of course, like all general rules, there certainly will be exceptions to this idea that offering condolences on Shabbat will be helpful. If there is a particular reason to believe that offering condolences to someone will be hurtful, of course one should refrain from doing so (though in most cases such situations would not be different on Shabbat than on other days).
The issue of making a shiva visit on Shabbat is a bit more complicated for a variety of related reasons. Today, people do not expect shiva visits on Shabbat. In addition, the lack of visitors on Shabbat may be a welcome respite for the family from the frenetic pace that often exists in a shiva home. The mourners may prefer to spend Shabbat in relative quiet and among family. This said, there is probably good reason to move away from a hard-and-fast rule that people do not visit on Shabbat. For instance, it may depend on whether the mourner will be relatively alone on Shabbat or has family there. There may also be particularly close friends from whom a visit on Shabbat might be appreciated or a friend who for whatever reason simply cannot make a visit other than on Shabbat (we should be careful that any permission in this regard not be taken too far, as to not end up in the troubling situation raised by Maken Avraham, above p. 6). I would note that no one should “show up” at a shiva home on Shabbat without advance warning and permission from the family (requested only if the requestor is confident that the family will be comfortable saying “no” if they want to). In addition, mourners should probably be afforded some latitude to invite visitors on Shabbat (either a public invitation or asking some select friends to come by) if they feel that will be helpful to them.

Section 2: Should Public Announcements/Nihum Avelim be Avoided on Shabbat?

Presuming that, as argued above, consolation of mourners is generally permitted on Shabbat, we must next consider whether there is any difference between an individual expressing condolences and a community doing so, in the form of, for example, public announcements or group visits. While it is clear that halakhah restricts public acts of mourning on Shabbat, there is, to my knowledge, no text from the Talmudic era that directly addresses whether this restriction applies only to the bereaved, prohibiting public acts of mourning, or also to the everyone else as well so as to prohibit the public from acts of consolation. In addition, even if in theory the rule that public mourning does not apply on Shabbat would include public acts of consolation, a strong argument could be made that the same logic that permitted private acts of consolation despite the possibility that it might detract from Shabbat might also apply to permit public acts of consolation as well.

35 This may be the case, for instance for mourners who are leaving a certain location after Shabbat and therefore will have limited time to receive visitors in that location. Thank you to Rabbi Gerald Sussman for raising this example as food for thought in a recent conversation.

36 Rambam Laws of Mourning 10:1

And there is no mourning on Shabbat other than in private, for instance the covering of the head, marital relations (lit. “using the bed”), and washing in hot water, but matters that are public, he does not practice mourning in that regard, but rather he wears shoes, uprights the couches, greets everyone, and if he has other clothing he changes his clothing, and he should not wear a torn garment on Shabbat, even for the loss of his father or mother, and if he doesn’t have other clothing with which to change clothing, he turns the tear to behind him.

See further Shulhan Arukh Yoreh Deah 400:1.

37 Thank you to my friend Dov Berger for framing this issue in this manner during our conversation on this subject.
We have already seen that Ritba presumed that public acts of consolation are prohibited. This is the earliest source I have found thus far to explicitly state such a distinction. Commenting on this text in the Mosad Harav Kook printing of Ritba, Rabbi Eliyahu Lichtenstein writes at footnote 527, “לא מצאנו בשום מקום חלוקים אלו, בין פרהסיא לצינעא, בין יחוד לרבים וה RNG cầnquiry, that we have not found in any place (i.e. text) these distinctions, between public and private, between the individual and the public, and this needs great investigation.”

The closest thing we have to a Talmud-era text discussing public consolation of mourners is the following text from Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer and its parallel source in Avot d’Rabbi Natan.

Solomon saw that the quality of bestowing kindness was great before God, so when he built the Holy Temple he built two gates, one for grooms and one for mourners and people who were excommunicated and Israel, i.e. Jewish people, would go on the Sabbaths and sit between these two gates, and one who would enter the grooms’ gate they would know he was a groom and would say to him, “may the one who dwells in this Temple bring you joy through sons and daughters,” and one who entered the gate of mourners and his mustache was covered, they would know he was a mourner and say to him, “may the one who dwells in this house console you.” … When the Holy Temple was destroyed, the sages instituted that grooms and mourners go to the synagogues and houses of study, and the people of the place would see the groom and celebrate with him and see the mourner and sit with him on the ground, so that they would sit and Israel would fulfill their obligation of bestowing kindness. And regarding them he, i.e. the mourner, would say, “Blessed is He who bestows a good reward on those who bestow kindness.

