

Expressing True Love Toward the Living and the Dead

Parashat Emor

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Rabbi Carl M. Perkins
Temple Aliyah, Needham

The very beginning of this week's parashah never sat well with me. It still doesn't.

Our parashah begins by telling us that Israelite priests—descendants of Aaron, the older brother of Moses—were not permitted to have contact with the dead, except for members of their immediate family.

The reason, which is hinted at in the passage, and given more explicitly elsewhere, is that death is a source of *tum'ah*, or ritual defilement. Priests, in the normal course of performing their duties, had to be in a state of *tahorah*, or ritual purity. So they had to avoid all sources of *tum'ah*, such as contact with various bodily fluids, or reptiles. But a corpse, the most potent source of *tum'ah*, was to be especially avoided.

Now, in its context, this rule undoubtedly made sense, and if we think long and hard about it, it probably makes sense, even today, as an expression of deep-seated psychological concerns, anxieties, and fears.

But it always bothered me, because it seems to ratify, rather than to confront, those deep-seated fears.

This ruling, by the way, as arcane as it seems, is still in effect. Even though there is no Temple in Jerusalem, and priests do not need to be in a state of ritual purity, many descendants of the ancient priesthood still observe this rule. I'm sure that many of us have been to funerals where "*kohanim*"—the Hebrew term for members of this ancient caste of priests—will not enter the room where a body is lying in repose (or lying in state), and they will not enter a cemetery.

By the way, Kohanic identity is a tradition that apparently has been well preserved. Genetic tests have confirmed that people who say that they are Kohanim have certain genetic markers that reinforce their claim.



Let me point out, though, that a name alone is not sufficient. Most, though not all, “Cohens” are “Kohanim.” Other names are similarly strongly associated with Kohanic identity such as “Katz,” which is an abbreviation for *Kohein Tsedek*; or “Kagan,” “Kaplan,” and “Rapaport.” (The names “Seigel” or “Segal” are abbreviations for “S’gan Levi’im,” or “Assistant Levites,” the next caste below that of the Kohanim.) But generally, if one has a tradition of Kohanic identity in one’s family, it is usually reliable.

So priests were and are in a separate category. Their duties required a certain removal from the sources of ritual contamination.

But there’s a problem with that argument. What does it say about undertakers? What does it say about nurses, and doctors, and orderlies, and the many others who attend to the needs of the dying and the dead? It’s a bit of an apologetic to say that an ordinary Israelite doesn’t need to avoid contact with the dead and that only the priests have to. If the elite are avoiding something, it doesn’t speak well of it.

And so, when I first learned of this law, this tradition, this ongoing Jewish practice, I found it disturbing. And I still do.

And therefore I was gratified to learn, again, many years ago, that though this is *one* model of how the elite of our people should relate to contact with the dead, it isn’t the *only* model. Indeed it isn’t the model that we should have at the forefront of our consciousness when we think about contact with the dead.

This other model is brought to our attention by Rashi, in his commentary on our passage. There is, in Judaism, the notion of a *met mitzvah*, a deceased person who has been abandoned. It is a fundamental, primary obligation of a Jew to bury such a body. Not only an ordinary Jew must do so, but even a priest. *Even a High Priest*. In other words, even a High Priest, who in general was sequestered and kept in isolation lest he be contaminated prior to Yom Kippur: should he encounter an abandoned corpse, he is duty-bound to bury it.

So that teaches us that, if necessary, we should—we *must*—take charge, and bury such a body. Why? The answer, in the Jewish tradition, is “*k’vod ha-briot*,” or “human dignity.” It diminishes human dignity when a deceased person’s body is not properly attended to.

O.K. That, you could argue is a *negative* reason to get involved, namely, avoiding human indignity. But is there a positive reason? And the answer is yes. In the

Jewish tradition, it is considered an act of love, true love, to attend to the dead. The term is "*hesed shel emet.*"

We learn this principle from the patriarchal narratives (Gen 24:49, 47:29), that when Jacob was about to die, he had his children swear that they would bury him in the ancestral burial place in Hebron. (The term occurs in Joshua as well. Joshua 2:14)

And so, tending to the dead is considered an act of love. And so in every Jewish community, all over the world, you would find a Hevra Kadisha, or a "Holy Society" to wash and clothe and prepare a body for burial. Long before caring for the dead became a business, it was a duty, a *loving* duty on the part of the entire community.

We've gained something, but we've lost something in the commercialization of funerals in our society. What we've gained is that, at the time of our intense grief, we have people we can call on to help us. But we've lost our own personal role in helping others during their most vulnerable time. We tend to do one part well, and that is to help the living. But we also owe a duty to the dead, a duty best expressed personally.

In our own community, there has been a traditional Hevra Kadishah for many years. Volunteers from within the Orthodox community come out -- sometimes in the "dead of night;" sometimes in the middle of the day -- to wash and clothe a body, and place it into its coffin.

For many years, liberal Jews like us were not able to play a role in this. But then, a few years ago, a group got together and organized a liberal Hevra Kadishah called, the Community Hevra Kadisha of Greater Boston. It's an independent, non-denominational organization of individuals, synagogues, Hebrew College and other Jewish institutions committed to making the full range of burial rituals accessible and available to the entire Jewish community.

The community Hevra Kadisha is always looking for volunteers to be trained, and I encourage you to do that.

Currently, it is only available if one is working with one particular Jewish funeral home in the Boston area. I hope that that will one day change.

There's a reason that it occurred to me to address this topic today. I've been

spending a lot of time this past week with hospice workers, because my sister-in-law is now at the Stanley Tippett Hospice House here in Needham. I've seen first hand how competently and lovingly they treat the dying. This, coupled with the great deal of respect I've long had for the Jewish funeral personnel in our area leads me to one simple message: Let's remember: though we may pray that one day the Temple will be rebuilt, it doesn't exist now.

The model of the priest is not the model to which we should aspire. Instead, let's aspire to be like the Holy One of Blessing who personally buried Moses in the valley in the land of Moab (Deut. 34:6). Let's aspire to be like God, performing acts of loving kindness, TRUE loving kindness, with the living and with the dead.

Shabbat Shalom.