

Parashat Emor 5781

Shabbat Shalom. I have a number of different thoughts and I hope I can tie them together. Parashat Emor talks about a number of things among them the laws regulating the lives of Kohanim (the priestly class), the keeping of holy days, and the sense of holiness in general. The idea of holiness is central to the Torah. What does the term actually mean? How do figure out what words mean, especially words used in ancient texts? Words often change their meanings over time or, more accurately, their meanings evolve and the way in which they are used evolves. I know this is obvious, but I'll say it anyway: words do not change their meanings, but rather the way in which people use words change their meanings. My favorite Hebrew dictionary is edited by Avraham Even Shoshan. It's a Hebrew to Hebrew dictionary. One of the wonderful things about it is he will indicate when in our 3,000 years of Hebrew literature the word meant what he is defining it as meaning. He will often give a citation from various times in Jewish literature in which the word was used. A word might have one meaning in the Tanakh (Bible) or more than one, and its meaning may have evolved by the time of the Mishna a thousand years later and might still acquire another meaning in medieval Hebrew literature and/or modern Hebrew literature.

Occasionally there are words that only occur once in the entire Tanakh. The technical term for such words are "hapax legomena" which is Greek for something said only once. One of the ways in which we discern the meanings of words is their usage in particular contexts. It's particularly difficult when a word only has one context. But then again there are words that have numerous contexts and we're still not sure what they mean. For example the word "selah" which appears numerous times in the Psalms for example. Since the Psalms were sung by the Levites and the word often appears at the end of a verse or the end of the Psalm scholars believe it is some sort of musical instruction – either like strike up the band or pause and be quiet.

The word for "holy" ("kadosh") appears in many forms throughout the prayer book and the Torah. So what does it mean? In understanding what it means, we should keep in mind that last week's parashah, Kedoshim (i.e. the plural of kadosh) opened with the words *Kedoshim tih'yu* (you shall be holy for I, Ad!nai your G!d am holy). So whatever the word kadosh means can it mean the same thing when applied to humans and to G!d? By the way, I should also note, I'm not exactly talking about what does the English word "holy" mean, but rather what does the

Hebrew word “kadosh” mean. We use the English word “holy” to translate the Hebrew word “kadosh” which does not mean that they connote exactly the same thing. The word Kadosh is used to refer to people and to things, to special days of the year, and, of course, to G!d. It also refers to behavior.

As a short aside, it’s worth noting that because we read the Torah parasha by parasha, it is easy to forget from one week to the next the context in which a Torah portion occurs. The portion that precedes this Shabbat’s portion is Kedoshim, which contains what is sometimes referred to as “the holiness code.” So, this Shabbat’s portion continues that theme of holiness.

Some commentators have understood the word Kadosh to imply something set apart, made special or different such as Shabbat which is separated from the other days of the week, or the priests whose tasks are different, set apart, from those of the rest of the people. Throughout the Torah, G!d’s Name is always a very sacred thing which we are forbidden to “take in vain.” In this sense it is valuable to remember that in the Torah, the name of something is not a mere label. It is meant to convey the essence of the entity to which it refers. So taking G!d’s name in vain is in some way a damaging act. In chapter 22 of parashat Emor verse 32 it says “You shall not profane My holy name, that I may be sanctified in the midst of the Israelite people – I Ad!nai who sanctify you.”

I want to quote to you a passage from the Talmud regarding this. It’s from Tractate Yoma 86a (Yoma is the Aramaic for Yom, day, and the overall concern of the Tractate is Yom Kippur, but it often wanders far afield, like I may be doing today). Here’s the passage: “If someone studies Scripture and Mishnah, and attends on the disciples of the wise, is honest in business, and speaks pleasantly to people, what do people then say concerning him? ‘Happy the father who taught him Torah, woe unto people who have not studied the Torah; for this man has studied the Torah – look how fine his ways are, how righteous his deeds!’” ...But if someone studies Scripture and Mishnah, attends on the disciples of the wise, but is dishonest in business, and discourteous in his relations with people, what do people say about him? ‘Woe unto him who studied the Torah, woe unto his father who taught him Torah; woe unto his teacher who taught him Torah!’ This man studied the Torah: Look how corrupt are his deeds, how ugly his ways; The first example is of someone who does what our tradition calls “Kiddush Hashem” (sanctifying G!d’s name), the latter is an example of someone who does what our tradition calls “khillul Hashem” (profaning G!d’s name). I’m sure we can all think of examples of both.

Interestingly, I think living in the diaspora, we are particularly sensitive to Jews who do things that are a Khillul Hashem, that make Judaism or Jews look bad, though those people are individuals and not characteristic of Jews in general. But they feed the biases of anti-Semites which always makes us feel vulnerable. The opposite is true when there's a Jew in the headlines for doing good things.

Back to the word Kadosh and our Torah portion. As I said earlier, the Torah uses the same word to refer to our being Kadosh and G!d's being Kadosh. It is only in later texts where it clearly says "My holiness is not the same as your holiness." This brings up another interesting point. Very often someone will use a word without defining it, because the audience knows exactly what the word means. It is more than likely that in ancient times everybody understood how the Torah was using the word Kadosh.

Near the end of the parasha, it goes into the various sacred times in the calendar. Always Shabbat is paramount. Shabbat has to be made Kadosh, by observing it. Why is it such a big deal in the Torah? I would like to offer a thought about that. I think that our sages and the Torah itself were very conscious how the daily requirements of our physical existence can be so preoccupying that if we don't consciously set aside a time for refraining from those daily necessities, we will always be steeped in our material needs to the neglect of our souls. Shabbat, as a consistent part of one's week, as a part that is seen as necessary as our most basic physical requirements keeps a spiritual component in our lives. I think we need that as much as ever. There are so many distractions and requirements in our daily life that without Shabbat it is very easy to lose that spiritual component in our lives. Just like we need to make time to exercise our bodies, and to exercise our minds, we need to attend to our souls too on a regular basis.

Shabbat Shalom.