

I don't remember exactly when we as a society began to employ "universal healthcare precautions" when interacting with others who were ill, or injured. I **DO** remember the day when one of our temple's second graders came to find me in my office. Crying, he held out his cut hand, asking me to help stop the bleeding.

Several months earlier our Executive Director had handed us a memo explaining that it would now be Temple policy to employ "universal healthcare precautions" in dealing with situations where there was a risk of coming into contact with blood or bodily fluids.

The CDC statement on universal precautions reads, in part, as follows:
"All workers should routinely use appropriate barrier precautions to prevent skin and mucous membrane exposure when contact with blood or other body fluids is anticipated. Gloves should be worn for touching blood and body fluids, mucous membranes, or non-intact skin of all patients, for handling items or surfaces soiled with blood or body fluids....Masks and protective eyewear or face shields should be worn during procedures that are likely to generate droplets of blood or other body fluids to prevent exposure of mucous membranes of the mouth, nose, and eyes...Older

children can be taught to hold a towel or gauze over the bleeding area themselves.”

This was the first time one of my students needed my help with an injury since the policy of “universal precautions” had been adopted at our congregation. I was profoundly uncomfortable when I asked the child to wait for a moment, while I took out a kit and put on gloves and a mask and proceeded to treat and bandage his cut very awkwardly through the layer of latex on my hands. What the child **wanted** was for me to “make it all better”. What **I** wanted was to hug him, and dry his tears. What I **did**, was to minister to his wound, comfort him verbally, and send him back to class.

What a far cry this scenario is from the Torah verses in the book of Leviticus, which describe the use of blood in the consecration of the Tabernacle. They deal specifically with Moses’ instructions to his brother Aaron and his sons, and their ordination as priests. Among other things these verses say the following,

“Moses brought forward the second ram, the ram of ordination. Aaron and his sons laid their hands upon the ram’s head and it was slaughtered. Moses took some of its blood and put it on the ridge of Aaron’s right ear, and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right

foot...and the rest of the blood Moses dashed against every side of the altar.”

Philo offers the following in explanation of the symbolism of Moses' actions, *“By this figure he indicated that the fully-consecrated must be pure in words and actions and in his whole life; for words are judged by hearing, the hand is the symbol of action and the foot of the pilgrimage of life.”*

The circumstance at my congregation mitigated that a young child's blood be treated as a potential source of **contamination** and **impurity**. In the wake of the devastation caused by HIV and the AIDS crisis, the issue of primary concern was fear of transmission of the virus. By contrast, the editors of the Etz Hayim commentary tell us that when Moses placed blood on the body parts of Aaron and his sons he used it to **purify** and **consecrate**, and when he dashed it on all sides of the altar, just as had been done at Sinai, the action *“bound them in a covenant of service to God in the tabernacle.”*

When we examine our understanding about blood in these two circumstances, we find two different conceptions. On the one hand, blood is the “life force” within each of us; it has the power to sustain us. Our ancestors displayed their regard for its **sacred** nature when they used blood to seal the covenant at Sinai, as part of the ceremony to consecrate the Tabernacle and in the consecration of Aaron and his sons for the priesthood.

It was offered back to God, the ultimate Source of life, in sacrifice on the altar.

However, blood **also** has the potential to kill us. It can carry and transmit pathogens such as HIV. It can also be a sign of ritual **impurity**, as in the menses. While these are seemingly disparate sets of characteristics, are they really as far apart as they seem?

I believe they are closer together than one would first-think. The life-giving potential in blood is no less than awe-inspiring. Here, the Hebrew term “yir-ah” (awe) conveys this duality of feeling very effectively. Blood, for us, is both awe-inspiring in its potential to sustain life, and frightening in its potential to harm it. Therein, I would suggest, lays its potential for ***kedushah***, for **holiness**. But within our Jewish tradition, no substance is innately holy.

It was the **physical** acts of the High Priests coupled with their **intent** that created a powerful moment of **consecration**. It is no coincidence that the term **consecration** is most-often rendered in Hebrew as ***hakdashah*** or ***kedushah***—the same term we use for holiness!

Abraham Joshua Heschel eloquently described this conception of holiness:

“Holiness in space, in nature was known in other religions. New in the teaching of Judaism was that the idea of holiness was gradually shifted from space to time...The physical world became divested of any inherent sanctity...The quality of holiness is not in the grain of matter. It is a preciousness bestowed upon things by an act of consecration and persisting in relation to God.”

This understanding of holiness in our tradition works on so many levels. It gives us opportunities to take notice and appreciate the wonder in God’s creation. It gives us the opportunity to rise above the mundane of our daily existence and to embrace the spiritual dimensions of ourselves and one another. It allows us to appreciate the meaning of being partners with God in engendering moments of sanctity.

It says in Bamidbar Rabba 12:4,
“Entrances to holiness are everywhere. The possibility of ascent is all the time. Even at unlikely times and through unlikely places. There is no place on earth without the Presence.”

And so, the experience with my young student would prove to be the first and last where I let the physical implements of protection be a

barrier to my intent to comfort and console. That day I learned not to fear—
to reach through gloved hands and a mask—to create a holy connection.

During these Days of Awe and always, may we, like Moses, Aaron
and his sons, be blessed to know many moments of holiness in our lives!

Keyn y'hi ratzon!