

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Emor
May 14, 2022 *** Iyar 13, 5782

[Emor in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2020/jewish/Emor-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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The Torah section of Emor (“Speak”) begins with the special laws pertaining to the kohanim (“priests”), the kohen gadol (“high priest”), and the Temple service: A kohen may not become ritually impure through contact with a dead body, save on the occasion of the death of a close relative. A kohen may not marry a divorcee, or a woman with a promiscuous past; a kohen gadol can marry only a virgin. A kohen with a physical deformity cannot serve in the Holy Temple, nor can a deformed animal be brought as an offering.

A newborn calf, lamb or kid must be left with its mother for seven days before being eligible for an offering; one may not slaughter an animal and its offspring on the same day.

The second part of Emor lists the annual Callings of Holiness—the festivals of the Jewish calendar: the weekly Shabbat; the bringing of the Passover offering on 14 Nissan; the seven-day Passover festival beginning on 15 Nissan; the bringing of the Omer offering from the first barley harvest on the second day of Passover, and the commencement, on that day, of the 49-day Counting of the Omer, culminating in the festival of Shavuot on the fiftieth day; a “remembrance of shofar blowing” on 1 Tishrei; a solemn fast day on 10 Tishrei; the Sukkot festival—during which we are to dwell in huts for seven days and take the “Four Kinds”—beginning on 15 Tishrei; and the immediately following holiday of the “eighth day” of Sukkot (Shemini Atzeret).

Next the Torah discusses the lighting of the menorah in the Temple, and the showbread (lechem hapanim) placed weekly on the table there.

Emor concludes with the incident of a man executed for blasphemy, and the penalties for murder (death) and for injuring one’s fellow or destroying his property (monetary compensation).

[Haftarah in a Nutshell: Ezekiel 44:15-31.](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/671841/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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This week's haftarah discusses various laws that pertain to the kohanim, the priests, a topic also discussed at length in the first part of the week's Torah portion. Ezekiel prophesies about the service of the kohanim in the third Holy Temple which will be rebuilt after the Final Redemption. The prophet describes their priestly vestments, their personal care, whom they may and may not marry, and their

special purity requirements which preclude them from coming in contact with a corpse, unless it's for a next of kin. He also discusses their calling as teachers and spiritual leaders.

The prophet conveys G-d's word: "You shall give them no possession in Israel; I am their possession." The kohanim do not receive a portion in the Land of Israel, instead they partake of the sacrifices as well as various tithes.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Sanctifying the Name from The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/emor/sanctifying-the-name/>

In recent years we have often felt plagued by reports of Israeli and Jewish leaders whose immoral actions had been exposed. A President guilty of sexual abuse. A Prime Minister indicted on charges of corruption and bribery. Rabbis in several countries accused of financial impropriety, sexual harassment and child abuse. That such things happen testifies to a profound malaise in contemporary Jewish life.

More is at stake than simply morality. Morality is universal. Bribery, corruption, and the misuse of power are wrong, and wrong equally, whoever is guilty of them. When, though, the guilty are leaders, something more is involved – the principles introduced in our parsha of Kiddush Hashem and Chillul Hashem:

“Do not profane My holy Name, that I may be sanctified in the midst of the Israelites. I am the Lord, who makes you holy...” Lev. 22:32

The concepts of Kiddush and Chillul Hashem have a history. Though they are timeless and eternal, their unfolding occurred through the course of time. In our parsha, according to Ibn Ezra, the verse has a narrow and localised sense. The chapter in which it occurs has been speaking about the special duties of the priesthood and the extreme care they must take in serving God within the Sanctuary. All of Israel is holy, but the Priests are a holy elite within the nation. It was their task to preserve the purity and glory of the Sanctuary as God's symbolic home in the midst of the nation. So the commands are a special charge to the Priests to take exemplary care as guardians of the holy.

