

## Parashat Emor, Leviticus 21:1-24:23

### Parashah Overview

- Laws regulating the lives and sacrifices of the priests are presented. (21:1-22:33)
- The set times of the Jewish calendar are named and described: the Sabbath, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and the Pilgrimage Festivals of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. (23:1-44)
- God commands the Israelites to bring clear olive oil for lighting the sanctuary menorah. The ingredients and placement of the displayed loaves of sanctuary bread are explained. (24:1-9)
- Laws dealing with profanity, murder, and the maiming of others are outlined. (24:10-23)

### ACCEPTABLE FOR YOU

*Lucy H. F. Dinner*

We who stand so removed from the ancient world of blemishless priests and burnt offerings, in this week's Torah portion, still have a great deal to learn from the depiction of the priestly duties in Parashat Emor. Though the details of the sacrifices may be distasteful to our twentieth-century palate, they reveal an underlying attitude that the priests were to bring to their duties. A twist on one word in this portion teaches that beyond the particular offerings, attitude is paramount.

In Leviticus 22:19, Moses instructs Aaron and his sons that the sacrifices must be "acceptable for you," *lirtzonchem*. Why does the text state "acceptable for you" and not "acceptable for God"? Rashi interprets the phrase to mean "propitiation for you before [God]." The offering serves to accrue goodwill for the priest; it counts on his behalf.

The phrase "acceptable for you" suggests an obligation beyond the physical mitzvah performed by the priest. "Acceptable for you" implies a willingness and desire by the priests to make an offering worthy before themselves and God. Prior to the priests' inspection of the offering for blemishes or defects, they must first assure that they come with a willing mindset. Intention matters.

Nehama Leibowitz, z"l, a renowned Torah scholar of our day, shares a similar sentiment, interpreting further verses of Leviticus 22.

The exactness and loving care with which [one] performs a precept raises its value in [one's] eyes. The mitzvah [one] performs is a symbolic act, a means of promoting good conduct.

*(Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Vayikra, p. 207)*

The completion of the mitzvah hinges on the intention combined with the action.

From its early years, Reform Judaism has emphasized the prime importance of the books of the Prophets that teach that acts of goodness and justice outweigh meaningless sacrifices. For generations, Reform Jews interpreted the prophets as casting aside ritual for the centrality of righteous acts. Yet, the Torah never meant for it to be an either/or choice. The vain offerings, the ones made without desire for acceptance, those were the offerings rejected. Jewish rituals are only complete when they combine action and intention to affect the way one lives.

When we participate in a mitzvah, the act is only complete if we bring our willingness to the deed. For example, in order for Jewish prayer services to be complete, one needs both *keva* and *kavanah*. The *keva* stands for the fixed nature of the prayer, the familiar liturgy that has linked Jews for centuries. The *kavanah* requires that each individual bring purpose and desire to the ritual.

"Acceptable for you." Before we can perform a mitzvah acceptable to God, we need to attune our own attitude and desire toward acceptance. What intentions do we bring to our rituals? What actions flow as a natural path from combining our willingness to serve God with the ritual heritage we perpetuate?

For Further Study: Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Vayikra* (World Zionist Organization, 1986).

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### We're on a Mission from God

*Judith Erger*

Jake and Elwood, in the now classic movie *The Blues Brothers*, offer this as reason for reconstituting their defunct band: "We're on a mission from God."

Long before Jake and Elwood ever thought about walking out onto a brightly lit stage in response to a divine calling, we Jews were operating on the stage of human history, professing a God-driven mission, and announcing our sacred charge. What are our orders? They are to bring knowledge of the *Borei haolam*, the Creator of the universe, to those inhabiting this world. This is no movie role for us, no make-believe, no pretend. We are the people tasked with introducing God to the nations of the earth. Our mission is to promote and protect God's name. Jewish history provides an accounting of how faithfully we have managed this sacred responsibility.

Jews are the guardians of God's good name. "You shall not profane My holy name, that I may be sanctified in the midst of the Israelite people—I the Eternal who sanctify you" (Leviticus 22:32). *Chilul HaShem*, "profaning God's name,"

is any act that brings public disgrace on Jews and Judaism, diminishes God's stature, tarnishes God's reputation, and shames God's people in the eyes of the world. In his commentary to Leviticus 22:32, Plaut writes (based on *Sifra*), "To prevent public profanation of God's name ('in the midst of the Israelite people'), the Jew should die rather than transgress even a minor commandment, He should offer himself unreservedly, without expectation of a miracle" (*The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, ed. W. Gunther Plaut [New York: UAHC Press, 1981], p. 918).

Any act, small or large, that diminishes the moral standard of Judaism eclipses God's good name and shames the community. No act is minor, trivial, or inconsequential. A Jew who perpetrates *chilul HaShem* jeopardizes the very mission we, as a people, are sent to accomplish.

The word *chilul*, "profane," derives from the root *chet-lamed-lamed*, which denotes an empty space, a black hole. When a Jew sins by lying, cheating, stealing, murdering, and so on, his or her act creates a void, an empty space, a severing, an interruption of the person's God-given light. Remember, God's glory has been entrusted into our care, but God's light emanates from the human soul. Human actions that diminish God's light are acts that seal up the soul.

