

**Distancing from Death**  
**Parashat Hukkat 5780/2020 – Masorti Judaism (U.K.)**  
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We distance ourselves from death, especially that of human beings. Not only is that our instinctive response, but the Torah warns us: “He who touches the corpse of any human being shall be *tamei* [impure] for seven days” (Num. 19:11). That impurity-contagion seems to be airborne: “When a person dies in a tent, whoever enters the tent and whoever is in the tent shall be unclean seven days, and every open vessel, with no lid fastened down, shall be unclean,” whereas in the open, it takes direct contact to impart impurity: “anyone who touches a person who was killed or who died naturally... shall be unclean seven days” (vv. 15–16).

The Torah offers a remedy even for that most virulent of impurities: hyssop is dipped in water to which the ashes from the “fire of cleansing” on the Temple altar has been added; that water is sprinkled on the impure person on the third and seventh days; his clothing is cleaned—and he is cleansed.

It is not that one should never touch a corpse. *Au contraire*—it is a *mitzvah* to bury the dead, so much so that even a *kohen*, normally expected assiduously to maintaining his ritual purity, is commanded to bury close relatives. Avoiding corpse-defilement is not the Torah’s prime value.

Modern critical scholarship at first dismissed these death-avoidance behaviors as random taboos, mere superstitions. Others offered saw those rules as driven by public health considerations, although the Torah itself offers no evidence for that view. More recently, anthropologists have proposed that the system of ritual purity has profound psychological and religious significance. An American scholar, Jonathan Klawans, puts it this way (in *The Jewish Study Bible*): “The ritual purity system of ancient Israel serves to force a separation between the experience of encountering God’s sanctity and matters pertaining to death.... Because God is eternal, God does not die... Therefore, by separating from... death—by following the ritual purity regulations—ancient Israelites separated themselves from what made them least God-like.” Being in a God-like state of purity was necessary, in the view of Priestly religion, for approaching God’s sacred sanctuary.

We, who are now surrounded by an airborne contagion that has killed very many people, can understand the need to distance ourselves from death. Many of us have experienced the urgent need to be purged of contagion. We know what it means

to wait for a period of days to be unburdened of that contagion and the restrictions it imposes. But how can we make sense of the Torah's concern for making us more God-like, or at least more distanced from what makes us less God-like?

Death is inevitable, but working to maintain life, to "choose life," as the Torah impels us (Deut. 30:19), to "be most careful" about protecting our lives (Deut. 4:15), is doing God's will. Like the *kohen* commanded to bury the dead, health care providers risking contagion are doing God's work, even while the rest of us are under orders to behave quite differently in order to do our share in that work. As we don our masks, we can and should say, "May it be Your will that I do no harm to others, as I wish that no one harm me." As physicians and nurses begin work, they can say, "May I be protected from harm, and may my ministrations be like ashes from the 'fire of cleansing' on the Altar, healing those whose care is entrusted into my hands."

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