Another dimension was disclosed by the Prophets, who used the phrase Chillul Hashem to describe immoral conduct that brings dishonour to God's law as a code of justice and compassion. Amos speaks of people who “trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground, and deny justice to the oppressed... and so profane My Holy Name.” (See Amos 2:7)

Jeremiah invokes Chillul Hashem to describe those who circumvent the law by emancipating their slaves only to recapture and re-enslave them (Jer. 34:16).

Malachi, last of the Prophets, says of the corrupt Priests of his day:

“From where the sun rises to where it sets, My Name is honoured among the nations... but you profane it.” Mal. 1:11-12

The Sages[1] suggested that Abraham was referring to the same idea when he challenged God on His plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if this meant punishing the righteous as well as the wicked:

“Far be it from You [chalilah lecha] to do such a thing.”

God, and the people of God, must be associated with justice. Failure to do so constitutes a Chillul Hashem.

A third dimension appears in the book of Ezekiel. The Jewish people, or at least a significant part of it, had been forced into exile in Babylon. The nation had suffered defeat. The Temple lay in ruins. For the exiles this was a human tragedy. They had lost their home, freedom, and independence. It was also a spiritual tragedy: “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”[2] But Ezekiel saw it as a tragedy for God as well:

Son of man, when the people of Israel were living in their own land, they defiled it by their conduct and their actions...I dispersed them among the nations, and they were scattered through the countries; I judged them according to their conduct and their actions. And wherever they went among the nations they profaned My holy Name, for it was said of them, ‘These are the Lord’s people, and yet they had to leave His land.’ Ez. 36:17-20

Exile was a desecration of God’s Name because the fact that He had punished His people by letting them be conquered was interpreted by the other nations as showing that God was unable to protect them. This recalls Moses’ prayer after the Golden Calf:

“Why, O Lord, unleash Your anger against Your people, whom You brought out of Egypt with such vast power and mighty force? Why should the Egyptians be able to say that You brought them out with evil intent, to kill them in the mountains and purge them from the face of the earth? Turn from Your fierce anger and relent from bringing disaster to Your people.” Ex 32:11-12

This is part of the Divine pathos. Having chosen to identify His Name with the people of Israel, God is, as it were, caught between the demands of justice on the one hand, and public perception on the other. What looks like retribution to the Israelites looks like weakness to the world. In the eyes of the nations, for whom national gods were identified with power, the exile of Israel could not but be interpreted as the powerlessness of Israel’s God. That, says Ezekiel, is a Chillul Hashem, a desecration of God’s Name.

A fourth sense became clear in the late Second Temple period. Israel had returned to its land and rebuilt the Temple, but they came under attack first from the Seleucid Greeks in the reign of Antiochus IV, then from the Romans, both of whom attempted to outlaw Jewish practice. For the first time martyrdom became a

significant feature in Jewish life. The question arose: under what circumstances were Jews to sacrifice their lives rather than transgress Jewish law?

The Sages understood the verse “You shall keep My decrees and laws which a person shall keep and live by them” (Lev. 18:5) to imply “and not die by them.”[3] Saving life takes precedence over most of the commands. But there are three exceptions: the prohibitions against murder, forbidden sexual relations, and idolatry, where the Sages ruled that it was necessary to die rather than transgress. They also said that “at a time of persecution” one should resist at the cost of death even a demand “to change one’s shoelaces,” that is, performing any act that could be construed as going over to the enemy, betraying and demoralising those who remained true to the faith. It was at this time that the phrase Kiddush Hashem was used to mean the willingness to die as a martyr.

