Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Emor
May 17, 2025 *** 19 Iyar, 5785

Emor in a Nutshell

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

The name of the Parshah, “Emor,” means “speak” and it is found in Leviticus 21:1.

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/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's *haftorah* 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

Eternity and Mortality: Emor by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l (5772)

https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/emor/eternity-and-mortality/

Our Parsha begins with a restriction on the people for whom a kohen may become tamei, a word usually translated as defiled, impure, ceremonially unclean. A priest may not touch or be under the same roof as a dead body. He must remain aloof from close contact with the dead (with the exception of a close relative, defined in our Parsha as his wife, a parent, a child, a brother, or an unmarried sister). The law for the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) is stricter still. He may not allow himself to become ceremonially unclean even for a close relative, although both he and an ordinary priest may do so for a meit mitzvah, that is, one who has no one else to attend to their funeral. In such a case, the basic requirement of human dignity overrides the priestly imperative of purity.

These laws, together with many others in Vayikra and Bamidbar –

especially the rite of the Red Heifer, used to cleanse those who had come into contact with the dead – are hard for us to understand nowadays. They already were in the days of the Sages. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai is famous for saying to his students, “It is not that death defiles nor that the waters [of the Red Heifer] purify. Rather, God says, I have ordained a statute and issued a decree, and you have no permission to transgress it.” The implication seems to be that the rules have no logic. They are simply Divine commands.

These laws are indeed perplexing. Death defiles. But so does childbirth (Lev. 12). The strange cluster of phenomena known as tzara’at, usually translated as leprosy, coincides with no known illness since it is a condition that can affect not only a person but also garments and the walls of a house (Lev. 13-14). We know of no medical condition to which this corresponds.

Then, in our Parsha, there is the exclusion from service in the Sanctuary of a kohen who had a physical blemish – someone who was blind or lame, had a deformed nose or misshapen limb, a hunched back or dwarfism (Lev. 21:16-21). Why so? Such an exclusion seems to fly in the face of the following principle:

> “The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”1 Sam. 16:7

Why should outward appearance affect whether you may or may not serve as a priest in the house of God?

Yet these decrees do have an underlying logic. To understand them we have first to understand the concept of the holy. God is beyond space and time, yet God created space and time as well as the physical entities that occupy space and time. God is therefore “concealed.” The Hebrew word for universe, olam, comes from the same Hebrew root as ne’elam, “hidden.” As the mystics put it: creation involved tzimtzum, Divine self-effacement, for without it neither the universe nor we could exist. At every point, the infinite would obliterate the finite.

Yet if God was completely and permanently hidden from the physical world, it would be as if He were absent. From a human perspective there

would be no difference between an unknowable God and a non-existent God. Therefore God established the holy as the point at which the Eternal enters time and the Infinite enters space. Holy time is Shabbat. Holy space was the Tabernacle, and later, the Temple.

God's eternity stands in the sharpest possible contrast to our mortality. All that lives will one day die. All that is physical will one day erode and cease to be. Even the sun, and the universe itself, will eventually become extinct. Hence the extreme delicacy and danger of the Tabernacle or Temple, the point at which That-which-is-beyond-time-and-space enters time and space. Like matter and antimatter, the combination of the purely spiritual and the unmistakably physical is explosive and must be guarded against. Just as a highly sensitive experiment should be conducted without the slightest contamination, so the holy space had to be kept free of conditions that bespoke mortality.

Tumah should therefore not be thought of as "defilement," as if there were something wrong or sinful about it. Tumah is about mortality. Death bespeaks mortality, but so too does birth. A skin disease like tzara'at makes us vividly aware of the body. So does an unusual physical attribute like a misshapen limb. Even mould on a garment or the wall of a house is a symptom of physical decay. There is nothing ethically wrong about any of these things, but they focus our attention on the physical and are therefore incompatible with the holy space of the Tabernacle, dedicated to the presence of the non-physical, the Eternal Infinite that never dies or decays.

There is a graphic example of this at the beginning of the book of Job. In a series of devastating blows, Job loses everything: his flocks, his herds, his children. Yet his faith remains intact. Satan then proposes subjecting Job to an even greater trial, covering his body with sores.[1] The logic of this seems absurd. How can a skin disease be a greater trial of faith than losing your children? It isn't. But what the book is saying is that when your body is afflicted, it can be hard, even impossible, to focus on spirituality. This has nothing to do with ultimate truth and everything to do with the human mind. As Maimonides said, you cannot give your mind to meditating on truth when you are hungry or thirsty, homeless or sick.[2]

The biblical scholar James Kugel recently published a book, In the Valley

of the Shadow, about his experience of cancer. Told by the doctors that, in all probability, he had no more than two years of life left (thankfully, he was in fact cured), he describes the experience of suddenly learning of the imminence of death. He says, “the background music stopped.” By “background music” he meant the sense of being part of the flow of life. We all know we will one day die, but for the most part we feel part of life and of time that will go on for ever (Plato famously described time as a moving image of eternity). It is consciousness of death that detaches us from this sense, separating us from the rest of life as if by a screen.

