I am wrapped today is my father’s tallis.

My father Alex Shtull, z”l, was a man of few words whose actions spoke most eloquently of his decent, caring, hard-working nature. He took the extra moment to connect with a kind word to anyone that crossed his path, usually in the form of a kibbitz. He was of the old model of husband and father who worked tirelessly to support a family led domestically by his wife. In my youth I did not appreciate him enough and I pray that in the final decades of his life I was able to convey all of my love and admiration for him.

He was the last of his family of origin, having buried all his elders as well as his three brothers. Exactly five years before his passing, he buried his firstborn son, my dear brother Hershie. Alex bore his burdens quietly, with strength and dignity. He was an attentive listener, a marvelous host; was always quick to praise and turn the spotlight on others. May it be your will, Adonai, that I carry myself with even a small measure of his grace.

My father died on Shabbat afternoon, as did Moshe Rabbenu. I have been told it is considered an auspicious time to leave this world. What it provided me, sitting at his ICU bedside, was the opportunity to do a mitzvah that bound me profoundly closer to him, even at his
passing. There was no way to get a Rabbi or shomer on Shabbat, and so I performed as I could, fumbling my way through with the help of the TBZ book “In Times of Need”, which became my field guide.

On Friday night, when it seemed he was beyond reach, I said the Viddui on my father’s behalf, keeping my lips right next to his ear in the hope that he could hear me. And when he revived somewhat the next morning, I was able to pray with him. A lifelong “shul mensh”, my father’s lips soundlessly moved with me through the familiar prayers. When I ran out of songs & prayers, and could think of no other, we “sang” together the Shehecheyanu, his lips forming every word. I don’t know if that was really proper, but we had reached that moment, and we were grateful for it. On Shabbat afternoon when my father took his final breath, I closed his eyes, said goodbye, davened the final prayers, looked at his beautiful face one last time and covered it with the sheet.

We are all here at this moment sitting with someone no longer on this earth. We still love them, with a simple or a complicated love. That does not end with their death. We try to keep their memory alive somehow. We squeeze the details back to life, replaying important moments from the past, and imagining how they might react or advise us with new dilemmas we face without them. We rededicate ourselves at times like this, and again & again, to embody the best of their values,
teachings, and traits; to keep them alive by the actions of our life and by passing their spark on to our children.

May it be your will, Adonai, that I be able to see, with closed eyes, the slow, mischievous smile creeping into my father’s face and lighting it up as if from within as he erupts with contagious laughter.

May I hear the zany tunes that entertained three generations, the Yiddish jokes, the refrain to us upon bidding guests farewell, “I thought they’d never leave”.

May it be your will that I am able to close my eyes and conjure the feeling of my father’s hand on the small of my back as he expertly maneuvers me around the dance-floor, leading as only he could so that, with him as my partner, suddenly I could do the rumba, the cha-cha, the waltz.

Yehi ratzon milpanecha, may it be your will Ribbono shel Olam, that we all find a way, somehow, to keep the presence of our loved ones with us forever.