One of the most poignant of all collective responses on the part of the Jewish people was to categorise all the victims of the Holocaust as “those who died al kiddush Hashem,” that is, for the sake of sanctifying God’s Name. This was not a foregone conclusion. Martyrdom in the past meant choosing to die for the sake of God. One of the demonic aspects of the Nazi genocide was that Jews were not given the choice. By calling them, in retrospect, martyrs, Jews gave the victims the dignity in death of which they were so brutally robbed in life.[4]

There is a fifth dimension. This is how Maimonides sums it up:

There are other deeds which are also included in the desecration of God’s Name. When a person of great Torah stature, renowned for his piety, does deeds which, although they are not transgressions, cause people to speak disparagingly of him, this is also a desecration of God’s Name... All this depends on the stature of the Sage...[5]

People looked up to as role-models must act as role-models. Piety in relation to God must be accompanied by exemplary behaviour in relation to one’s fellow humans. When people associate religiosity with integrity, decency, humility, and compassion, God’s Name is sanctified. When they come to associate it with contempt for others and for the law, the result is a desecration of God’s Name. Common to all five dimensions of meaning is the radical idea, central to Jewish self-definition, that God has risked His reputation in the world, His Name,” by choosing to associate it with a single and singular people. God is the God of all humanity. But God has chosen Israel to be His “witnesses,” His ambassadors, to the world. When we fail in this role, it is as if God’s standing in the eyes of the world has been damaged.

For almost two thousand years the Jewish people was without a home, a land, civil rights, security, and the ability to shape its destiny and fate. It was cast in the role of what Max Weber called “a pariah people.” By definition a pariah cannot be a positive role model. That is when Kiddush Hashem took on its tragic dimension as the willingness to die for one’s faith. That is no longer the case. Today, for the first

time in history, Jews have both sovereignty and independence in Israel, and freedom and equality elsewhere. Kiddush Hashem must therefore be restored to its positive sense of exemplary decency in the moral life.

That is what led the Hittites to call Abraham “a prince of God in our midst.” It is what leads Israel to be admired when it engages in international rescue and relief. The concepts of kiddush and Chillul Hashem forge an indissoluble connection between the holy and the good. Lose that and we betray our mission as “a holy nation.”

The conviction that being a Jew involves the pursuit of justice and the practice of compassion is what led our ancestors to stay loyal to Judaism despite all the pressures to abandon it. It would be the ultimate tragedy if we lost that connection now, at the very moment that we are able to face the world on equal terms. Long ago we were called on to show the world that religion and morality go hand in hand. Never was that more needed than in an age riven by religiously-motivated violence in some countries, rampant secularism in others. To be a Jew is to be dedicated to the proposition that loving God means loving His image, humankind. There is no greater challenge, nor, in the twenty-first century, is there a more urgent one. [1] Bereishit Rabbah 49:9. [2] Psalm 137:4. [3] Yoma 85b. [4] There was a precedent. In the Av ha-Rachamim prayer (See the Authorised Daily Prayer Book, p. 426), composed after the massacre of Jews during the Crusades, the victims were described as those “who sacrificed their lives al kedushat Hashem.” Though some of the victims went to their deaths voluntarily, not all of them did. [5] Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 5:11.

[For What Should I Compromise on Religious Observance by Alan Imar](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/for-what-should-i-compromise/)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/for-what-should-i-compromise/>

As the co-chair of the egalitarian minyan at Columbia University, I was surprised to hear that an Orthodox student leader at Hillel was confused why some of our community members wanted to have joint Shabbat meals with Orthodox students. If students cooked food and ate it together, the “stricter” kashrut standards of Orthodox students might conflict with the “more lenient” practices of students in my community, the student objected. The comment struck me because there seemed to me better ways to mitigate any kashrut concern than to outright reject a communal meal with other Jewish students—students who, by the way, may not necessarily be less observant or “strict” than their Orthodox peers.

The episode raised a question: To what extent should we be flexible in our adherence to religious precepts, and to what extent can we remain steadfast in our commitment to certain principles, even if they exclude others? With this dilemma in mind, I want to consider the opening lines of this week’s parashah, which discuss cases where a priest may allow himself to receive tumat met (impurity from a corpse), something he is not usually permitted to do.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אָמַר אֶל-הַכֹּהֲנִים בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם לִנְפֹשׁ לֹא-יִטְמָא בְּעַמּוּיוֹ:

The LORD said to Moses: Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: None shall defile himself for any [dead] person among his kin . . .