Kugel also writes, “Most people, when they see someone ravaged by chemotherapy, just tend to keep their distance.” He quotes Psalm 38:12:

> “My friends and companions stand back at the sight of my affliction; even those closest to me keep their distance.”Psalm 38:12

Although the physical reactions to chemotherapy are quite different from a skin disease or a bodily abnormality, they tend to generate the same feeling in others, part of which has to do with the thought “This could happen to me.” They remind us of the “thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.”[3]

This is the logic – if logic is the right word – of tumah. It has nothing to do with rationality and everything to do with emotion (Recall Pascal’s remark that “the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing”). Tumah does not mean defilement. It means that which distracts from eternity and infinity by making us forcibly aware of mortality, of the fact that we are physical beings in a physical world.

What the Tabernacle represented in space and Shabbat in time was quite radical. It was not rare in the ancient world, nor in some religions today, to believe that here on earth everything is mortal. Only in Heaven or the afterlife will we encounter immortality. This is why so many religions in both East and West have been other-worldly.

In Judaism, holiness exists within this world, despite the fact that it is bounded by space and time. But holiness, like antimatter, must be carefully insulated. Hence the stringency of the laws of Shabbat on the one hand, the Temple and its priesthood on the other. The holy is the

point at which heaven and earth meet, where, by intense focus and a complete absence of earthly concerns, we open up space and time to the sensed presence of God who is beyond space and time. It is an intimation of eternity in the midst of life, allowing us at our holiest moments to feel part of something that does not die. The holy is the space within which we redeem our existence from mere contingency and know that we are held within the “everlasting arms”[4] of God.

[1] See Job 1-2. [2] Guide for the Perplexed III:27. [3] From William Shakespeare's famous soliloquy in Hamlet, Act III, Scene I. [4] Deut 33:27

Who Belongs? - Emor by Rachel Rosenthal
https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/who-belongs-2/

Who is the Other? This question, which is asked more and more often in our world, is not often easy to answer. Can one choose to be part of a community? Are people who were once outsiders ever fully welcomed as insiders? In Judaism, these questions are especially important. While Judaism has categories to define and even praise non-Jews, opting into the Jewish community is not simple. However, the Talmud tells us that once someone converts to Judaism, we are supposed to treat them as any other Jew. Unfortunately, this is a mission in which many communities fail. This failure can have significant consequences, as we see in this week’s parashah, Emor.

At the end of Emor, the Torah tells the story of the blasphemer, the man who curses God. On its surface, this story is not especially complex. A man curses the name of God, so he is held until God can communicate a punishment for him. God tells the people that everyone who heard his blasphemy is to take the man outside of the camp and stone him to death (Lev. 24:10–16). This becomes the paradigm for executing people who commit capital crimes in general, both in the Torah and in the rabbinic tradition.

However, a closer look at the story shows that it is more complicated than it might originally seem. The Torah points to a number of curious details. In verse 10, the Torah says, “And the son of an Israelite woman, who was the son of an Egyptian, went out among the children and Israel, and the son of the Israelite woman and a Israelite man fought in the camp.” There

is nothing in the Torah to tell us why this fight began, nor is it clear how the fight lead to the son of the Israelite woman blaspheming. We do not know why the man's mother is identified in the following verse, but he himself is never identified. And finally, the question I continue to return to is, why does it matter that this man is half Egyptian?

The midrashim explore the man's lineage in detail, explaining how his parents' history helps us understand his crime. Vayikra Rabbah explains that this man's father was actually the Egyptian that Moshe killed in Egypt, before he ran away and ultimately encountered the burning bush. Because the blasphemer's father was not an Israelite, he had no share in the Land, and no set place in the camp. Despite having reasonable cause for feeling alienated from the Israelite community, Ramban (quoting the Sifra), claims that he chose to convert by immersing in the mikveh and having a brit milah. However, he still finds himself outside of the community. Thus, the Sifra locates the origin of the dispute between the blasphemer and the Israelite as being about whether the blasphemer has a place with the tribe of Dan, his mother's tribe.

