
Gufei Halachot: On “Body Worlds” and the Public Display of Human Remains

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“Body Worlds” is a traveling exhibition of human bodies, preserved using a technique called “plastination,” developed in the 1970s by German scientist Gunther von Hagens. In plastination, bodily fluids and fatty tissues are replaced by acetone and, subsequently, reactive polymers. The exhibition, entitled *Körperwelten* in the original German, is ostensibly designed to educate the public regarding anatomy and various health issues by posing human cadavers in life-like positions, highlighting bodily systems, musculature, and organs relevant to the activity depicted. Such displays include, *inter alia*, bodies (in von Hagen’s terminology, “plastinates”) posed as a swimmer, an archer, a soccer player, a rider astride a rearing horse, a ballerina, a discus thrower, a figure skater, a group of (cheating) card-players, and a teenage skateboarder. The recumbent body of a pregnant woman is displayed with her fetus, at an advanced stage of development, also exposed. Among the best known displays is the “flayed man,” who is posed holding his own complete dermal envelope in one hand. The exhibition has toured Germany, Austria, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, the United States and Canada, drawing some 20 million viewers. The showing in Toronto alone was seen by over 470,000 visitors.

The Body Worlds exhibits are not an entirely new phenomenon:

*“Precursors to von Hagens’s more realistic work, perhaps, are the prepared tableaux and ‘wet’ specimens of Frederik Ruysch (1638-1731) and his student Bernhard Siegfried Albinus (1697-1770): these Dutch anatomists posed fetal skeletons and severed babies’ limbs to create... ‘an alien aesthetic.’ Similarly, the specimens of Honoré Fragonard (1732-99) included an anatomized rider with horse, and a dancing baby.”*¹

The provenance of the bodies in the exhibition has been a matter of ongoing debate and contention. It has been alleged that among the bodies are remains of prison inmates and hospital patients from Kyrgyzstan, as well as executed prisoners from Communist China, including, specifically, pro-democracy dissidents and members of the Falun Gong sect. Although the source of the human remains displayed in “Body Worlds” was investigated and approved by a special commission of the California Science Center in Los Angeles, Professor von Hagens was compelled to return seven corpses

1 J. T. H. Connor, “Exhibit Essay Review: ‘Faux Reality’ Show? The *Body Worlds* Phenomenon and the Reinvention of Anatomical Spectacle,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 2007, #81, p. 849.

to China after the German magazine “Der Spiegel” traced cadavers used in his plastination center to Chinese state executions. The discrepancy may be attributable to the discriminating selection of cadavers from willing donors for public display, while bodies of untoward provenance, though not included in all exhibits, have indeed been used in refining the plastination technique. Professor von Hagens has employed as many as 200 workers for the dissection and preservation of human remains.

The public display of human remains appears to have been a standard element of executions in the Biblical period, as is assumed by Deuteronomy.

וכי יהיה באיש חטא משפט מות והומת ותלית אותו על עץ: לא תלין נבלתו על העץ
כי קבור תקברנו ביום ההוא כי קללת אלהים תלוי...²

“If a man is guilty of a capital offense and is put to death, and you impale him on a stake, you must not let his corpse remain on the stake overnight, but must bury him the same day, for an impaled body is an affront to God...”²

A Baraita in *Sanhedrin* insists that impalement took place subsequent to death, and not as the method of execution:

תלמוד לומר: והומת ותלית — ממיתין אותו ואחר כך תולין אותו. הא כיצד? משהין אותו עד סמוך לשקיעת החמה, וגומרין את דינו ומסיתין אותו ואחר כך תולין אותו.

