

Health Ministry Reverses Guidelines to Permit Cleansing the Coronavirus Dead

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In anticipation of the expiration of some Israeli coronavirus patients, the health ministry issued guidelines and procedures to the burial societies (Chevra kadisha) on how to treat the victims of the virus. The guidelines suggested no cleansing (tahara) was required for Jews who died from the coronavirus, nor were they to be wrapped in shrouds.

But on Wednesday morning, the health ministry reversed its position on the guidelines and sent a revised version to the burial societies, stating:

“The cleansing of the deceased will be carried out strictly by a (specially trained) dedicated team. The deceased will be unwrapped with utmost care and be disinfected by spraying a 70% alcohol solution. The body’s holes will be clogged with cotton wool, and then a strictly external purification will be performed, following which the deceased will be dressed in shrouds.”

The guidelines reiterate that all stages of the purification of the dead will only be performed by teams which received proper training for handling coronavirus victims.

Four dedicated facilities will be set up to manage the preparation of Jews who perished from the coronavirus for burial, in Haifa, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and

Beersheba. Access to these facilities will be limited to the special teams. Identifying the deceased by their family members will be done through photographs of the body from various angles, which will be attached to the bag containing the deceased and presented to the family for identification. Photographing the body must be done with adherence to hygiene rules.

The new guidelines determine that “before being buried, the body must be enclosed in a double wrap of impermeable plastic bags, and only then be brought to burial.”

As far as the funeral is concerned, the health ministry insists that no one is allowed to touch the body of the deceased. However, it is not necessary to limit the distance between the mourners and the wrapped body as long as they do not touch it.

The health ministry has also established strict procedures regarding the bodies of deceased Jews arriving from abroad, which are that every body shipped to Israel must be treated as if it carries the virus, and so it must be embalmed with formaldehyde. The body’s identification must be made abroad, and before being shipped to Israel, the body must be wrapped in two polyethylene bags and enclosed in a sealed coffin padded by metal sheets.