These midrashim are striking because, whether intentionally or not, they turn the blasphemer into a more sympathetic character. Although there is no attempt to condone the choice to blaspheme, the more the blasphemer's back story is offered, the easier it is to understand what might have caused him to ultimately curse God. His father was killed by the leader of his community. He is rejected by the tribe where he tries to find a place. He is known as the son of the Egyptian father, rather than simply another Israelite. Is it any wonder that he eventually lashes out and curses the deity that rules over the people who shunned him?

Surely, the blasphemer is most responsible for his actions. However, the community is forced to grapple with its culpability as well. In verse 14, God commands that all of the people who heard the man curse God are to lay their hands on his head, mirroring the process that one goes through with an animal that will be sacrificed on their behalf. In part, the laying of the hands signifies their rejection of his actions; the fact that they were present does not mean they condoned their actions. However, it also forces them to admit that they were there, and thus that they have a small part in what caused this man to be executed. Perhaps if they had treated this man differently, the situation would not have escalated, God

would not have been cursed, and nobody would need to be put to death.

Although we no longer execute people for blasphemy, the lessons of this story are strikingly relevant today. When we divide our communities—in whatever forms they take—into insiders and outsiders, we are breeding seeds of pain and rejection that could have unknown consequences. Many of us see ourselves more as the Israelites than as the blasphemer in this story, but that means that we must do better than the Israelites did. We must learn from what they did, and find a way to open our doors, rather than pushing people out. Where around us are people feeling rejected as they try to enter in? Where are we dividing when we could unite? When are we othering people who are really more like us than we might want to admit? *(Rachel Rosenthal is a JTS Alum, Gemara Faculty and Director of External Affairs, Yeshivat Maharat)*

Emor: Insiders and Outsiders by Rabbi Julie Hilton Danan
https://truah.org/resources/julie-hilton-danan-emor-moraltorah_2025_/

This week's Torah portion, Parshat Emor, is a tragic tale of insiders and outsiders, ending with the public stoning of the outsider. Reading Emor is an opportunity to consider who is on the inside and outside of our own contemporary "camps," and to write a new ending to the story.

Emor begins with centering the Kohanim, the priests. Kohanim are the ultimate insiders, dwelling near the center of the Israelite camp and continuing for centuries to be associated with our holiest places. The laws of Emor not only limit their contact with the dead, but demand a "purity" of lineage and perfection of body in order to serve in their roles.

Emor ends with the tragedy of an ultimate outsider: the son of an Israelite woman and an Egyptian man. This man, whom the Torah doesn't even call by name, goes out, gets in a fight, blasphemes God and is ultimately taken outside the camp where the community lays their hands upon him invoking shades of a sacrifice before stoning him to death — certainly a very disturbing episode that no one wants to chant for their b-mitzvah!

Midrashic traditions specify that the Egyptian man who fathered this doomed individual was none other than the Egyptian taskmaster whom Moses struck and killed because he beat an enslaved Hebrew. Moreover,

the Egyptian taskmaster had already raped the Hebrew man's wife, Shlomit. He had seen her and noted that she was beautiful and "had no imperfection," (no mum). That's the same term used to qualify a priest for service in our parshah — they could have no mum, no bodily imperfection or "defect." But in Shlomit's case, her beautiful body was used as an excuse to victimize her. (Shemot Rabbah 1:28)

Some Midrashim critique Shlomit in a painful way, saying that her name hints that she was too friendly, too outgoing, immodestly greeting men with "Shalom." She was the daughter of Dibri, a word from the same root as "speech," in other words, a chatterbox. (Vayikra Rabbah 32:5) Like too many women in history, she was blamed for her victimization.

And what was the source of the immediate fight that led to the blasphemy? Members of the tribe of Dan refused to let Shlomit's son join their tribal camp, because even though his mother was of their tribe, his father was Egyptian. At least one midrash (Sifra Emor 14:1) has it that he took them to court, and Moses ruled with the tribe against the individual. In his anger and frustration, our nameless man blasphemes the sacred name of God, resulting in his execution. The outsider was destroyed, but I think that the entire community, who couldn't make room for this individual in their camp, was affected in a way that echoes through time.

I'd be preaching to the choir to note that the devastating consequences of excluding "the other" reverberate through history and are particularly relevant in our current climate of nativism and xenophobia, where human beings are being exiled for their words, and the very term "inclusion" is being banished.

