

## He shall not defile himself for the dead among his people. (21:1)

No *Kohen* may defile himself for a dead person who is not one of his seven close relatives as enumerated in the Torah. *Sforno* explains the reason why a *Kohen* may not defile himself to a corpse. “The *Kohen* is a chief, a leader among his people, whose function is to learn and to teach as the *Navi Malachi* says (2:7), ‘For the *Kohen*’s lips shall preserve knowledge, and they should seek Torah from his mouth.’ It is, thus, proper that such an individual conduct himself as a prince, so that his words will be listened to. It is (thus) improper for him to profane his readiness toward the service of the Sanctuary – for the purpose of honoring the dead... For one’s (close) relatives, however, the Torah permits the *Kohen* to defile himself, for their honor is also his honor”. The *Kohen* must uphold the dignity due to his station of leadership. Occupying himself with a corpse would impede his ability to do so.

The *Kohen*’s relationship to the people as a mentor and *halachic* arbiter is in contrast with the accepted notion that in order for a *rebbe* to succeed in imparting knowledge to his students, he must feel and manifest love for them. To the degree that they know he loves and cares for them, his teaching will be effective. A student who feels that his *rebbe* does not really care for him is usually not one of the better students in the class. Why then did the Torah forbid the *Kohen*, who is *Klal Yisrael*’s spiritual mentor, from defiling himself to a corpse? On the contrary, by defiling himself, he demonstrates his closeness to the people, his abiding love for each and every Jew – regardless of his circumstances. Clearly, his involvement in preparing the deceased is not his most appealing function, but it shows that he cares. As a spiritual mentor, this should be one of his requisite credentials. Why is it prohibited?

*Horav A. Henach Leibowitz, zl*, derives from here that while it is certainly critical that the nation sense that the *Kohen* cares for and loves them, it is equally important that they recognize and acknowledge his eminence and distinction. While defiling himself to the dead demonstrates his love for the people, a vestige of his dignity is impugned. They view him through a different lens. Apparently, the sense of *kavod*, honor, that is added to the *Kohen* is greater in the long run than the sense of love (although, with less dignity) that ensues as a result of his defilement to the deceased.

Some mentors feel that descending to the level of the student is crucial for success in reaching the student. This is probably true for some students, but not necessarily true for others, as indicated by the laws of defilement regarding *Kohanim*. A spiritual mentor/*rebbe* should project and communicate his sincerely felt, reverential respect for the subject that he is teaching: Torah. He must believe in its indispensable value to the student, a belief that is conveyed via his continued enthusiasm for the material, and the respect that he shows to its significance in his life. When teaching Torah, the *rebbe* should promote an environment of dignity, respect and reverence as befits the lofty nature of the subject matter. Anything that detracts from this culture of dignity, limits

the students' ability to learn and benefit from its life-altering lessons.

*Chazal* teach that it is a great *mitzvah* to be involved with the necessities of *keivurah*, burial of the dead. *Chevra Kaddisha* is called just that – sacred – due to the sanctity of the nature of the work which the *misaskim* – dedicated volunteers who literally are *oseik*, involved, with the needs of the deceased and family – perform, bestowing the greatest honor on the deceased. *Horav Yosef Chaim Sonenfeld, zl*, was the head of the *Chevra Kaddisha* in the *Old Yishuv* and its *Rav*. In contemporary times, *Horav David Feinstein, zl*, filled in at a bakery on *Purim*, so that its owner could properly mourn his father. Clearly, the *kavod* of these and so many other *gedolim* was not diminished as a result of their devotion to the *klal*, community. We might say that, while this is all true, the *Kohen* in his role as spiritual mentor is still distinct from other mentors. The Torah writes (Ibid. 21:6), *V'lo yechallelu shem Elokeihim*; "And do not profane the Name of their G-d." *Sforno* writes: "Although all those acts are for his (the *Kohen's*) honor, he does not have permission to forgo Hashem's honor, for, indeed, the intent of the Torah in honoring the *Kohanim* is for the purpose of enhancing the honor of Hashem (The Torah makes an exception to, or for the burial of, a *Kohen's* relative. Because their honor is also his honor, one might think that all restrictive acts of mourning are waived, but the Torah teaches that they are not.) Hence, by forgoing their own honor, they thereby profane His Name. In other words, the *Kohen's* responsibility extends beyond the students'. He is responsible to Hashem to uphold His honor, and anything which might in any way impugn that honor is prohibited.