“From the phrase ‘is put to death, and you impale,’ you may conclude that we execute him and afterwards we impale him. How so? We delay until close to sunset, conclude his sentencing, then we execute him and afterwards we impale him.”³

Post-mortem display seems, indeed, to be the procedure intended by the Torah’s description⁴ of the Egyptian court baker’s execution, as was foretold by his cell-mate, Joseph. The Book of Esther makes it perfectly clear that Haman’s ten sons were ordered to be impaled (or hanged) only well after their death had already been reported to Ahashuerus.⁵

Whether public display of the executed criminal’s remains was intended further to dishonor the perpetrator, or to deter others from similarly unlawful behavior, or both, such draconian penal methods were viewed with disdain in Israel, and were early deemed “an affront to God.”⁶ The procedural schedule for executions described in *Sanhedrin* was designed to assure that the duration of this indignity was, therefore, to be kept as brief as possible, even for the most despicable criminals. Joshua followed an expedited procedure similarly consonant with the parameters specified in Deuteronomy when, for

2 Deuteronomy 21:22-23.

3 BT *Sanhedrin* 46B.

4 Genesis 40:19.

5 Esther 9:10-14.

6 Deuteronomy 21:23 (see above).

example, executing the kings of Ai, Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, and Eglon,⁷ removing their bodies from public display for entombment at sunset. When the bodies of the decapitated King Saul and his sons were left impaled on the wall of Beit-Shan by the Philistines, the indignity was redressed by the “stalwart men” of Jabesh-Gilead, who marched all night to retrieve the remains and provide them with appropriate funerary rites.⁸

The *Shulchan Aruch*⁹ codifies a regulation in Tractate *Semachot*¹⁰ that one may not continue to reside in a city where the crucified remains of one’s parent or spouse have been left on public display. The extended duration of such penal measures is evident from the specific provision that the ban remains in force until the remains are sufficiently decomposed as to be unrecognizable.

Jewish history also records examples of the preservation of human remains – examples ranging from the reverent to the miraculous to the macabre. Both Jacob and Joseph are embalmed in Egypt. That characteristically Egyptian procedure, Scripture explicitly records, is carried out by men of science: “physicians.” Jacob’s preserved body is returned to the Land of Israel for burial, while Joseph’s mummified remains -- encased in a sarcophagus – are still on hand generations later, and accompany the Israelites in the Exodus from Egypt.¹¹

A macabre passage in the Gemara¹² reports that Herod kept the body of a young Hasmonean noblewoman – preserved in honey – on display for seven years. He used the remains, it was variously asserted, either to bolster his claim to royal stature and marriage, or for periodic acts of necrophilia.

Finally, the bodies of the slaughtered inhabitants of Betar were miraculously kept from decomposition until a new Roman administration permitted their burial.¹³

While examples abound of bodies placed on public display in order to shame, or merely to objectify the deceased, the historic record offers few examples of remains made available for viewing as part of Jewish burial rituals. It was, for a time, permissible to bare the face of a “bridegroom” in order to heighten the anguish of mourners.¹⁴ Both the Shach¹⁵ and the Bach¹⁶ note that this practice was long since discontinued and that the prohibition

7 Joshua 8:29; 10:26.

8 I Samuel 31:8-13.

9 *Yoreh Deah* 346:1.

10 *Semachot* 2:11.

11 For a fascinating discussion of the fate of Joseph’s remains, see Ahmed Osman, *The Hebrew Pharaohs of Egypt*, (Bear & Co./Rochester, VT, 1987).

12 BT *Baba Batra* 3B.

13 BT *Ta’anit* 31A.

14 See *Semachot* 8:7 and *Yoreh Deah* 250:1.

15 Ad loc.; Rabbi Shabbetai Kohen of Vilna, 1621-1662.

16 Ad loc.; Rabbi Joel Sirkes, 1561-1640.

against viewing the deceased, already current at the time of their rulings, was to be observed with care. More generally, the Gemara recalls:

בראשונה היו מגלין פני עשירין ומכסין בני עניים, מפני שהיו מוּשחרין פניהן מפני בצורתן. והיו עניים מתביישין. התקינו שיהו מכסין פני הכל, מפני כבודן של עניים.

