

Potential Solution for Priestly Predicament? The Possibility of Kohanim Studying Medicine

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The Torah prohibits male Kohanim from contracting tum'at meit (corpse tum'ah). Tum'at meit is contracted either by direct (touching) or indirect (e.g., lifting or touching through gloves) contact as well as ohel. Tum'at ohel is unique among types of tum'ah and only applies to tum'at meit. It comes in two forms: 1. hovering above or below the source of tum'ah; 2. being under the same roof (or ohel) as the source of tum'ah. The latter type of ohel, called אוהל המשכה, has myriad details and intricacies and is the focus of much of Masekhet Ohalot.

Aside from the 'seven relatives' for whom a Kohen is obligated to mourn, he is prohibited from contracting tum'at meit in any of these forms. The Rambam highlights the importance and hence severity of the mitzvah of mourning over one's close relatives by codifying the rule that demands that a Kohen become tamei in taking part in the funeral and other burial preparations.

It's important to realize that while all Jews are susceptible to tum'ah, only male Kohanim violate a prohibition when knowingly becoming tamei, and even then, only when knowingly contracting tum'at meit. ((There is a misconception among some that Kohanim may not contract any type of tum'ah as a type of hiddur mitzvah or enhancement of the mitzvah of וקדשתו, but there is no basis in Halakhah for this position.))

The prohibition of tum'at Kohanim is one of the lone halakhot of tum'ah and taharah that still applies nowadays. Even though we no longer have the ability to remove tum'at meit, as it requires sprinkling with ashes from a parah adumah prior to immersing in a mikvah, the Poskim are quite clear that the prohibition is still in effect.

The only exception to that generalization is the Ra'avad, who famously held that considering that everybody is nowadays considered to be tamei, there is no further prohibition on Kohanim from contracting that which would anyway qualify as an additional tum'ah. ((There is much discussion as to the precise position of the Ra'avad, as he is quoted as elsewhere having argued otherwise. His additional position can be found in Temim De'im, no. 336. For further discussion, see ["It is upon him to bring the proof": A Note on Historiography, Printing, and the Power of Hearsay in a Position of Rabad.](#)")) While this position of Ra'avad is summarily dismissed by the Poskim for a variety of reasons, the theory behind his argument is not without merit and is built upon principles that are quite well accepted.

In discussing the prohibition of contracting tum'ah, the Gemara often compares the Kohen and Nazir, who is similarly prohibited in contracting tum'at meit in the same manner as a Kohen. In that context, the Gemara (Nazir 42b) questions the precise nature of the prohibition and how the prohibition of becoming tamei relates to the consequences of being tamei. The Gemara cites a debate between Rabbah and Rav Yosef as to whether a Kohen is prohibited from contracting tum'ah ve-tum'ah—repeated tum'ah. In attempting to clarify the disagreement more sharply, the Gemara posits two different possible situations: 1. when contact with the first tum'ah is maintained when coming into contact with the second tum'ah (tum'ah be-hibburin); and 2. when contact with the first tum'ah has been lost prior to contacting the second tum'ah; the first would be permitted, the second prohibited. The Gemara is somewhat unclear as to whether it is Rabbah or Rav Yosef who holds of this distinction, leading to different Rishonim interpreting the normative Halakhah differently. ((See the previously referenced article for a fuller exposition on this topic.))

The general consensus of the Poskim seems to adopt the more lenient position, that if a Kohen is still in contact with one source of tum'ah, he isn't prohibited from contacting a second source of tum'ah. Practically speaking, there aren't many situations in which this leniency applies.

But using this idea, Rav Shlomo Goren developed a very practical application that would help solve a community challenge.

In most medical schools, one of the ways in which students learn anatomy is through cadaveric dissection. While many medical schools are abandoning what many consider to be a 'rite of passage' of first year medical students in favor of advanced technology, this was certainly the widespread practice up until a few years ago. Effectively, considering that anatomical dissection was a required course, Kohanim would be barred from studying medicine. ((This discussion will not address the many other challenges Kohanim may face in medical school or practicing medicine. These range from being in the same room, floor, or building as a dead body [almost a daily guarantee in most large hospitals], to participating in amputations and other surgeries. That said, Rav Goren's suggestion was an attempt to alleviate all of these concerns.))

Building upon this Gemara, Rav Goren suggested that if a Kohen could permissibly maintain contact with a source of tum'ah, then he wouldn't be prohibited from contacting a second source of tum'ah. Meaning, that so long as the Kohen was in permissible contact with some source of tum'ah, he would be allowed to participate in anatomical dissections or enter the rooms of the recently deceased while in complete compliance with the Torah's restrictions on tum'at Kohanim. The obvious challenges are two fold: when is it ever permissible for a Kohen to contact the initial tum'ah and how would the Kohen be able to maintain contact with this tum'ah while he goes about his regular studies?

To answer both questions, Rav Goren turned to the principle of חרב הרי הוא כחלל (a sword is halakhically similar to a corpse), which according to most Rishonim means that a metal

object that comes into contact with a dead body attains the same tum'ah status as that dead body (an אבי אבות הטומאה). The Gemara (Bava Kama 2a) explains that normally, whenever tum'ah is transmitted from one object / source to another, the level of tum'ah drops down one notch. Such that while a dead body is considered to be an אבי אבות הטומאה (the 'grandfather' of all types of tum'ah), a person who touches that corpse is considered an אב הטומאה and the objects that this person touches become ראשון לטומאה that can then transfer tum'ah to food and drink that would become a שני לטומאה.