But Emor should challenge us more personally, too. This portion brings the opportunity to consider how inclusive we are in our Jewish communities and movements. Almost every synagogue website today includes words like "welcoming" and "friendly." But I'm not sure it always feels that way to one who lacks the knowledge, resources, or connections to integrate easily into our communities.

Ironically, Shlomit's son was rejected as a matrilineal Israelite, while today, patrilineal Jews still feel heartbreakingly excluded in many Jewish settings. Our parshah excluded the physically "imperfect" Kohanim from divine service. Today, Jews with differing abilities may find daunting

physical or social barriers to participation. Jews of Color and Jews by choice too often find themselves “othered” in the Jewish world. In our polarized society, Jews whose ideological outlooks don’t match their community’s have experienced being pushed to the outside. Even socially progressive communities are sadly not immune from casting out people who don’t fit our standards of ideological “purity.”

For many years, I have worked to combat xenophobia and to support immigrants and refugees through my writing, sermons, and organization affiliations. But such public actions are just part of the spectrum of making outsiders into insiders. I invite you to join me in enacting a tikkun (repair) for the tragedy of Emor by taking every opportunity to expand our tent of Jewish community and bring another outsider in. In a world of loneliness and alienation, we can write a new ending to Emor, one that builds community and affirms life. *(Rabbi Julie Hilton Danan is the religious leader of Seaside Jewish Community in Rehoboth Beach, DE. She is a graduate of the ALEPH Rabbinic program and holds a Ph.D. in Hebrew Studies from the University of Texas at Austin.)*

Emor: Power of Speech – *Silence is Golden* by Salvador Litvak

https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/torah/2023/05/03/emor-power-of-speech/

Emor means “speak,” and Torah portion Emor starts with God commanding Moses to speak to the priests about their special responsibilities and restrictions. Why is the parsha named for the very act of speaking rather than the important Kohanic laws Moses speaks about? One reason is to emphasize the vital importance of speech in Jewish practice. What we say matters and has the power to cause considerable pleasure or pain to others.

“Lashon Hara” (evil tongue) describes a wide variety of forbidden speech and is often used to mean “malicious gossip.” Our Sages teach that “Lashon hara kills three: the one who speaks, the one who listens, and the one who is being spoken about.” Certainly the one who speaks does damage, as does the one who listens rather than walking away or changing the subject. But how does lashon hara hurt the one who is being gossiped about?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe teaches that speaking about a person’s negative

traits actually reinforces them, even if the person never knows what was said. Perhaps seeing someone in a negative light will cause you to unconsciously treat them in a negative way, and often we live up to others' expectations of us, whether deliberately or not. Let's make sure to think before we speak, and assess honestly whether it is necessary and helpful for us to say anything. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said, "All my life I have been raised amongst the wise and I have found nothing better for the body than silence."

Emor: Third Commandment – *Don't Blaspheme* by Salvador Litvak
https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/torah/2024/05/14/emor-third-commandment/

Parsha Emor contains the disturbing episode of the blasphemer in the camp. A Jew (who has an Egyptian father) gets into a fight with another Jew and curses the name of God. Recall the Third Commandment: "Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." (Ex. 20:7, Deut. 5:11) Punishment is swift: God tells Moses to take the blasphemer out of the camp, "and let all who were within hearing lay their hands upon his head, and let the community leadership stone him." (Lev. 24:14).

The Torah says that blasphemy is a death penalty offense, and then defines murder also as a death penalty offense. Next in the Torah are laws about injuries to animals and humans. Why is blasphemy in the same category of crime as physical abuse and murder? Uttering words in a moment of emotion that don't hurt anybody seems like a lesser sin than taking someone's life.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein explains that a man who has no fear of God has nothing to keep his darkest inclinations in check. He is in a spiritually debased state and can rationalize any behavior. The crimes of murder, assault and property damage are linked to the sin of blasphemy because without a strong belief in God, people and societies are at higher risk of becoming wicked and violent.

Note: like other death penalty offenses that don't involve assault or murder, it's highly doubtful that capital punishment for blasphemy was ever imposed by a Jewish court. It's in the Torah to emphasize that disrespecting God is a serious transgression. *(Salvador Litvak bio: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salvador_Litvak)*

Yahrtzeits

Burt Solomon remembers his sister Judi Solomon Rosenberg on Sat. May 17

Ilisia Kissner remembers her aunt Sadye Rosenblum on Tues. May 20

Daniel Zwillenberg remembers his mother Myrna Zwillenberg on Wed. May 21

All of Kol Rina and Sylvia Orenstein remember her husband Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein on Fri. May 23

Nikki Pusan and Russett Feldman remember their cousin Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein on Fri. May 23