“Originally, they would bare the faces of the rich, but cover the faces of the poor, as the latter would be darkened and drawn from malnutrition. But this caused the poor to be ashamed, so they enacted the practice of covering the faces of all deceased.”¹⁷

Maavar Yabok, the classic guide to mourning and burial by Rabbi Aharon Berechya of Modena, states explicitly that the face of the dead is to be covered immediately after death, שאסור להסתכל בפני המת – “since it is forbidden to look upon the face of the dead.”¹⁸ He explains that viewing the dead both adds to the suffering of the soul and tends to induce in the observer contempt and disdain for the deceased. The Gemara conveys the additional caveat that looking at the face of the dead impedes learning.¹⁹

Modern authorities are virtually of one voice in their opposition to public viewing of the deceased, as by means of an open casket.²⁰ Rabbi Maurice Lamm devotes an entire chapter of his popular *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* to the message that:

viewing the corpse is objectionable, both theologically and psychologically.... Religiously, it expresses disregard for the rights of the dead and a perversion of the religious significance of life and death. Psychologically, it may serve to short-circuit the slow therapy of nature’s grief process.... By making a display of the flesh minus the mind, we are, in fact, demonstrating our lifelong emphasis on appearance over value, on externals and possessions over the inner life and growth of the sensitive and sentient human being.”²¹

Rabbi Harold Schulweis²² similarly wrote that “the tradition of closing the casket expresses respect for the deceased.” By viewing human remains, he explains, “we become, inadvertently, spectators and the deceased becomes an object... We want to remember the deceased as exercising free will and not treated as an ‘it.’”

17 BT Moed Katan 27A.

18 *Maavar Yabok, Shaarei Renanut*, Chapter 9.

19 BT Horayot 13B.

20 Such funerary displays are to be distinguished from the private inspection of the deceased by close family members for purposes of identification, or when seeing the remains is deemed necessary for the emotional well-being of the mourner. Even such brief viewing should be carefully limited, and is customarily avoided to the extent possible.

21 Rabbi Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (Jonathan David/New York, 1969), pp 26-34.

22 “Shailos & Tshuvos,” Valley Beth Shalom, Encino, CA: <http://www.vns.org/religious/shailos.htm>.

A responsum issued by the Reform Movement also urges that “the coffin should be closed before and during the service,” describing closed caskets as “a uniform practice throughout the country.”²³

Rabbi Isaac Klein, citing the 1959 responsum of Rabbi Sanders Tofield, states simply: “Having the body on exhibition... mocks the tradition that the funeral is an occasion for paying respect to the dead.... It is also an affront to the bereaved family.”²⁴

The *Kol Bo Al Aveilut* records an unambiguous prohibition against viewing the dead:

אסור לגלות פני המת או להסתכל בפניו... מכל שכן שאסור מה שעושין באיזה מקומות שפותחים ארונו... והוא מעשה בורות ומנהג עכויים ובזיון למת.

“It is forbidden to uncover the face of the deceased, or to look at the face of the deceased... All the more so is it forbidden to open the casket, as is done in some places. This is a boorish practice, a heathen custom, and a dishonor to the deceased.”

Demonstrating how far this prohibition extends, the *Kol Bo* adds:

גם אין לעשות תמונה פטגרפית ממת לזכרון

*“Further, one is not to take a photograph of the deceased as a remembrance.”*²⁵

It should be noted in this regard that Body Worlds markets “merchandise” with photographic depictions of plastinated cadavers in the form of posters, mousepads, bumper stickers, t-shirts, keychains, watches, and lapel pins.

Perhaps the most telling statement of prohibition derives from the practice of the Cracow *Chevre Kadisha*, which banned non-members from assisting in their ritual preparation of the dead,

מטעם בזיון להמת להסתכל בו מי שאינו מוכרח

“on the basis that it is a dishonor to the deceased for anyone to view their remains who is not absolutely required to do so.”

