

“HE SHALL NOT BECOME DEFILED ... EXCEPT FOR HIS RELATIVE THAT IS CLOSE TO HIM.”(VAYIKRA 21: 1-2)

There is no longer any spiritual component

THE RALBAG (ibid.) explains why the Torah prohibits a *kohen* from defiling himself by coming in contact, or in proximity, of a dead body: The *kohanim* need to learn to despise earthly matters. Their position as servants of Hashem in the *Beis HaMikdash* demands that they separate themselves as much as possible from worldly pursuits. The only reason to justify their involvement with a physical body would be to benefit the spiritual aspect of that person, his *neshama*. Once the *neshama* has left the body, however, there is no longer any spiritual component that would gain from the interaction, and therefore it should be prohibited as a purely physical activity. If the deceased is a direct relative, on the other hand, the *kohen* is obligated to defile himself, the Ralbag continues, in order to properly mourn them and to build the necessary family bonds.

A *kohen* may not become *tamei* for anyone other than a family member (or a *mes mitzva* – a dead body found in public without anyone to properly care for its interment). A very important member of the community may have died, the greatest rabbi of the generation may have passed on, nevertheless, a *kohen* may not participate in the *tahara* – the final preparations of the body for burial. No matter how important his presence at the funeral may be, the *kohen* may not be in the same room, or even in the same building, as the deceased. Obviously, the Torah considers the separation of *kohanim* from corpses to be a very crucial matter. Bearing this in mind, how can it be that for a mere enhancement of family ties these strictures are overruled?

Apparently, there is no such thing as a “mere enhancement”

Apparently, there is no such thing as a “mere enhancement” when we deal with relationships between members of a family. In the Torah perspective, the fostering of love between them is so critical that it comes even at the cost of sacrificing the *kohen*'s separation from physicality – which would seem to affect his level of sanctity which is appropriate to perform the *avodah* – the Temple service – on behalf of the Jewish people. Hashem places a very high value on our connections to our parents, spouse, siblings and children. The Torah does not allow the *kohen* to show his final respects to the greatest Torah personality of the time, yet the Torah does allow the *kohen* to attend the funeral of his relative. Even though attending the funeral of the *talmid chacham* may be a powerful manifestation of respect for Torah, improving a common family bond is even more important. May we appreciate the spirituality and significance of our family relationships, as the Torah teaches us with this *mitzva*, and show the love we feel for them in the greatest way possible.