

Obligation of Kohanim to Remain Tahor

Parshas Emor

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Parshas Emor begins with the prohibition of Kohanim to become unclean from contact with death. The exceptions for the Kohanim are the seven relatives and a *meis mitzvah*, one who passed away with no one to attend to the burial. The seven relatives are father; mother, brother, son, daughter, spouse and unmarried sister. The Kohen can not defile himself for a married sister as her burial is her husband's obligation. The Kohen Gadol can only defile himself for a *meis mitzvah* and not for relatives.

The Sefer Hachinuch writes that Kohanim, especially in the time of the Bais Hamikdash, are more directly involved in the service of Hashem than the rest of the population. They therefore need to maintain a higher level of *kedusha*. He then explains how the body without the neshama is *Avi Avos Hatumah*, pure physical lust which leads to all types of ritual impurity. Only the neshama brings the corporeal body to holiness. That being the case, he asks, why are the Kohanim allowed to defile themselves for relatives? Because the 'Torah's ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace' [Mishlai 3-17] so it would not be logical or compassionate to deny the Kohanim the opportunity to bury and properly mourn for their immediate relatives.

The Kli Yakar explains this mitzvah in a similar way, stating that Kohanim are directly involved in matters of *kedusha*. However, he adds the following thought. Since the source of the *kedusha* of Kohanim is Aharon and he never leaves the Bais Hamikdash, Aharon and all future Kohanim Gedolim have to retain this *kedusha* even at the death of a close relative. The other Kohanim only perform the rituals of *korbonos* and at their designated periods of the year known as their *mishmarim*. Therefore it is logical that the other Kohanim can and should defile themselves to take proper care of their relatives' burial. I once heard a similar explanation for the Kohen Gadol's prohibition to defile himself for relatives. The Kohen Gadol does not have a personal family like everyone else; the entire Am Yisroel is his family.

The Ksav Sofer brings the following from the Midrash Tanchuma. First the Torah singles out that the Kohen Gadol is not to defile himself for anyone else but for a *meis mitzvah*. The reason for the stress on the allowance for *meis mitzvah* in the drasha is that this fits in appropriately with the Kohen's role of being peacemaker for Klal Yisroel. As the lover and pursuer of peace, it is incumbent upon Kohanim to do the ultimate *chesed*; burying a *meis mitzvah* who has no one else to attend to him/her is a true *chesed shel emes*.

Rabbi Herbert S. Goldstein, a"h, writes in his commentary on the Torah that the Kohanim should not need the message of death to scare them into religious conviction. All too often, we see people turn to religion only after the loss of a close relative. This especially should not have to apply to Kohanim.

The Kedusahs Halevi states that the Torah reveals an important lesson in this mitzvah. While it is true that the Kohanim have special status and therefore added mitzvos, nevertheless, there should be no arrogance on their part because of this status. While the *kedusha* comes from Aharon ultimately, the same kedusah ultimately comes from Hashem who chose Aharon. Whatever status we have, we must always remember that Hashem gave this *kedusha* to us and we must always be aware of Hashems' gifts to us even in holy matters.