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DEATH'S DOOR: RISKING LIFE WRONGLY BUT WITH PIOUS MOTIVES

Adapted from the writings of Dayan Yitzhak Grossman

VINnews reports:

A Jewish firefighter risked his life to save a sefer Torah from a burning Long Island Chabad center on Wednesday morning, in a moment congregants described as nothing short of a miracle.

Michael Farca, a firefighter and member of the Jewish community, rushed into the Chabad of Greenvale just after 7 a.m. as flames engulfed the building. He emerged moments later cradling the sacred sefer Torah, drawing gasps and tears from the crowd gathered outside in prayer...

The fire broke out as the community was wrapping up celebrations of Shavuot, the holiday marking the giving of the Torah. That timing added a deep layer of significance for those who witnessed the scroll's rescue.

"The Torah is more than a book—it's our heart and soul," said congregant Yuriy Davydov. "Seeing it carried out safely felt

like a miracle."

The blaze charred much of the sanctuary, soaking prayer books and blackening the interior. Yet the Torah survived unharmed. Fire crews from across Nassau County responded swiftly and contained the fire before it could destroy the entire building. No injuries were reported. The cause remains under investigation...¹

This article and a follow-up discuss the propriety of risking one's life to save a sefer Torah from destruction or disgrace. We will consider both the question of whether doing so is a praiseworthy act or prohibited, as well as the broader question of whether such an act might conceivably be viewed positively even if it were to violate halacha.

There appears to be very little halachic discussion of risking one's life to save a sefer Torah. Based on general principles, doing so would seem to be wrong, as the preservation

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¹Joseph Friedman, Jewish Firefighter Saves Torah from Blaze at Long Island Chabad: 'A Miracle', VINnews, <https://vinnews.com/2025/06/05/jewish-firefighter-saves-torah-from-blaze-at-long-island-chabad-a-miracle/>.

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PARSHAS BEHA'ALOS'CHA

WHO'S ASKING?

Excerpted and adapted from a *shiur*
by Dayan Yosef Greenwald

Those men said to him, "We are impure through a human corpse; why should we be left out by not offering Hashem's offering in its appointed time among Bnei Yisrael?"

Bemidbar 9:7

According to the Sifri, the phrase "those men" teaches that the men themselves asked Moshe the question. The Panim Yafos explains that many of the people may not have been *tamei*, because only a person who carries the majority of the weight of a corpse becomes *tamei*, but one who carries it along with others (*mesayeia*) does not. Because they all asked together, Moshe ruled that they were all *tamei* to account for those who were certainly *tamei*.

The same conclusion would seem to emerge from the Gemara (Psachim 10a): If two people walk on different paths—one of which is *tamei*, but it is unknown which one—both men are *tahor*, because each has a *chezkas taharah*. But if they ask together, they are declared *tamei*, because two simultaneous rulings cannot

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Q&A from the
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Ayin Ro'ah

Q If a man and a woman are secluded under the watchful eye of video surveillance, is that forbidden *yichud*?

A A related scenario in *hilchos yichud* is *pesach pasuach lirshus harabim* (where a door or window is open to a public domain). In many such cases, *yichud* is permitted, because the room is not considered secluded. Similarly in your case, if the video feed can be viewed in real time, it is permitted, provided that

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of life is clearly a greater value than saving a sefer Torah: It is well known that saving a life overrides almost all the mitzvos, including even the *issur deOreisa* of chillul Shabbos, and it is apparently unanimous that one may not be mechallel Shabbos to save a sefer Torah (only certain *deRabanan* Shabbos prohibitions may be violated in order to save one).²

The Tosefta states:

One who finds a sefer Torah in a field (on Shabbos) sits and guards it until nightfall and then takes it. If there is danger, he leaves it (מניח) and goes on his way.³

It is unclear whether מניח here means that he may leave it or that he *should*, as the word sustains either translation.

R' Yitzchak Zilberstein reports that R' Yosef Shalom Elyashiv was asked a question quite similar to ours:

There was an incident in which someone traveled near a dangerous Arab village, and he noticed a sefer Torah lying there in disgrace. He assumed that it was stolen from one of the shuls. He was uncertain: "Is it my duty to endanger myself and stop near the village in order to take the sefer Torah, or perhaps one should not endanger himself to save a sefer Torah?"