The Torah bars a priest from coming into close contact with a corpse, except (as it continues to delineate) under certain conditions, e.g., the death of a loved one. But when I read the opening verse, I was immediately reminded of a baraita (early rabbinic text) I had encountered in my Introduction to Talmud class during my first year at JTS that seemed to say otherwise!

תָּא שְׁמַע דְּאָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בַּר צְדוֹק: מְדַלְגִין הֵיינוּ עַל גְּבֵי אַרְנוֹת שֶׁל מֵתִים, לְקִרְאֵת מַלְכֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְלֹא לְקִרְאֵת מַלְכֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּלִבַּד אָמְרוּ אֶלָּא אֶפִּילוּ לְקִרְאֵת מַלְכֵי אוּמוֹת הָעוֹלָם, שְׂאֵם יִזְכֶּה, יִבְחִין בֵּין מַלְכֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמַלְכֵי אוּמוֹת הָעוֹלָם.

Come and hear that which Rabbi Elazar son of Zadok said: We would skip over coffins to greet the kings of Israel. And they did not say this only regarding the kings of Israel, but even gentile kings, that if he will merit, he will be able to distinguish between Jewish and gentile kings.

Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 19b

Rabbi Elazar son of Zadok is a priest living in the first century CE who is prohibited by the verse presented above from becoming impure by coming into contact with a corpse. This would presumably happen if he were jumping over coffins! The verse, however, does not mention a king as an exception to the rule. How can it be that he is saying he became impure to greet a king—and not just any king, but even a gentile king? Enter the principle of kavod habriyot (human dignity).

The baraita cited above is part of a broader Talmudic discussion on the question of when human dignity trumps law. That is, are there certain cases in which the dignity of the person supersedes whatever halakhic rules the situation requires? Rabbi Elazar son of Zadok answers in the positive: he, a priest who must respect the strictures of Jewish purity law, may become impure to greet the kings of Israel. The two sources (Torah and baraita) present different rules. According to the Torah, a priest may not defile himself unless the corpse is that of his immediate family. Yet, according to the baraita, a priest may even become impure for a non-Jewish king. It isn't that for the rabbis purity laws were less important; on the contrary, proper observance of purity was a fundamental concern for Jews in the ancient world. I read this not as a shift away from purity but rather as an example of how the rabbis struggled to balance observance with the value of kavod habriyot.

In approaching these texts, I cannot help but think of how the question of priests and defilement is emblematic of a larger, still-relevant question modern Jews face: How do we navigate competing values that may require us to be lenient or make exceptions in certain situations?

For an answer to this question, it would do us well to look to Maimonides's Mishneh Torah, wherein he prescribes that one should seek a middle path,

the derekh beinonit, between two extremes:

שְׁתֵּי קְצוֹת הַרְחֻקוֹת זוּ מִזוּ שֶׁבְּכָל דְּעָה וְדְעָה אֵינָן דֶּרֶךְ טוֹבָה וְאֵין רֹאיוּ לֹו לְאָדָם לְלַכֵּת בֵּהֶן. . . וְיִלֵּךְ
[בְּדֶרֶךְ הַטּוֹבִים וְהִיא הַדֶּרֶךְ הַיְשָׁרָה. הַדֶּרֶךְ הַיְשָׁרָה הִיא מִדָּה בִּינוּנִית שֶׁבְּכָל דְּעָה וְדְעָה.]¹

The two extremes opposite from one another for every trait are not the right path and are not fitting for a person to walk by their way . . . A person should walk in the path of the good ones—and this is the straight path.

The straight path is the middle measure in every trait.

