



Shir Hatzafon

Progressiv jødedom i Danmark

Shabbat Emor
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There is something very cold and austere about the opening verses of our Pareshah; they lay down the rules governing the priests', and particularly the High Priest's, relationship to their dead family members. They are rules concerned entirely with matters of ritual defilement – they take no account of personal feelings – that is rarely the business of law codes. But they strike a chill to the heart.

They also, of course, strike a chord of recognition, of an instinctive, primeval fear: not just of death itself, but more particularly of the dead. All our most ancient fears and horrors centre on the dead not really, finally being dead – ghosts, vampires, zombies, haunted houses, every culture knows them. Cremating bodies, burying them under the heavy earth and weighing them down with rocks, with headstones, these are not just rituals of farewell. At a deeper level, they are a way of ensuring that the dead stay dead.

Because we don't, ultimately, understand death – if people physically disappeared at the moment of death, if the body was consumed with the soul, matters would perhaps be less complicated, but being left with half of what made a person real, the half that we could see and smell and touch, is a source of both comfort and anguish, of love and horror. I've spent time with two dead people; my late mother-in-law and my uncle. In both cases it was a peaceful and rewarding experience, and what really stuck in my mind was their feet. In my mother-in-law's case, she died, fully dressed, in the middle of breakfast, and was simply laid out on her bed in the nursing home – with her shoes on, as though she really was ready for departure. In my uncle's case, he died in hospital and I was allowed to sit with him for a while behind the curtains. His face looked dead; it looked sort of used-up, but one of his feet was sticking out from under the sheet, and I was struck by how healthy, how beautiful it looked, completely untouched by whatever had killed him, and I found myself thinking; 'It's such a waste of a perfectly good foot'.

Of course there are circumstances in which, for us, the body does disappear with the soul – when a death happens far away, even in circumstances imagined, but unknown, so that grief has no anchor. Last Monday was Yom HaShoah. Several of our founding members were Kindertransport: children who were sent out of Germany on the eve of the Second World War and given shelter in Britain. With one or two miraculous exceptions, the entire families of those children simply vanished. Until the news footage started to come out of Eastern Europe at the end of the war, and any possibility of comfort was denied them.

We can imagine the High Priest standing dry-eyed in the Sanctuary while the funeral procession passes by. In ancient Israel, as in other ancient, and not-so-ancient, cultures, the closer you get to God, the more isolated you become from the rest of society, the more hedged around with prohibitions and taboos. It's a lonely life, being holy.

Do the dead defile us? Most of us no longer believe so; but they do haunt us. The boundaries of kinship are clear; but the boundaries of death are a noman's land that we patrol in silence and perplexity.