Rav Elyashiv responded:

Ab initio (*lechat'chilah*), it is clear that it is prohibited to endanger oneself to save a sefer Torah, for this is not among the things of which it is said, "He should be killed and not violate the prohibition." But *bedieved*, if he endangered himself and saved the sefer Torah, great reward will be his, because he intended to honor the Torah.⁴

The following Gemara may bear on this issue.

Mishnah: Regarding Nikanor, miracles occurred to his doors, and the Chachamim would recall them with praise.

Gemara: The Chachamim taught in a *breisa*: What miracles occurred to his doors? They said: When Nikanor went to bring doors from Alexandria, Egypt—upon his return, a sea gale threatened to drown him. The sailors took one of the doors and threw it into the sea to lighten

the load of the ship. But the sea still did not subside from its raging. They sought to throw the other door overboard. But Nikanor stood up and hugged the door. He said to them, "You will have to throw me into the sea with it." Immediately, the sea subsided from its raging. Nikanor was pained about the other door. As soon as he arrived at the port of Akko, he saw the door poking out from under the walls of the ship. And some say that a sea creature swallowed it and spat it up upon the dry land. Regarding this door Shlomo said (Shir Hashirim 1:17): The beams of our houses are cedars, our doors are cypresses (*berosim*). Do not pronounce it *berosim* (cypresses) but *biryas yam* (sea creature). Therefore, all the gates in the *Mikdash* were later rendered out of gold except the gates of Nikanor, which were not replaced, because miracles happened to them. And some say because their copper shone brilliantly (so there was no need to replace them with gold). R' Eliezer ben Yaakov says: It was refined copper, and it shone like gold.⁵

A simple reading of this Gemara suggests that the Chachamim approved of Nikanor's willingness to sacrifice himself on behalf of his door, but the Meshech Chochmah (R' Meir Simcha of Dvinsk) suggests that they actually disagreed about whether to view his act positively or negatively: Those who held that the doors were not replaced because their copper was brightly colored, rather than on account of their story, fundamentally objected to the notion that risking one's life improperly—even motivated by pious considerations—is worthy of commemoration. He notes the principle that the Gemara elsewhere attributes to Dovid Hamelech in the name of the *bais din* of Shmuel of Ramah: "In regard to whoever submits himself to death on account of words of Torah, we do not cite any matter of halacha in his name."⁶ R' Meir Simcha suggests that it would have been inappropriate to mention Nikanor's name and to refrain from replacing his doors in commemoration of his misguided act of risking his life.⁷

²See, e.g., Shulchan Aruch O.C. simon 334, especially se'ipim 10-12, and Aruch Hashulchan ibid. se'if 31.

³Tosefta Eiruvin perek 8, codified in Mishneh Torah Hilchos Shabbos 19:25, and cf. Shulchan Aruch O.C. 301:43.

⁴Kav Venaki simon 362 p. 326 (cited in Minchas Todah (Moditz) p. 596). I am indebted to my friend and chavrusa R' Yitzchok Mandel for bringing these sources to my attention.

⁵Ibid. 38a.

⁶Bava Kama 61a.

⁷Meshech Chochmah, end of Parshas Trumah.

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contradict each other, and one of them *did* walk on the *tamei* path. Tosfos there notes that this halacha is only *mideRabanan*; *mideOreisa*, both are *tahor*. If

so, it is difficult to understand how the Panim Yafos uses a similar idea to explain a *pasuk*. Perhaps the answer is that in the case in Psachim, each man asked his own *sheilah* about his own experience, albeit at

the same time as his friend. In the Pesach *Sheini* case, they all participated in the same activity of carrying a body, so perhaps they would all be *tamei* even *mideOreisa*.

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three or more people have access and are likely to log in at any time and view it (R' Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, cited in Shiurei Halacha, *Yichud* 4:6; though it



is permitted, there is still room for stringency, as some *poskim*—cited there in a footnote—forbid it). This leniency cannot be applied in cases where the occupants are acquainted with one another (*libo gas bah*), as in an office setting (ibid.).

If the camera's recordings are saved to a file but cannot be viewed live, that does not render the area public, even though people can access the recordings later (ibid.).

A camera can only help permit *yichud* if it views the entire room. If it doesn't, *yichud* applies even in the surveilled parts, as the people could easily move (ibid. 4:4). If the man and woman don't know which areas are unmonitored, *yichud* is permitted in the entire room (ibid. n. 36).

While video surveillance can help mitigate *yichud*, a Zoom call cannot. This is because a phone can easily be turned off with a plausible excuse, such as a dead battery, and nothing suspicious would be detected (ibid. 4:7).

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