Mishneh Torah

While Maimonides discusses how one should always act according to the middle path—for example, not being too quick to anger, but also not being numb to all feeling—his teaching presents a useful paradigm for many aspects of our lives, religious observance included. For example, on a scale of strict purity (represented by the Torah) to abandoning the concept of purity entirely, the baraita might actually represent a derekh beinonit, a middle path. It does not reject purity but expands on the Torah’s narrow conditions.

We, too, should be able to balance holding fast to traditional observance—allowing it to inform our lives—while being able to accommodate practice, in certain situations, when values conflict. There should be a derekh beinonit, for example, where one neither needs to isolate from sharing a meal with others, nor abandon kashrut entirely. The student who refused to eat with my community would have done well to heed this teaching. Nearing graduation, I hope to take this lesson into the future—crafting for myself a life full of derakhim beinoniyot, middle paths, as an effective and meaningful compromise in the world in which we live.

[1] Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot De’ot 1:3-4.

[Why is the Torah So Silent About Prisons by Rabbi Greg Hersh](https://truah.org/resources/greg-hersh-parshat-emor-moraltorah/)
<https://truah.org/resources/greg-hersh-parshat-emor-moraltorah/>

Near the end of this week’s parshah, Emor, is one of the only narrative portions in Leviticus. It describes a man who “pronounced the [Divine] Name and cursed. So they brought him to Moses... They placed him in the guardhouse (*mishmar*) [until his sentence would] be specified to them by the word of THE

ETERNAL.” (Leviticus 24:11-12) This is one of very few instances in the Tanakh where any kind of prison or incarceration is mentioned.

The Torah itself, surprisingly, has very little to say on the subject of imprisonment. It lays out 613 laws, with corresponding punishments if we fail to observe them. But being imprisoned was not a punishment in itself; rather, it was

a *mishmar* — temporary custody where people waited for Moses to ask God how to handle them. Of all the biblical punishments spelled out in the Torah, from restitution to stoning, prolonged imprisonment doesn’t make the list.

I argue that the reason the Torah is so silent about prisons is because that’s not

where God wants us! Instead of promoting incarceration, the Torah acknowledges our human imperfections and offers various paths of teshuvah, where a person can make penance, atonement, rehabilitation, and an ultimate purging so that they can resume life with a clean slate. The Torah commands us to be a nation of priests and to make the earth a place for God to dwell. And it's not possible to do that from behind bars.

You may be familiar with Psalm 146, which opens, "*Halleli nafshi et Hashem*" — "My soul praises God." The Psalmist then lists several good reasons for that appreciation. Verse 7 states how God "performs justice for the oppressed, gives bread to the hungry," "*Hashem matir asurim*, God releases the captive." That's the kind of God I want to sing my praises to! The rabbis of the Talmud used some verses from this psalm as they were formulating *Birkot Hashachar*, the morning blessings. In the Talmud (Brachot 60b), we learn that when you're first getting up, after you've opened your eyes, the next thing you do is to stretch out and sit up. "Upon sitting up straight, one should recite: *Baruch matir asurim*" — blessed is the One who sets captives free.

For the early rabbinic sages and much of the subsequent rabbinic tradition, *matir asurim* became divorced from the idea of incarceration. Instead, it refers to the "captivity" we experience during sleep. Our bodies are symbolically imprisoned since we don't control our movements while we're sleeping. When we wake up, we're released from the supposed "shackles" of sleep, and we can move our bodies to see where we are free to move and where there is restriction.

Eventually these blessings became part of the siddur liturgy. The phrase *matir asurim* also made it into the Amidah, in the Gevurot blessing about God's power. "*Somech noflim v'rofe cholim umatir asurim.*" God supports, heals, and liberates. So at least three times a day, Jews have the opportunity to remember and appreciate God as the One who sets captives free, Who releases those who are bound.

Moving into modernity, in Rav Kook's commentary on the siddur, *Olat Reiyah*, he explains the concept of freeing the captive, *matir asurim*. In his words, "The vital desire of the soul (*nefesh*) is to be free in her movement, in her physical movement and spiritual movement, with a desire for elevating and renewal." Rav Kook's words can be understood in the rabbinic sense, that this has to do with our own body and soul when we wake up. But Kook's words can also be understood more literally — that inherent to **everyone's** soul is a yearning for physical freedom and spiritual elevation.