The Rabbis teach that we Jews are to be scrupulous in our actions, especially as we interact with the non-Jewish world. Why? It's because, we *are* on a mission from God. What exactly is our mission? The prophet Isaiah taught that we Jews are to be "a light unto the nations" (Isaiah 42:6). What does that mean? Clearly, we are not the electric company, but we are the enlightenment company. Our mission is clear: we are to energize and enlighten the world about God. When we do this—when we behave in ways that highlight the Divine within us—we shine the light of God on ourselves and on those around us. Then we fulfill our mission acting as or *l'goyim*, a "light unto the nations."

Leviticus 22:32 teaches not one, but two commandments. Along with the concept of *chilul HaShem* is a second commandment, the mitzvah of *kiddush HaShem*, "sanctifying God's name," or perhaps more accurately, making God's name unique in the world. If *chilul HaShem* encompasses those acts that diminish the intensity of God's light in the world, creating black holes between God and God's children, then acts of *kiddush HaShem* intensify and magnify God's light in the world. *Kiddush HaShem* establishes reciprocity of consequence, a unique quid pro quo. The brighter we cause God's light to shine, the brighter our reflection.

Why does our passage conclude with the reminder, "I the Eternal who sanctify you, I who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God, I the Eternal" (Leviticus 22:32-33)? Did Israel forget what God did in Egypt? Perhaps the scorching sand and searing sun caused a national memory lapse? I don't think so. This last verse is subtle and nuanced. Our passage ends mentioning God's deliverance as reminder and restatement of purpose, a rearticulation of mission. The reference to the Exodus from Egypt suggests that Israel's redemption was intentional; it was not the capricious whim of a fickle deity, but the deliberate act of God, the Creator of the universe, who seeks connection to creation, not estrangement. God redeemed us for a reason. The Jewish people exist for a purpose, and yes Jake, yes Elwood, we really are on "a mission from God."

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## JUDAISM'S CORE VALUES: RITUAL OBSERVANCE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE GO HAND IN HAND

*Bonnie Margulis*

Reform Judaism has been called "Prophetic Judaism" because of its identification with and strong responses to the admonitions of the prophets to engage in acts of social justice. However, in recent years there has been a move away from social justice and at the same time a movement toward a renewed interest in spirituality and ritual observance. *Parashat Emor* makes it clear that Judaism is not based on one *or* the other but rather is founded on the core principle that ritual and ethical observance go hand in hand.

This *parashah* is concerned mainly with ritual obligations and the festival calendar. Yet sandwiched among the detailed commands concerning the various animal sacrifices and the harvest offerings are two fairly straightforward commands: Leviticus 22:28 is concerned with the ethical treatment of animals, while Leviticus 23:22 commands us to leave some of the harvest for the poor.

Why are these laws, focusing on humanity toward animals and justice for the poor, placed amid laws regarding sacrifices and festivals? By interweaving ritual and ethical laws, the text makes it clear that the observance of the first type of law is not more important than the observance of the second: Both are of equal importance. Faith, as expressed in the observance of ritual law, has little impact on God's scales of justice unless it is accompanied by ethical deeds.

It is also fitting that the text of *Emor* turns immediately from the law pertaining to the poor to laws concerning the High Holy Days. The rabbis teach that repenting on Yom Kippur will atone for sins committed by people against God but will

not atone for sins committed by one person against another unless the sinner seeks to make amends directly with the other person. In other words, while Yom Kippur enables us to atone for ritual transgressions, our atonement will not be complete until we have also resolved our ethical and social justice transgressions.

The *haftarah* portion for Yom Kippur morning, Isaiah 58:5-7, makes explicit Judaism's core teaching of the inseparable nature of ritual observance and social justice. Isaiah says, in the name of God: "Is such the fast I desire, a day for [all] to starve their bodies?... No, this is the fast I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness and untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free.... It is to share your bread with the hungry and to take the homeless poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe [them]."

Thus for Jews, the issue is not whether to prioritize spirituality over social justice but rather how to integrate both values into our lives.

#### Questions for Discussion

- Judaism provides us with many opportunities for combining ritual observance with social justice. On Shabbat eve it is traditional to put *tzedakah* into the family *pushke* prior to lighting the Shabbat candles. What other examples of combining Jewish practice with ritual and ethical dimensions can you suggest?
- What new opportunities can your family create in order to engage in these dual aspects of Jewish observance?

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### MAKING OUR DAYS COUNT

*Sally J. Priesand*

"These are My fixed times...which you shall proclaim as sacred occasions." (Lev. 23:2) In describing the Jewish calendar, Parashat Emor reminds us that Judaism is a religion of time and that holidays in our tradition are not just days off but occasions to celebrate time and make it holy. To be a Jew means to understand that every moment of life represents an opportunity that will not come again, a chance to make our days count.

