

Our Torah reading tomorrow begins with the strange ritual of the red heifer. You can read about it in detail in Numbers 19. It goes on to deal with issues of ritual purity and impurity, which are probably not high on the priority list of most Conservative Jews in terms of their religious lives. But let's unpack some of these things—time constraints will limit us to a superficial look at it—but I think we will uncover a paradox within our religion. Will it give you food for thought? I have to admit that I hope it won't give you very much. Instead, I think I will resolve the paradox, and in so doing, bring to light one of the countless ways that Judaism, rabbinic Judaism as we practice it today, has evolved or progressed from pure Torah Judaism.

God forbid, someone in the family passes away, at home or in a facility. What is one of the first things done? Phone calls are made. Who is always high on the list of people to be called? The rabbi. I've not been here long enough yet, and God willing it should be many years before anyone needs to do it, but many's the time Arlene had to wake me up and say, "It's so-and-so." And of course, that always meant that someone in the family had died.

What would I do? Express my condolences, of course. And then I would always say, "Give me a few minutes to get dressed. I'll be right there." And I always got the same response: "Thank you, Rabbi." Even if the caller was someone used to calling me by my first name, at that moment it was always "Rabbi." That's why I don't go around telling people not to use my title, as has been the fad for some ten years or more. You all know my name. You all know me well enough to know that I won't take offense if you use it, or pretend not to hear you. It's your choice. But if someone chooses to call me Rabbi and I say, "Please don't call me that. My name is Ben," I have taken something away from that person that s/he wants. A rabbi.

Back to that 2:00 am phone call. Some colleagues play it differently. They say, “Would you like me to come over?” Translation: “It’s two in the morning and I’m tired. Are you asking me to schlep out at this hour? And the congregant will usually say, “Oh, no, it’s too late.” And so they will talk in the morning.

Here’s why my way is better. I get to the house or the hospital, and the person who passed away is not going to come back to life. The family is not going to stop crying. I can say the appropriate prayers and psalms, which bring a measure of comfort. But the main thing I can do is be there, simply be present. It’s what my late Chief Chaplain John Hunt, may he rest in peace, called “a ministry of presence.” It is not your words that bring comfort. It is your mere presence. That is why I never asked, I simply went. The most important thing I could do as a rabbi was be there.

But now let us turn back to the text of the Torah. There were no rabbis at this time. It was the *kohanim*, the priests, who were the leaders of the Jewish people. In this section of the Torah, we are talking about ritual purity, a state the *kohanim* were expected to maintain. Life represents ritual purity. Therefore, the opposite of purity is the opposite of life. Death represents ritual impurity, so the ultimate source of ritual purity is being in the proximity of a body.

Let’s read a little Torah. Tomorrow we are reading about the average Israelite who contracts ritual impurity from a body, but earlier we read:

*The LORD said to Moses: Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them:*

*None shall defile himself for any [dead] person among his kin, except for the relatives that are closest to him: his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, and his brother; also for a virgin sister, close to him because she has not married, for her he may defile himself. But he shall not defile himself as a kinsman by marriage, and so profane himself.*

Allow me to make this more plain: a *kohayn* could only attend the funerals of his closest relatives. The high priest could not even do that. Therefore, at the time an Israelite died in the Torah, the religious leaders of Israel were cut off from doing what rabbis do today when someone dies. What if a rabbi is a *kohayn*? It can be very difficult. I conducted a funeral for Rabbi Cowan at Etz Chaim because as a *kohayn*, he could not.

Judaism is a religion that is focused on life. At the same time, death is part of life, and we have well developed and widely observed rituals, like the shiva call, that bring all of us together in a time of sorrow to support each other in grief. I believe strongly in that. But what about the paradox presented by Torah, that excluded the religious leaders of the community from dealing with death? Maybe that was to teach the ancient Israelites a lesson that the Jewish people have never forgotten. It is not up to the so-called religious professionals to respond to the needs of fellow Jews, it is the responsibility of every Jew.

That leaves one last unanswered question: if it is the responsibility of all the Jews, not just the “professional Jews,” why do the rabbis get the 2:00 am phone calls? I’ll conclude by answering that in three parts.

First, not only rabbis get those calls. I’ve been called to a house or a hospital and a close family friend shows up too, or sometimes gets there before I do.

Second, you have many friendly relationships in life, but relatively few true friends you can call on at 2:00 am and say, “I’m stuck on the highway, get out here.” My father is a good soul. He can’t drive at night anymore, but when he could, if a friend had called and said, “Art, I’m broken down on I-295 and I need you to come out,” my father would have come out. You then would have had two men staring worriedly at the broken down car, because my father could no more fix a car than pilot the space shuttle. He could have helped his friend work through his feelings about his car breaking down, but sometimes you need a therapist and sometime you need a mechanic. The analogy is not perfect, but you call the rabbi because the rabbi knows what to do in that situation. You need a person with the right skill set.

Third and finally, I hope the rabbi is called because a relationship has been built that tells you I would want you to wake me up at two in the morning because you really needed me for something. Please don’t do it to settle a bet (that was only 11:30 at night, not 2:00 am, but I really did get a call late at night to settle a bet). If there really is a short list of people you can count to to be able to call at 2:00 am and know you are going to hear, “I’m on my way,” know that your rabbi is on that list. And be glad we don’t live in the day of the Torah. I would not have been able to come. No, I am an Israelite, not a kohayn, but in the days, of the Torah, how would you have called?

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The Paradox of Life, Death, & Jewish Leadership Rabbi Benjamin Sendrow