Generally speaking, it's the Torah that's harsh and punitive and the sages who offer a more holistic and justice-oriented approach to society. But for this specific concept of incarceration and *matir asurim*, I think we should reclaim the biblical meaning of the phrase — that God does not want people to languish in prisons. It's

not about how we wake up in the morning; rather, it's about how we create a society based on justice and compassion.

As Americans, we all know of the blight of our prison-industrial complex. Despite claiming to be the land of the free, we incarcerate more people per capita than any other country on earth. As Jews, we are called to pursue justice. When we pray and remind ourselves that God *matir asurim*, let us think beyond our own bodies. May we turn our prayers into actions, becoming God's agents on earth as we work to fix our broken carceral system.

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Understanding more from a repeated verse by Dr. Shula Laderman

<https://schechter.edu/understanding-more-from-a-repeated-verse/>

Parashat Emor begins with God telling Moses: "Speak (*emor*) to the priests, the sons of Aaron" (Lev. 21:1), but then moves on to address all of Israel regarding the special celebrations of the *moadim* (holidays), that is, the "fixed times of the Lord which you shall proclaim as sacred occasions (*mikray kodesh*)" (Lev. 23:2), such as the spring and summer festivals of Passover and Shavuot and the fall festivals of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot.

Interestingly, the command about these holy days called *MOADIM* starts with referring to the Sabbath, the weekly festival: "On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day, there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest, a sacred occasion (*mikra kodesh*). You shall do no work; it shall be a Sabbath of the Lord throughout your settlement" (Lev. 23:3). Why? Why repeat here again a text that appeared twice before, once toward the end of the story of Creation (Gen. 2:1–3) and again as the fourth of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:11)?

The picture seen here, by artist Avner Moriah focuses on the Sabbath's introductory verse, which he visualized in a painting he created for *Parashat Bereshit*. The picture images the six days of Creation, depicting the non-anthropomorphic spirit of God as a three-dimensional spiral; the *tohu* the firmament; the separation of the water and the land; all of the Earth's flora, fowl, fish and sea creatures, land animals, and finally the very prominent images of Adam and Eve, the crown of Creation.

The artist's decision to repeat most of the elements from the picture he first painted for Creation might serve as an answer as to why the law of the Sabbath is repeated hereafter having appeared earlier in both Genesis and Exodus. The point is to remind the Israelites that by their working six days and resting on the seventh they were imitating God and His acts in Creation.

Moreover, the reference back to Genesis serves to underscore the primordial concept of the *moadim* by recalling the story of Creation. The same word appears in the first chapter of Genesis in connection with the creation of the luminaries on the fourth day: “God said ‘Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night; they shall serve as signs for the set times (*moadim*) – the days and years (Gen. 1:14). The word *moadim* is related to the verb “to assign, to appoint, or to fix.” Once the sun and the moon were created, they marked day and night and the months and the seasons, thus enabling the determination of the dates of the *moadim*, as we read: “Set times of the Lord, the sacred occasions (*mikray kodesh*), which you shall celebrate each at its appointed time” (Lev. 23:4). That the word *moadim* first appears in the story of the luminaries on the fourth day lets us understand that, like the Sabbath, the *moadim* have their origin in the Creation story. God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh and so it should be with a man. God also created the sun and the moon, but once they were in the skies it fell to man to fix the times and appoint the dates of the various *moadim* so they fall in the right season (Passover in the spring and Sukkot in the fall) and on the right day. Clearly then the story of Creation has a bearing on the celebration of the *moadim* as well as on observance of the Sabbath.

Shavua Tov from Schechter

**Beginning immediately after Pesach and until August, Parashat Hashavua in the Diaspora is one week ‘behind’ the Parasha in Israel. Shavua Tov@Schechter will follow the Diaspora schedule.

