

Rav Kook Torah



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Kohanim and the Illusion of Death

Summary: For the sake of the kohen's soul, he must distance and protect himself from death and its illusions.

God told Moshe, 'Speak to the kohanim, the descendants of Aharon. Let no [kohen] defile himself [by contact] with a dead soul among his people. (Vayikra 21:1)

Why are kohanim not allowed to come in contact with a dead body? Why does the Torah refer to the dead person as a "dead soul"? After all, it is the body that dies, not the soul!

The Parable of Twin Brothers

In his book on mourning practices, Gesher HaChayim, Rabbi Tukachinsky used the following parable to explain the Jewish view on life after death:

Twin brothers, fetuses in their mother's womb, enjoyed a carefree life. Their world was dark and warm and protected. These twins were alike in all aspects but one. One brother was a 'believer': he believed in an afterlife, in a future reality much different from their current, miniature universe.

The second brother, however, was a skeptic. All he knew was the familiar world of the womb. Anything besides what he could feel and sense was only an illusion. The skeptic tried to talk some sense into his brother. He warned him to be realistic, but to no avail. His naive brother insisted on believing in an extraordinary world that exists after life in the womb, a world so immense and fantastic that it transcends their wildest dreams.

The months passed, and the fatal moment arrived. Labor began. The fetuses became aware of tremendous contractions and shifting in their little world.

The freethinker recognized that "this is it." His short but pleasant life was about to end. He felt the forces pressuring him to go down, but fought against them. He knew that outside the womb, a cruel death awaited, with no protective sack and no umbilical cord. Suddenly, he realized that his naive brother was giving in to the forces around them. His brother was sinking lower!

"Don't give up!" he cried, but his twin took no heed. "Where are you, my dear brother?"

He shuddered as he heard the screams from outside the womb. His poor brother had met his cruel fate. How naive he had been, with his foolish belief in a bigger, better world!

Then the skeptic felt the uterine muscles pushing him out, against his will, into the abyss. He screamed out

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“Mazal Tov!” called out the doctor.
“Two healthy baby boys!”

The Illusion of Death

Rav Kook wrote:

Death is a false illusion; its defilement is due to its deceptive nature. What people call ‘death’ is in fact the intensification of life. Because man wallows in pettiness, he pictures this increase of life in a pained, black fashion, which he calls ‘death’.

The kohanim in their holiness are able to rise above this falsehood. Yet, falsehood and deception rule over the world. In order to overcome the illusion of death, the kohanim must limit their exposure to death. They need to protect themselves from those images that impress the soul with deceiving messages.

The word “soul” in the verse does not refer to soul of the dead person. It refers to the soul of the kohen. This is how the verse should be understood: “For the sake of the soul, the kohen shall not defile himself among his people” – for the sake of the kohen’s soul, he must distance and protect himself from death and its illusions.

*Gold from the Land of Israel, pp. 207-209.
Adapted from Orot HaKodesh vol. II, p.380*