

The Study of Medicine by *Kohanim*

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There is a strong and well-known tradition that a *kohen*, a priestly descendant of the Biblical tribe of Levi, is not permitted to study medicine. While the reasons behind this prohibition clearly stem from concerns of ritual defilement, the blanket proscription is a relatively new phenomenon. Many illustrious rabbinic scholars through the ages were both *kohanim* and physicians. The Talmud relates that both Rav Yishmael and Samuel along with Rav Chanina ben Dosa filled the dual position of being great scholars and physicians despite being priests. It was only from the eighteenth century onward, when the study of human anatomy on deceased corpses became an integral part of a physician's education, that the issue of *kohanim* studying medicine became problematic. This review will summarize the main points of the leading English-language articles written by acknowledged experts in the field of Jewish medical ethics on this subject. The reader is urged to explore the bibliography of sources provided to gain a more profound historical appreciation of the numerous minority opinions on the topic that are not quoted here, due to their non-acceptance by the predominant rabbinic authorities of the modern age.

BASIS OF THE PROHIBITION

The Torah in Vayikra (21:1) forbids the sons of Aaron to defile themselves by contact with a human corpse either by direct touch or by being under the same roof, known as *tumas ohel*:

And the Lord said to Moses: Speak to the priests the sons of Aaron, and say to them: There shall none defile himself for the

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dead among his people; except for his kin that is near to him, for his mother and for his father, and for his son, and for his daughter . . .

There is thus a Biblical prohibition against a *kohen* touching or being in the same room as a Jewish corpse except for the above-mentioned close relatives, as well as a wife, brother, and sister. Numerous Talmudic and post-Talmudic discussions have dealt with the defiling nature of a Jewish versus a non-Jewish corpse. The prevailing opinion is that a Jewish corpse can defile both by touch and *tumas ohel*, whereas a gentile corpse only defiles by touch but not by being in the same room. There is, however, considerable disagreement on this last point, with a number of authorities opining that even gentile corpses defile by *tumas ohel* similar to Jewish corpses.

Given that the study of gross anatomy, defined as the dissection of a human cadaver by a medical student, is a major requirement of virtually every medical school in the United States, it is clear that an observant *kohen* cannot undertake the study of medicine if active dissection is required.

One question that remains open is whether a *kohen* may be permitted to study medicine if given special permission to fulfill his anatomy requirement by observing, but not participating in, the dissection. According to the opinion that gentile corpses do not cause impurity simply by being under the same roof or, more specifically, room ceiling, it is conceivable that there is room for a permissive approach.

Based on known data, one can be confident that the overwhelming majority of cadavers made available for medical student dissection are not of Jewish origin. Using the legal concept of *rov*, or majority rule, there is ample allowance to consider every cadaver as being non-Jewish. Thus, there would be no intrinsic objection to a *kohen's* standing in an anatomy lab and observing a dissection, provided he does not actually touch the cadaver. He could, for example, use a laser pointer to specifically designate anatomic structures for

learning or exam purposes. This allowance would only be countenanced by those who hold the opinion that gentile corpses do not defile by being in the same room. There is a strong minority view, however, that gentile corpses defile priests in an identical manner to Jewish corpses. It should be noted that the use of the masculine pronoun when referring to a *kohen* is intentional, as women who are the daughters of a *kohen* are totally permitted to study medicine.

The practical defect in the reasoning of the preceding paragraph is the great unlikelihood that any medical school would grant an exemption from the dissection requirement. Physical participation in the dissection of a corpse is widely considered one of the most important aspects of medical training that sensitizes future physicians to respect their patients, and is therefore unlikely to be dispensed with. Indeed, the introduction of computerized virtual 3-D anatomy to replace conventional dissections has not occurred because of the perceived importance of this rite of passage. Should such an exemption be given, or were computerized substitutes for dissection introduced, then a reexamination of the prohibition would be in order.

There have been rabbis who have ruled that *kohanim* who are very desirous of studying medicine should be allowed to study anatomy because of their future ability to save lives, but these rabbis are not considered by rabbinic scholars to be authorities on this matter. Indeed, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, arguably the twentieth century's leading Orthodox Jewish legal scholar, strongly objected to this line of reasoning, stating that one is only obligated to heal and save lives if one is already a practicing physician. He states:

It is prohibited for priests to study medicine in medical schools in countries where it is necessary to have contact with corpses. One should not point to some of our ancient sages who were both priests and physicians and were able to learn all of medical science by oral teaching without any observations on or physical contact with corpses. In our times, this is impossible and therefore is prohibited.

One semi-permissive opinion is that of the Chatam Sofer, who argued that a *kohen* is able to study medicine if he can do so without becoming ritually defiled, even if in the future, as a practicing physician, he may have to set aside the sanctity of the priesthood in life-saving situations. The relevance of this opinion, however, is minimized by the unlikelihood of finding a medical school in the United States that would permit a medical student to be excused from the anatomy dissection requirement.

In summary, then, it is prohibited for a *kohen* to participate in the dissection of cadavers. If a *kohen* is given an ironclad written exemption from this requirement as well as the handling of other human tissues, such as bones and human histology and pathology specimens and slides, then it may be permitted for him to attend medical school, providing he can pass all exams in gross and microscopic anatomy without actively participating in these activities.

KOHANIM IN THE HOSPITAL

Another problem with a *kohen's* studying medicine is the high probability that he will encounter a deceased Jewish body during his clinical training, when, as a student, he is incapable of functioning as a fully trained physician licensed to provide life-saving care. If a *kohen* is already a physician, then the injunctions against defilement do not apply in situations where life-threatening disease is present, since a *kohen* is allowed to defile himself "to save a life." That permissive ruling does not, however, extend to the study of medicine, but only to the practice of medicine. The argument that today's study will permit a *kohen* to save lives in the future is non-operative inasmuch as the permissive principle of practice only applies if the patient with life-threatening illness is immediately at hand.

Once a priest has become a physician, the question arises as to whether he is permitted to practice medicine, to treat terminally ill patients, and to visit and treat non-terminally ill patients in a hospital where corpses are frequently present. Many authorities allow these visits, but some are more restrictive and permit them only when

there are no other physicians present. Most authorities do, however, permit a *kohen* to treat terminally ill patients. According to Rabbi Feinstein, the problems of defilement by corpses in a hospital are mitigated for practicing physicians (as opposed to students) by the physical structure of hospitals, where each patient room and treatment area is considered to be a separate compartment. Therefore, a *kohen* passing by in a corridor or who is in another room is not considered to be in the same room as the corpse.

CONCLUSIONS

The overwhelming majority of authoritative rabbinic scholars prohibit the study of medicine by a *kohen* in any school where the dissection of human corpses is required. If a student is given permission to learn anatomy by observation of dissection without participation there is room for leniency, although the problem of encountering corpses in the hospital for an as yet unlicensed medical student remains.

Medical schools in the United States remain heavily committed to the teaching of gross anatomy because of the strong feeling that dissection provides a multidimensional understanding of the human body, highlights anatomical variability, fosters learning in a peer group as part of a team, and incomparably introduces medical students to the comprehension of death and humanistic care. Non-participation in dissection is either not permitted or severely frowned upon because of the strong belief that the study of anatomy involves far more than learning the names of the body's parts and that dissection provides a multidimensional understanding and unique appreciation of the human body. The use of plastic models and computerized technologies is still considered an adjunct to the teaching process.

If a *kohen* chooses to ignore the stated prohibitions and studies anatomy nevertheless, he is permitted to practice medicine once he achieves his medical degree and license.

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