[Dr. Shula Laderman worked for many years as a computer programmer and planner at Shaare Zedek Hospital in Jerusalem. While working there, she studied at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem towards her Ph.D., which she received in 2000. Her topic of research is the “Artist as an interpreter” – visual interpretation of the Bible in Jewish and Christian Art. She is the author of: Images of Cosmology in Jewish and Byzantine Art- God’s Blueprint of Creation and is co-author with the artist Avner Moriah of: The Illuminated Torah. She taught for many years at Bar Ilan University as well as at the Schechter Institute, where she continues to teach in the Judaism and the Arts track (which she directed in the past)]

Emor: Our Relationship With Other Creatures by Ora Sheinson

<https://www.growtorah.org/vayikra/2022/05/11-emor-our-relationship-with-other-creatures>

Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rav: Everything that the Holy One, Blessed be He, created in His world, He did not create a single thing in vain.[1]

In Bereisheit, Hashem looked at all that He created and saw that it was very good.

[2] Since then, the vast diversity of life on the planet has not gone unnoticed by the Jewish sages. They were moved to derive a deep lesson from the species of earth, specifically because the Torah conveys Hashem’s intention for, as well as His satisfaction from the existence of every life form. The Midrash on Shemot Rabbah 10:1 (2nd Century) notes in the name of Rabbi Acha bar Rabbi Chanina: “everything you see as superfluous in this world—like snakes and scorpions—they are part of the greater scheme of the creation of the world.” Though most of us are

used to a halachic dialog that calls certain animals “not kosher” or “impure,” here the Torah outlook is actually one of respect for all creatures. This outlook has important ramifications for biodiversity issues today.

The biodiversity of planet earth is severely endangered. Edward O. Wilson, a Harvard University zoologist, estimates that “If we continue at the current rate of deforestation and destruction of major ecosystems like rainforests and coral reefs, where most of the biodiversity is concentrated, we will surely lose more than half of all the species of plants and animals on earth by the end of the 21st century.”[3] Humans benefit from biodiversity in immeasurable ways. For example, many of our most potent medicines come from the plants and animals that Hashem put on this earth. Aspirin from the willow tree; digitalin from the foxglove plant; vincristine, taken from the rosy periwinkle of Madagascar and used to treat childhood leukemia;[4] painkillers from cone snails, snake venom, and frog skin poison. What if the willow tree had gone extinct? What if the rosy periwinkle had disappeared? In addition, the wide variety of plant and animal life allows humans to globally nourish and sustain themselves in several different climates. No less important, the splendid sight of differing flora and fauna enhances the human experience by expanding the mind and delighting the senses. Billions of dollars are spent each year on tourism to enjoy breathtaking views and “exotic” wildlife such as safaris, coral reefs, and rain forests.[5]

Hashem saw the good in all that He created. And He gave a series of commandments to the Jewish people intended to ensure that man was a proper steward of that which Hashem had created. In this week’s parsha, Parshat Emor, Hashem gives the Jewish people a mitzvah that is instructive to all of us enduring today’s challenge. The Torah prohibits the slaughter of a mother and its calf on the same day – a prohibition often referred to as “oto v’et beno”[6]. The Ramban, in his commentary on this prohibition, indicates that its reason is to prevent us from eliminating a species. He offers the same comment on the Biblical commandment to send away the mother bird before taking her eggs, known as “shilu’ach haken.” [7] The Ramban says that even though Hashem has clearly given us the right to benefit from an individual member of a species, he has prohibited us from the destruction of an entire species. Both of these prohibitions revolve around the killing of two generations at once, an act that is symbolic of the destruction of the ability of a species to persist.