This text seems to approve of a public display of consoling mourners on Shabbat. Then again, as was noted in the Alay Tamar commentary on the Jerusalem Talmud, it is possible that there were varying traditions regarding consolation of mourners on Shabbat, and to the extent Pirke d’Rabbi Eliezer suggests a practice that might be violative of the rule against public mourning, the text of Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer should not be considered authoritative. However, a number of authorities provide an explanation for the behavior referenced in Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer by arguing, as we suggested above, that the interest in consoling mourners overrides any potential restriction based on the rule against public mourning.

38 See text of Ritba, above p. 5.
39 Some of the distinctions between the two texts are addressed in the Alay Tamar commentary on the Jerusalem Talmud found above at page 3.
40 Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer is one of the so-called “minor tractates,” which are generally not considered authoritative when they contradict other early rabbinic material.
Even though this, i.e. the story in Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer, is public mourning on Shabbat, for the sake of a mitzvah, i.e. the kindness bestowed on the mourner it is distinguished from other manner of public mourning that is prohibited. And it is because of its public nature that we say “with difficulty they, i.e. the Rabbis, permitted consoling mourners on the Sabbath.”

Note that Raaviah argues that the sages’ original concern regarding consoling mourners on Shabbat was the public nature of the act, presumably meaning that even where it is just a single mourner accepting condolences from a single friend, that is already a public act, and nonetheless the sages permitted the act. If Raaviah is correct about this analysis, it would make it more clear that public acts of consolation are permitted on Shabbat. However, as we saw in section Ib, above p. 7, the earlier explanations for the rabbis’ concerns for consolation of mourners on Shabbat revolve around the detrimental effect such acts have on a person’s enjoyment of Shabbat.

Public participation in consoling mourners is spoken of by the Rosh, who relies on Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer as a permissive precedent:

The Rosh’s teaching is quoted in Tur Yoreh Deah 393. However, Shulhan Arukh does not mention this precedent or whether it is permitted or forbidden to engage in public consolation of mourners on Shabbat. Some later authorities presume that public announcements of condolences are not permitted on Shabbat in reference to a practice of welcoming mourners into the synagogue during Kabbalath Shabbat.

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41 R. Eliezer ben R. Yoel Halevi, born c. 1140 Mainz, Germany, d. Cologne, c. 1220.
42 See foot note 29 on page 8 for a reference to some others who make the same argument. One of those opinions is that of Mordechai, a descendant of Raaviah, who in turn is cited on the point by Beth Yoseph in Yoreh Deah 393 sv משמע שמחתับנכם בישראל תחתית פירקין ורבינא אליעזר.
Gesher Hahayim 20:5

Because Rabbi Hanina says “With difficulty they, i.e. the Rabbis, permitted consoling mourners on the Sabbath.” … therefore the Ashkenazim became accustomed to console mourners before receiving Shabbat and to have him take his place (lit. “to cause him to sit”) in the synagogue with the people with the receiving of Shabbat, i.e. that the mourner enters the synagogue after “Lecha Dodi” before “let us sing a song for the day of Shabbat,” i.e. Psalm 92, and the sexton announces “go to welcome the mourner” and the congregation receives the mourner with the blessing “may the omnipresent console you,” etc., and he, i.e. the mourner, takes his place in the synagogue. And through this consolation before the receiving of Shabbat we also express that receiving Shabbat suspends public mourning and consolation.

Note that it is unclear whether Gesher Hahayim means that only public consolation of mourners is suspended on Shabbat or all forms of consolation, depending on whether the adjective “public” is meant to refer only to mourning or also to consolation.

Mishnah Berurah 287:3

The P’ri Megadim wrote, “if the mourner comes to the synagogue after the reciting of ‘let us sing a song for the day of Shabbat’ the sexton should no longer call out ‘go to the mourner’” the Mishnah Berura explains: because one may not publicly mention mourning on Shabbat. Nonetheless for one to go on one’s own on Shabbat to say ‘the Sabbath prevents us from consoling’ is permitted.”


44 Rabbi Israel Meir HaKohen 1839-1933 Radin, Poland (now Byelorussia). The immediately preceding text of Mishnah Berurah appears below at page 17, text accompanying footnote 52.

45 R. Joseph son of R. Meir Teomim b. 1727 Steritz, Poland (modern day Ukraine), d. 1792. The text of P’ri Megadim is a follows:

46 Other parts of this comment of Mishnah Berurah are found below at pages 14 and 17.
The Aruh haShulhan also references this practice although he does not explicitly associate this practice with any prohibition of consoling mourners:

ואצלינו המנהג בערוכים מקומתי
שהאבל ממתין בע"ש קודם קבלת שבת בהיכל או במ"ד וקודם קבלת שבת מכריז השמש לכל נער היום קומיו ועופר
практиוכם ורצאים נגדי זה הנכש
ולעבון"א ואלבון"ב

And amongst us the practice in many places is that the mourner waits on Shabbat eve before the receiving of Shabbat in the hall of the synagogue or study hall, and before receiving Shabbat the sexton announces “go to the mourner,” and the people get up from their places and go out to him and he enters the synagogue or study hall.