That is, any viewing of human remains – other than with the intention of providing for the needs and dignity of the deceased, and exclusively by those whose official role and specialized training qualify them as technically, emotionally, and spiritually well suited to do so, was deemed forbidden.

23 “Contemporary American Reform Responsa,” Central Conference of American Rabbis/NY, 1979.

24 Rabbi Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (Jewish Theological Seminary/NY, 1979), pp. 277. For Rabbi Tofield’s ruling, see *Proceedings of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, 1927-1970* (Rabbinical Assembly/NY, 1997), p. 468: “Viewing the Deceased.”

25 For a thorough study of the practice of portraiture of the dead, see Stanley Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America* (Twelvevetrees Press, 1990).

It is well documented that

אין לך דבר שעומד בפני פקוח נפש

“preservation of life overrides all other considerations”²⁶... and thus that

אסורי תורה חמורים נדחים מפני פקוח נפש

“weighty Torah prohibitions are set aside for the preservation of life.”²⁷

While Body Worlds purports to be an educational enterprise, it is far-fetched indeed to assert that attendance at such exhibits directly results in life-saving benefits. Nevertheless, there is some halachic precedent to considering advancement of medical science and knowledge a mitigating factor in the general prohibition against post-mortem disfigurement or manipulation of human remains. Bechorot 45A, for example, records that the students of Rabbi Yishmael boiled the body of an executed prostitute in order to ascertain the correct number of bones in the human skeleton. I. L. Katzenelsohn²⁸ argues for the historicity of this anecdote. Similarly, Niddah 24B has Abba Shaul recalling that during his former employment as a grave-digger, he made it a practice carefully to examine skeletal remains. It must be noted, however, that the bones in question may well have been those inadvertently disturbed by his funereal excavations... and not intentionally removed or further manipulated for educational purposes or research.

The late Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and pioneer of Jewish medical ethics, Lord Immanuel Jakobovits, summarized the evolution of Jewish views toward the use of cadavers in scientific studies research since the extraordinary studies in the academy of Rabbi Yishmael:

“Judaism, then, became heir to a distinctly tolerant attitude to dissection.

Yet... eventually evolved an outlook which, in its modern rabbinic formulation, was increasingly unfavourable to the utilisation of the dead in the service of science.”

Rabbi Jakobovits also details a fascinating and extended discussion of the halachic permissibility of treating Jewish corpses with quick-lime to hasten decomposition, in part in order “to frustrate the anatomists’ avid rapacity in securing Jewish bodies for dissection.” Medieval and early modern medical schools favored Jewish cadavers – typically stolen from cemeteries -- both because of the legal disabilities and powerlessness of the Jewish community and, more pragmatically, because the Jewish practice of immediate burial resulted in “the best and freshest subjects” for research and examination. The parallel to the use of bodies of political dissidents, as well as unclaimed corpses (a practice acknowledged by von Hagens, and legally permissible in China) should be sobering.

²⁶ Yoma 82A. See also Yoreh De’ah 263:1.

²⁷ Rabbi Isser Yehudah Unterman, Responsa *Shevet Mi-Yehudah* (1983 Mossad Ha-Rav Kook ed.), p. 54

²⁸ I.L. Katzenelsohn, *Ha-Talmud V’Hochmat Ha-Refuah* (Jalkut/Berlin, 1928), p. 257.

While rabbinic authorities of necessity permit autopsy when demanded by the state -- and when the life-saving benefits of post-mortem investigation are direct and manifest -- the halachic approach to autopsy for purposes of scientific research remains restrictive. This still defining distinction was crystallized in the 18th Century by Rabbi Ezekiel Landau. Landau permits autopsy when a specific individual, whose life is in imminent danger, might be saved by the findings. Of autopsies for the general advancement of science and medical knowledge aimed at saving lives in the future he states:

לא דחינן משום חששא קלה זו שום אסור תורה או אפילו אסור דרבנן... חלילה
להתיר... ואין בזה שום צד להתיר