The very first Mishnah in Ohalot highlights the idea of חרב כחלל as an exception to this rule. When an object that qualifies as a חרב (there is a debate in the Rishonim whether this is limited to metal objects or includes other materials as well) contacts a dead body, this object itself attains the status of an אבי אבות הטומאה. If a person then touches this object, the person then becomes an אב הטומאה (meaning that the rule of חרב כחלל is only relevant regarding that first object ((According to most Rishonim, the notion of חרב כחלל applies to an אב הטומאה as well. Meaning, that if this person were to then touch a metal object, the metal object would stay at the same level of the person—as an אב טומאה.)) but not to the subsequent chain of tum'ah stemming from it.)

The last piece of the puzzle is that most Poskim (following Rama YD 369:1) agree that Kohanim are not prohibited from becoming tamei through a חרב כחלל. Even while a Kohen who contacts a חרב כחלל becomes an אב הטומאה, he hasn't violated anything in doing so.

Putting all of this together, Rav Goren suggested that a Kohen medical student obtain a metal bracelet or watch that came into contact with a corpse. That bracelet would have the status of an אבי אבות הטומאה and the Kohen who wore it, would be an אב הטומאה who is still in continuous contact with an אבי אבות הטומאה, although he hasn't violated any prohibition in attaining that status. And since this Kohen would already be in consistent contact with a source of tum'ah, based on the Gemara Nazir, he wouldn't be prohibited from contacting a second source. Effectively, Rav Goren argued that a Kohen wearing this bracelet could completely participate in anatomy lab or any other hospital function without violating any detail of tum'at Kohanim! ((In the newer editions of Rav Goren's Torat Ha-Refuah, there is a note appended to the end of this teshuvah indicating that Rav Goren never meant for this idea to be practically applied. Meaning that it should be taken להלכה ולא למעשה. The way it is printed, it appears that it was Rav Goren who included this caveat before signing off on the teshuvah. However, in an [exchange of letters in Assia](#), Dr. Joel Wolowelsky, a co-recipient of that teshuvah shared an image of the original, which did not contain any such caveat.))

While certainly clever, Rav Goren's suggestion was summarily rejected by virtually all Poskim. On the simplest level they point out that Rav Goren relied upon tried and true

principles which, if acceptable, would practically eliminate the entire prohibition of tum'at Kohanim. For centuries, Poskim have fielded difficult challenges faced by Kohanim in the course of normal life and were Rav Goren's suggestion valid, all of these challenges could have simply been avoided. But beyond an argument from silence, Poskim find a much more fundamental problem with Rav Goren's idea.

It begins by more closely analyzing the notion of חרב כחלל and explaining that a Kohen isn't prohibited from contacting one because, simply put, he isn't touching anything having to do with a dead body. As Rav Elchanan Wasserman argues (Kovetz Shiurim 2:41[also Shu"t Achiezer 3:65]), tum'at Kohanim prohibits a Kohen from coming into close contact with a dead body—להתקרב למת. It's not about becoming tamei or changing their tum'ah status, but rather about התקרבות למת. Since a חרב כחלל is far removed from the actual dead body, the fact that it has the same tum'ah status as a dead body isn't relevant insofar as tum'at Kohanim is concerned. This idea is also why טומאה וטומאה doesn't present a prohibited problem for a Kohen either. Since he is already touching a dead body, he is as close as he can possibly get and therefore, doesn't attain any further התקרבות למת when he touches the second body.

When it comes to Rav Goren's suggestion, the Kohen only violates התקרבות למת when he contacts the second source of tum'ah. Even though the Kohen is continuously touching the חרב כחלל and as such, 'actively' making himself into an אב הטומאה at all times, he is not מתקרב אל המת at all. The reason that a Kohen isn't prohibited from contacting a second source of tum'ah while still touching the first is not because he is already 'actively' making himself tamei at the same level. Instead, it's because he already was מתקרב אל המת (in the Gemara's case, permissibly) and by touching another source of tum'ah, he doesn't become any closer. As Rav Hershel Schachter notes (Be-Ikvei Ha-Tzon, no. 35), according to Rav Goren's suggestion, even when wearing such a bracelet, a Kohen would violate the prohibition of התקרבות אל המת each time he contacted a corpse and be in violation of tum'at Kohanim.

In a similar, but slightly different approach, Rabbi J. David Bleich (Bi-Netivot Ha-Halakhah 3, p. 202) explains that because touching the initial tamei object is not prohibited, it indicates that in doing so, the Kohen does not become מחולל even while he becomes tamei (based on the Torah's wording, ולא יחלל זרעו). The prohibition of tum'at Kohanim prevents a Kohen from becoming tamei in a manner that he will then become מחולל. As such, since while touching the bracelet the Kohen is not מחולל (even though he is tamei) when he contacts a second source of tum'ah, he now becomes מחולל and violates the prohibition of tum'at Kohanim.