



Parashat Emor

## Life And Love

**Although priests cannot have any contact with death, exceptions are made for their immediate relatives, teaching that even the principle of treasuring life bows to love and family connections.**

**By Rabbi Irving Greenberg**

Emor recounts the ritual laws that govern [priests'](#) behavior toward the dead. Priests are not to have any contact with death. Priests do not touch corpses nor can they be in the immediate presence of the dead. This means that priests do not attend funerals, go to the cemetery or care for the dead. The only exception is for their closest relations (parents, siblings, wives, and children).

[Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik](#) teaches that for Judaism, the world is the scene of a cosmic battle of life against death. God creates life and loves it. Death is the enemy, the antithesis of God. [The Temple](#), representing perfection and the pure presence of God, is totally devoted to life. Therefore, no form of death can enter the Temple. Human beings who come in contact with the dead can enter into the Temple only after they are purified, i.e., they are born again to life.



**Achieving Tikkun Olam**

Judaism is the religion of human partnership with God to achieve *tikkun olam* (repair of the world). Since God is completely on the side of life, Jews must be totally on the side of life. Ideally, every act should advance and nurture life and/or fight and reduce death. In this imperfect world, Jews compromise with death. We live with it, we treat its victims, we show honor to the dead by caring for and burying them.

But priests are people totally dedicated to God. They work in the Temple, the place dedicated totally to God. By shunning contact with the dead, priests represent the fundamental Jewish opposition to death, the infinite commitment to work hard so life wins.

Why then are priests allowed--in fact commanded--to care and mourn for their immediate relatives? To insist that they have no contact with their loved ones in death would be inhuman. Prohibiting this care would uphold life by overruling the deep natural love the priest has for immediate family. Principles--even noble principles like treasuring life--cannot be upheld by dehumanization, by repudiating loved ones.

The priest represents the Jewish ideal of perfection. Some day when the world is perfect, all Jews will be priests to humanity (Exodus 19:6). Jews should advance life; every act, every moment of life should be devoted to the living. But the commitment to life must be built on love, mutual care and respect for family ties that bind and make us human. If we abandon family or repudiate intimacy--even for the sake of God or to advance life--we serve death, not life.

*Provided by [CLAL: The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership](#), a multi-denominational think tank and resource center.*



Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg was the president of Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation and founding president of CLAL, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. He also is the author of [For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity](#) (2004, Jewish Publication Society).