*"For such a distant possibility, we set aside no Torah prohibition, nor even any rabbinic prohibition... God forbid that we permit it... There is absolutely no basis here to permit it."*²⁹

It should be noted further that Landau predicated his limited sanction for life-saving autopsies on the assumption that they were so immediate as not to delay burial for more than a day, nor preclude the possibility of *Taharah*... nor even compromise the quality of the individuals available and willing to carry out this ritual. It is significant, too, that the specific case on which Landau ruled involved not an extensive or inordinately invasive autopsy, but post-mortem surgical examination of a specific wound.

Israel's 1953 Anatomy and Pathology Act reflected Rabbi Landau's concerns, insisting that cadavers subjected to autopsy or dissection for purposes of medical studies must, upon conclusion of the procedure, be relegated to proper burial.

To what extent can the plastination of human bodies and their display in Body Worlds be justified on the basis of these precedents in the interests of advancing medical knowledge? Dr. J. T. H. Connor, of the United States Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (successor institution to the U.S. Army Medical Museum, Washington, D.C.), after meeting Dr. von Hagens and reviewing Body Worlds, concluded:

*Viewing plastinates may be entertaining... we are on shakier ground in claiming that it is truly a learning experience.... Body Worlds may act as a discovery experience, or as an inspiration, but it lacks the rigor of formal anatomical training.... Do exhibit attendees profit educationally by it? Most likely the answer is yes, but in some short-term, general, and ill-defined way.... The visual exploitation of cadavers, the veneer of educational respectability, and the crass commercialism ought to concern us.*³⁰

29 Yechezkel Landau, *Responsa Noda b'Yehuda*, second edition, *Yoreh De'ah* #210.
30 Connor, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 859-860.

Dr. Connor calls into question the sincerity of Dr. von Hagens’ stated educational goals in exhibiting plastinates:

“If Body Worlds is not an art show but rather a scientific and educational experience, as von Hagens claims, then where are the accompanying in-depth educational programming, demonstrations, and truly informative educational explanations? Further, now that von Hagens attaches autographed plaques to selected plastinated cadaver models, presumably indicating that these specimens are quite literally his signature pieces, does this not signal that he does consider them works of art?”³¹

Jewish law explicitly prohibits, and Jewish morality precludes, the dishonoring or disfiguring of human remains. Jewish law prohibits viewing human remains for any reason but that which is required properly to prepare the deceased for proper burial, and then only by those whose official role and specialized training qualify them to do so. Jewish law requires prompt burial of the dead, regardless of the deceased’s station or personal character in life -- setting aside other significant religious obligations should they conflict with the imperative of burial.³²

Gunther von Hagens’ Body Worlds exhibits (so, too, the exhibits entitled “Bodies, the Exhibition,” “Bodies Revealed,” and “Our Body: the Universe Within,” etc.) represent particularly egregious violations of each and every one of these norms and values... in addition to the morally questionable provenance of the human remains exploited to these ends.

While religious obligations and values are indeed set aside when they conflict with the overriding halachic duty to save lives, Body Worlds in no way can be construed as a life-saving enterprise – an act of *פקוח נפש* ... nor, according to scientists in allied fields, can Body Worlds properly be deemed to be a process of scientific, much less medical education. Attending an exhibit of Body Worlds must be considered halachically forbidden and, from a Jewish perspective, morally repugnant.

לא דחינן משום חששא קלה זו שום אסור תורה או אפילו אסור דרבנן... חלילה

להתיר... ואין בזה שום צד להתיר

*“Let us set aside no Torah prohibition, nor even any rabbinic prohibition for such purposes... God forbid that we permit it... There is absolutely no basis here to permit it.”*³³

31 Ibid., p. 858-859.

32 See *Yoreh De'ah* 360, 374.

33 Yechezkel Landau, Responsa *Noda b'Yehuda*, second edition, *Yoreh De'ah* #210.