Whether public forms of consolation of mourners, such as in synagogue announcements should be avoided is a very close call. There is no particularly strong source from the Talmudic era on this point and logical analysis can point in opposite directions. On the one hand, our sages bent over backwards to permit consolation of mourners in deference of the therapeutic effect of such acts and therefore perhaps we should err on the side of permitting public acts of consolation. On the other hand, since the sages bent over backwards to permit such acts, perhaps we should construe that permission narrowly and therefore eschew public acts of consolation. Friday night also presents an additional interesting question. The practice of welcoming mourners before Psalm 92 has the advantage of allowing the congregation to offer condolences in plenum before formally welcoming the Shabbat. On the other hand, this practice may reinforce mistaken beliefs as to the permissibility of consoling mourners on Shabbat in general. For Gesher Hahayim, communicating that Shabbat suspends public mourning and (public?) consolation of mourners is a feature, but perhaps it is a bug. My personal opinion is that I would allow and encourage announcements of condolences on Shabbat morning, but I might allow the greeting of mourners before Psalm 92 to suffice on Friday night. As to other communal acts of consolation on Shabbat, I would permit such acts if they are welcomed/requested by the mourner.

Section 3: Should the Standard Greetings to Mourners be Extended on Shabbat?

The Babylonian Talmud⁴⁷ offers a number of suggestions as to what should be said by a person visiting a sick person on Shabbat. No such suggestions are made regarding visiting a mourner. The same is true of Rambam and Shulhan Arukh:

47 Text above p. 2.
48 Translated per the comment of Rabbi Yoseph Kappach below p. 17.
Sholovim Tevuah Torah Hisborsa Payshem Rav Mecholah

But one should not speak to the person in the manner that he speak during the week, but rather should say to him, “Shabbat is what prevents us from crying out, and healing will come soon (alt: “may healing come soon”), God’s (lit. “His”) compassion is great, and have peaceful Sabbath rest. Gloss (by Rabbi Moses Isserless) and some say that one need not say, “God’s compassion,” etc., and thus is our practice.

Arguably, this may indicate that the standard greetings that are offered to a mourner during the week may also be offered on Shabbat. However, a number of later authorities suggest that rather than extending the normal greetings, a substitute greeting similar to the greeting used for a sick person should be used.

And if there is a mourner, etc. ... It seems that that which is written that “one should not speak to the person in the manner that he speaks during the week” only refers to what immediately follows, “and to visit the sick,” ... Rashi explained that special words are prescribed for the sick people because it is necessary to distract their thoughts so that they not be troubled, which suggests that for the mourner one may console him in the manner that he consoles him during the week, but particularly for the sick person since during the week the visitor must cry out and pray for him, i.e. the visitor must pray for the sick person, we say that on Shabbat it is forbidden to cry out, rather he says “The Sabbath prevents us from crying out,” etc. However, I saw the Maharshal (in glosses on Tur) who wrote that when one consoles mourners one says on his exiting “Shabbat prevents us from consoling, but consolation will come soon (alt: “May consolation come soon”), God’s (lit. “His”) compassion is great, and have peaceful Sabbath rest,” end of quote. Apparently he, i.e. Maharshal, believes that just as the Tanaim, i.e. the rabbis quoted in BT Shabbat 12 as to what to say to a sick person on Shabbat, disagreed regarding what to say in visiting the sick, so, too, they disagree regarding consoling mourners and since the halakhatah is established in accordance with Shevna’s recommended words to the sick person, one must say “Shabbat

50  ה"ט ואחרי תוספות פסחים

51  Bach is commenting on the text of Tur which mentions using different words immediately after mentioning visiting a sick person.

49  Ashkenazim generally say המיקום ינחם אתכם בתוך אבלי ציון וירושלים “may the Omnipresent console you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem” while Sephardim generally say תנוחמו מן השמים “may you be comforted from the heavens.” As noted above page 4 footnote 8, one could also suggest that the Babylonian Talmud does not supply text for consoling mourners on Shabbat because no words of consolation ought to be spoken. However, I think that interpretation is unlikely.

50  Rabbi Joel Sirkes, Poland 1561-1640.

51  Bach is commenting on the text of Tur which mentions using different words immediately after mentioning visiting a sick person.
prevents us from consoling,” as Shevna said for visiting the sick, and this is sensible.

