

Parashat Emor 5780

Shabbat Shalom. This Shabbat's *parasha* (Torah portion) still from the Book of Leviticus (*Vayikra*), has a few components. Of course, much of Leviticus concerns the tribe of Levi, the tribe devoted to the ritual life of our ancestors. The priests, the *Kohanim* (plural of *Kohen*) were an extended family within the tribe of Levi. The beginning of *Emor* talks about laws concerning the functioning of the priests, for example, who they're allowed to marry, how they have to maintain a state of purity, what may be offered as a sacrifice, etc. Another section of the portion speaks of the special times and holidays throughout the year and observances connected with them. That's a quick overview of the portion. However, I want to address a particular verse or two within the portion itself.

But first I want to relate an anecdote related to the functioning of the *Kohanim*. One of the issues mentioned at the very beginning of the *parasha* is that the *Kohen* is not allowed to become ritually impure by attending a funeral unless it's that of his parents, his son, his daughter, his brother, or an unmarried sister. Contact with death made a *Kohen* ritually impure which meant they couldn't function as a *Kohen* until they returned to a state of ritual purity. The belief that contact with death made one ritually impure is the origin of our custom of washing our hands after leaving a cemetery and before returning to our homes. So, for example, when we have a meal of condolence in the vestry after a funeral, George always leaves a bowl, a pitcher and a cup for us to wash our hands before entering the building. In case anyone is unfamiliar with the custom I'll spell it out: We pour some water into the cup from the pitcher and then pour the water from the cup over our hands alternately (usually three times) over the bowl.

When I was living in Israel, occasionally I would take a public taxi called a *sherut* from one city to another. It was discovered that some roads had been built right outside of Jerusalem by non-Jews over Jewish cemeteries. There were special *sherutim* (plural of *sherut*) that would take the road permitted for *Kohanim* i.e. routes that would avoid those roads over the cemeteries. Whenever something is being built in Israel they always have to make sure that they are not building over some not-yet-discovered archaeological site or cemetery of ancient Israel.

More modern commentators have interpreted the prohibition of *Kohanim* being allowed to perform rituals for the community after immediate contact with death from a psychological perspective. They think that contact with death can possibly lead to sadness or depression on the part of the *Kohen* which would impede their social function as spiritual leaders of the

community. This reminds me of the anecdote I originally wanted to relate. Beginning in the 1950s and particularly in the 1960s and later there were two rabbis that did a great deal to bring Jewish youth back to Judaism. They were Shlomo Carlebach and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (originally just known as Zalman Schachter and now better known as Reb Zalman). They were the first rabbis sent out by the Lubavitcher Rebbe to college campuses. They would often encounter students and young Jews (especially from the 1960s on) who had been attracted to eastern forms of spirituality and had left Judaism. Reb Shlomo believed that the weight of the holocaust had made it much harder for these young people to find the joy in Judaism and Jewishness to which Shlomo and Zalman tried to expose them. Shlomo related it to this prohibition of *Kohanim*, the spiritual leaders of the past, having contact with death.

I want to address one other element of this Shabbat's *parashah*. In the middle of the portion, in verse Leviticus 22:32 it says: "You shall not profane My holy name..." Clearly this phrase is related to not taking G!d's name in vain. The phrase reflects the belief, found throughout the Torah and our tradition, of the power of language. The first instance that implies the power and centrality of language, of course, is that the book of Genesis opens up with G!d creating the universe with Divine speech. The names given to people and things are understood to capture and reflect the essence of the person or thing. When the Torah says not to profane G!d's holy name, I take that to mean not to use the name in such a way as to diminish its power, to use it as you would other words and names. For example, we never even utter the actual name, we say another word in its place (*Ad!nai*) and even that word (which literally means "my Lord") we don't traditionally use unless in actual prayer or for teaching. People traditionally use the word *Hashem* (literally "the Name") instead. The more reverence we give the word/name the more power it has, the more it evokes.

The Hebrew word in the verse that is translated as "profaning" G!d's name is *t'khal'loo*. We often contrast the holy (*kadosh*) with that which is profane or ordinary (*khol*). To profane G!d's name is called *khilool Hashem* and to sanctify G!d's name is called *kidush Hashem*. These categories go way beyond the actual use or abuse of the name. In our tradition whenever Jews do something publicly that reflects well on our culture and religion that's a kind of *kidush Hashem*, and when we do the opposite, i.e. when Jews do something publicly that reflects badly upon us, that's considered a *khilool Hashem*. The behavior of Bernie Madoff and Jeffrey Epstein are major examples of *khilool Hashem*. When a rabbi is involved in some sort of scandal, that's an

example of *khilool Hashem*. Unfortunately we know that there are plenty of people out there who won't see the negative action as the behavior of just one person who happens to be Jewish. On the other hand, when a Jew wins the Nobel Prize, many Jews feel a sense of pride, even though it's just one person who won this and happens to be Jewish.

Another aspect of our tradition's attitude towards language is the concern to avoid gossip and negative speech about someone. Negative speech is called *lashon hara* (or *loshen horo* in Yiddish). Embarrassing someone in public is likened to murder in our tradition. As you can see, it's taken extremely seriously.

Though it's true, as Shakespeare said, that "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," the beauty of a word enhances the music in its use – which is an important component of poetry and prayer.

Wishing everyone Shabbat shalom, health, and a good week.