At this season of the year, we follow the custom called *sefirah*, the counting of the *omer*. The word *omer* refers to the first sheaf of the barley harvest that was brought to

the priest as an offering to God on the day after Passover began. From then on, our ancestors would count the days—forty-nine in number—until Shavuot.

After the destruction of the Temple, when our people were no longer able to bring the offering, the rabbis continued the custom of counting as a meaningful way to anticipate the revelation at Sinai that we commemorate on Shavuot. What is most interesting about the practice, however, is that we count up and not down. Contrast that with the way in which advertisers greet December every year, warning people as they do: "Only twenty-four shopping days left until Christmas."

Jewish counting is just the opposite. Each evening, we announce the number of days and weeks that have already passed, instead of mentioning those that are yet to come. For example, we say: "Today is the nineteenth day, making two weeks and five days of the *omer*." This gives us an opportunity to appreciate more fully every day of the count, reminding us that in Judaism the journey is as meaningful as the destination and how we prepare ourselves for our encounter with God is as important as standing at Sinai.

Our tradition suggests that this time of counting can be enriched by studying *Pirke Avot*, that tractate of the Talmud that contains the spiritual wisdom of our ancestors. Pausing to reflect on its words as we count our days in anticipation of Sinai is yet another way of making our days count.

For further reading: *The Jewish Holidays: A Guide & Commentary*, Michael Strassfeld (Harper & Row, 1985).

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### CHALLOT IN THE ARK

*Ron Symons*

It all seemed so simple back then, in the time of Parashat Emor. The rules seemed much clearer. If you wanted to communicate with God, all that you had to do was bring your sacrifice to a kohen and your prayer, like the smoke of the sacrifice, wafted up to God. If only I could go to the ark today, make my offering, and be assured that it would be received and answered. Oh how I yearn for those "simpler" days!

After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, in the sixteenth century, a man named Jacobo settled in Safed. He spoke only Spanish. When he went to shul, he didn't fully understand the rabbi's sermons. One Shabbos, the rabbi gave a sermon in which he mentioned that in the Holy Temple, God had commanded: "You shall take choice flour and bake of it twelve loaves....[Aaron] shall arrange them before Adonai regularly every Sabbath day...." (Leviticus 24:5,8) Jacobo didn't understand the whole sermon, but that part he

understood. When he entered his home, he said to his wife, 'Spranza, "Friday morning, I want you to bake twelve loaves of *pan de Dios*. I will take them to the synagogue for God. That week, Esperanza baked especially good loaves of *challah*. She kneaded the dough until it was extra smooth, and her *kavanah* was one of the main ingredients.

On Friday morning, Jacobo wrapped the loaves of *challah* in a white cloth and took them to shul. He looked around to make sure that he was alone, went up to the Holy Ark and said, "*Señor Díos*, I bring you twelve loaves of *challah* that my 'Spranza baked. I hope you will like them. Tomorrow when they take out the *Sefer Torah*, I will look inside the ark, and I expect to see every crumb gone. I do this mitzvah because the rabbi says that You like *challah* for Shabbos." Then Jacobo opened the ark, put the loaves of *challah* inside, said *Bueno Apetito*, closed the ark, stepped back seven steps, and left the synagogue, very happy that God would have such good *challot* to eat.

A few minutes later, the *shammash*--the care-taker of the shul--came in with his broom, talking to God: "Seven weeks already with no pay I'm cleaning the synagogue, and, dear God, you know I only want one thing in life-I just want to be here in Your house. I don't want another job. But, dear God, my children are so hungry. Please make a miracle for me." He walked over to the ark, opened the *Aron Kodesh*--"the Holy Ark"--and saw a miracle! "I knew it! *Ribbono Shel Olam* never forsakes anyone!" He took the twelve loaves of *challah* and made his way home.

The next morning, Jacobo and Esperanza went to the synagogue. They waited anxiously to see what would happen. When the rabbi opened the ark, Jacobo saw that the *challot* were gone. "*Baruch Hashem*, 'Thank God!' Jacobo said. He winked up at his wife 'Spranza and went back to his seat.

This scene repeated itself every week. The *shammash* found out that if he came too early or stayed late, there was no miracle. He learned to rely on God: Only if he arrived after ten o'clock on Friday morning would he find his miracle from God.

And so it happened every week for thirty years.

One Friday morning the rabbi happened to walk into the sanctuary. He silently witnessed the exchange. Struck by the beauty of the miracle, the rabbi immediately returned to his study and rewrote his sermon for that Shabbat.

Imagine that you are the rabbi. While eating *challah*, please share this story with your family at the Shabbat table. Write your sermon, titled "*Challot* in the Ark: How to Translate the Prayers of Our Lips into Actions of

Our Hands," and try to live what you preach.

May the sweet *challah* we eat, along with the sweet words we pray, inspire us to be better people and thus help God answer our prayers.

This rendition was adapted from Zalman Schachter's version of the story in *Gates to the New City : A Treasury of Modern Jewish Tales*, edited by Howard Schwartz (Jason Aronson, Inc., 1991, p. 540).

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