The Talmud did not mention what to say for consoling mourners on Shabbat, and it seems to me that he can say as he says during the week, “May the omnipresent console you among,” etc. But some say that he can/should say as he says with the sick “Shabbat prevents us from consoling, but consolation will come soon (alt: “May consolation come soon”), God’s (lit. “His”) compassion is great, and have peaceful Sabbath rest.”, and see Yoreh Deah 393. But in our area the practice is not to console mourners on Shabbat.

But rather should say to him, etc. – This refers to visiting the sick. But for consoling mourners one should say to him, Shabbat prevents us from consoling, but consolation will come soon (alt: “May consolation come soon”). But some are lenient and hold that it is permissible to say “May the omnipresent console you.”

And in a responsum, our teacher, i.e. Rambam was asked if one should say on Shabbats and holidays the liturgical poems and supplications that were written by the Geonim, and Rambam responded that it is forbidden. And within his words on that subject he wrote, “and all these supplications, requests, and prayers that were written by the Geonim and liturgists it is not permitted in any circumstance to say any of them, not on the Sabbath nor on a holiday, neither for an individual to recite them nor for the congregation to recite them, even any of the lighter words of this group. Because they, i.e. the Sages said, The Sabbath is what prevents us from crying out, and healing will soon come, God’s (lit. “His”) compassion is great, which is by way of announcement and not by way of supplication. …

52 This text presents the first half of this comment of Mishnah Berurah. The balance of the text appears at page 14, text accompanying footnote 44.
… And in any event, it is clear that the language of consolation of mourners during the week is not like the language of Shabbat, and our custom is that one who enters to console mourners during the week says upon his entering “may you be comforted from the heavens,” in accordance with the language of our teacher in chapter 13 of the Laws of Mourning halakhah 2 and thus he says on exiting as well. But on Shabbat one may not say thus since it is a prayer (lit. “A request for mercy”), but rather we say “Peaceful Sabbath” bot on entering and exiting. And see Jerusalem Talmud Moed Kattah page 13b.53

Rabbi Kappach suggests that the common Sephardi greeting to a mourner, “may you be comforted from the heavens,” takes on a prayerful note that is not permitted on Shabbat. He would presumably similarly object to the Ashkenazi greeting, “may the Omnipresent console you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.” As my colleague Rabbi Yaakov Siegel noted in a conversation I had with him on this topic, Rambam takes the strictest approach toward avoiding supplication on Shabbat, and much of our liturgy, especially around Torah reading on Shabbat, would have to be gutted were we to follow Rambam’s guidance on this.54 The more accepted approach seems to permit lightly prayerful sentiments provided they not have a tendency to make us sad, and perhaps the standard greetings offered to mourners are reasonably appropriate on Shabbat. In addition, using the regular phrases might help reinforce the idea that consoling mourners is permitted on Shabbat.

As to the suggested replacement phrase, “שבת היא מלנחם ונחמה קרובה לבא” I have several concerns.

First, the statement “Shabbat prevents us from consoling” is inaccurate. Though arguably there may be some limitations on consolation on Shabbat, such as whether particular common words of consolation are permitted or whether public acts of consolation are permitted, “Shabbat prevents us from consoling” is at best an exaggeration and at worst a misrepresentation of the halakhah with the potential for perpetuating the misunderstanding that consolation of mourners is not permitted on Shabbat. Further, it strikes me that saying to a bereaved person, “I’d like to give you support in your time of need but Shabbat tells me not to” is hardly a sensitive thing to say. If one wishes to avoid the standard Shabbat greeting to a mourner then perhaps the better phrase would be “שבת היא מלזעון prevents us from crying out” which is at least factually accurate, though in truth “crying out” is not exactly something we do in comforting mourners.

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53 Text above page 2.
54 See, for example Arukh haShulhan Orah Hayyim 287:2 commenting on the phrase “וישלח לו רפואה שלמה and send him a full recovery” to which the Arukh haShulhan says, “וכן נדפס בסידורים ולא ידעתי מיהי התיר להם זה אם לא בחולה מסוכן großen Illness there was danger (of death) on that day as we have written.”
As to the phrase “ונחמה קרובה לא,” to the extent it means “may comfort come soon,” the phrase would be objectionable to Rambam but likely would be acceptable to most authorities. On the other hand, if we were to understand this phrase as Rambam understands the phrase “ורפואה קרובה לא,” i.e. “comfort will come soon,” so as to render it acceptable to Rambam, I would think the phrase highly insensitive in most cases. While it is true that a person who is bereaved will likely find comfort at some point in the future, suggesting that this will happen “soon” might be seen as minimizing the person’s loss.

In the end, I would suggest that the standard greetings to mourners are better than the suggested replacement on a number of levels and therefore I would prefer to use them or to say something more simple such as, “my condolences” or “I am sorry for your loss.”