Other Torah commandments also imply limits to humankind’s effect on the natural world. For example, Hashem prohibits us from breeding two species of animals together, and from grafting plant species together. “You will keep my laws; you will not breed your animals as kilayim, you shall not seed your fields as kilayim.”[8] Here too is the message that though we are expected to cultivate Hashem’s creations for our benefit and sustenance, we are not to permanently affect those species’ essential identities.

To underscore the importance of all things that Hashem created, the Midrash tells the story of David Hamelech, who, as a young boy, once asked for what purpose Hashem created spiders on this earth. Hashem answered that there would come a day when David would need a spider and then he would thank Hashem for creating it. Many years later, when David incurred the wrath of Sha'ul, and was on the run from his soldiers, David escaped into a cave to hide. He heard the soldiers near the cave and knew they would find him. Suddenly a big spider appeared in front of the cave, and spun a web across the opening. When the soldiers came they did not look in David's cave, because they assumed that he would have torn the web when he entered. David's life was saved by a spider, and on that day, he understood that Hashem was wise, and thanked Hashem for creating all creatures.

[9]

David's realization, no doubt, was that if the actions of one spider in a few seconds can determine the life and death of one person, then hundreds of spider species worldwide must surely have a tremendous impact on everything. Today scientists have begun to discuss biodiversity in terms of "webs." [10] What used to be called the "food chain" is now called the "food web" because of the amount of cross-links between species. As we begin to understand how much more complicated and involved relationships on this earth are, cause and effect are no longer unidirectional or even bi-directional, but a multi-faceted web of relationships. The more we learn about biodiversity, the more we begin to see its overall importance in strengthening every kind of ecosystem against disturbances. Diversity brings stability to an ecosystem because the more species-diversity that exist, the more possible adaptations there will be, and therefore, there will be a higher chance that more variations will persist as time goes on. [11] David began to understand this lesson when he saw the spider weaving a protective web across the cave, sheltering him from damaging intrusions. So too, in every ecosystem each species is responsible for its own part of the "web" that can support boundaries in the system against intrusions.

We have a far greater understanding of the importance of every living thing in the modern era. This knowledge bears a responsibility on each of us, on both a personal and religious level, to take actions that reduce our impact on our ecosystems. The two Torah commandments that directly apply to species-diversity might be rare to come by. After all, how often do we see a bird hovering over eggs in its nest and how often are we in charge of which cows get ritually slaughtered? While most of us do not have the opportunity to perform many of the mitzvot related to species preservation, we cannot fool ourselves into thinking that species-diversity preservation is far beyond our reach. We can each take actions in our everyday lives to protect the earth's biodiversity, and adhere to Hashem's general commandment to honor the importance of all that He has created.

1] (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 77b) [2] Bereisheit 1:31 [3] Read more here. [4] YPTE

website [5] People and Planet website [6] Vayikra 22:28 [7] Devarim 22:6, commentary of Ramban. [8] Vayikra 19:19 [9] From the sayings of Ben Sira 23B, Otzar Midrashim 47 [10] For example, see “Animal Diversity Web” of University of Michigan: [11] For example: “Biodiversity and ecosystem stability in a decade-long grassland experiment.” David Tilman, Peter B. Reich and Johannes M. H. Knops, Nature 441, 629-632 (1 June 2006) [12] Taken from Ten Things YOU Can Do to Help Preserve Species Biodiversity, By David Hooper, an Associate Professor of Biology at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington, specializing in the study of the effects of plant diversity on ecosystem processes and ecological services.

Yahrzeits

Elaine Berkenwald remembers her mother Jean Berkenwald on Sat. May 14 (Iyar 13).

Linda Dorf remembers her mother Annette Pinkowitz Dorf-Hills on Sat. May 14 (Iyar 13).

Ronnie Klein remembers her father Walter Leibowitz on Thurs. May 19 (Iyar 18).

Blossom Primer remembers Irwin's sister Anne Levinson on Fri. May 20 (Iyar 19)

Burt Solomon remembers his sister Judi Solomon Rosenberg on Fri. May 20 (Iyar 19)
