Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Emor
May 2, 2026 *** 15 Iyar, 5786

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

Emor: Faith as a Journey by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l (5767)
https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/emor/faith-as-a-journey/

In its account of the festivals of the Jewish year, this week's parsha contains the following statement:

> For seven days you shall live in huts [succot]. All those native-born in Israel must live in huts, so that future generations may know that I had the Israelites live in huts when I brought them out of the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God." Vayikra 23:42-43

What precisely this means was the subject of disagreement between two great teachers of the Mishnaic era, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva. According to the Talmud Bavli (Succah 11a), Rabbi Eliezer holds that the reference is to the Clouds of Glory that accompanied the Israelites on their journey through the desert. Rabbi Akiva maintains that the verse is to be understood literally (succot mammash). It means "huts" – no more, no less.

A similar difference of opinion exists between the great medieval Jewish commentators. Rashi and Ramban favour the "Clouds of Glory" interpretation. Ramban cites as proof the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the end of days:

> Then the Lord will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over all the glory will be a canopy. It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain. Isaiah 4:5-6

Here the word succah clearly refers not to a natural but to a miraculous protection.

Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, however, favour the literal interpretation. Rashbam explains as follows: the festival of Succot, when the harvest was complete and the people were surrounded by the blessings of the land, was the time to remind them of how they came to be there. The Israelites would relive the wilderness years during which they had no permanent home. They would then feel a sense of gratitude to God for bringing them to the land. Rashbam's prooftext is Moses' speech in Devarim 8:

> And when you eat and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land that He has given you. Take care not to forget the Lord your God…
>
> Otherwise, when you have eaten and been satisfied, and have built fine houses and lived in them, when your herds and flocks have grown abundant, and your silver and gold is abundant, and all that you have has grown abundant, your heart may become proud, forgetting the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, the house of slaves… you might be tempted to say to yourself, 'My power, the strength of my own hand, have brought me this great wealth.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you the power to do great things, upholding the covenant that He swore to your ancestors, as He is doing on this day. Devarim 8:10-18

According to Rashbam, Succot (like Pesach) is a reminder of the humble origins of the Jewish people, a powerful antidote to the risks of affluence. That is one of the overarching themes of

Moses' speeches in the book of Devarim and a mark of his greatness as a leader. The real challenge to the Jewish people, he warned, was not the dangers they faced in the wilderness, but the opposite, the sense of wellbeing and security they would have once they settled the land. The irony – and it has happened many times in the history of nations – is that people remember God in times of distress but forget Him in times of plenty. That is when cultures become decadent and begin to decline.

A question, however, remains. According to the view that the succot are to be understood literally as huts in the wilderness, what miracle does the festival of Succot represent? Pesach celebrates the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt with signs and wonders. Shavuot recalls the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, the only time in history when an entire people experienced an unmediated revelation of God. On the "Clouds of Glory" interpretation, Succot fits this scheme. It recalls the miracles in the wilderness, the forty years during which they ate mannah from heaven, drank water from a rock, and were led by a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night (In 1776, Thomas Jefferson chose this image as his design for the Great Seal of the United States). But on the view that the succah is not a symbol but a fact – a hut, a booth, nothing more – what miracle does it represent? There is nothing exceptional in living in a portable home if you are a nomadic group living in the Sinai desert. It is what Bedouin do to this day. Where then is the miracle?

A surprising and lovely answer is given by the Prophet Jeremiah:

> Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem:
> "I remember the devotion of your youth,

how - as a bride - you loved Me
and followed Me through the desert,
through a land not sown." Jeremiah 2:2

Throughout Tanach, most of the references to the wilderness years focus on the graciousness of God and the ingratitude of the people: their quarrels and complaints, their constant inconstancy. Jeremiah does the opposite. To be sure, there were bad things about those years, but against them stands the simple fact that the Israelites had the faith and courage to embark on a journey through an unknown land, fraught with danger, and sustained only by their trust in God. They were like Sarah who accompanied Abraham on his journey, leaving "his land, birthplace and father's house" behind. They were like Tzipporah who went with Moses on his risk-laden mission to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. There is a faith that is like love; there is a love that calls for faith. That is what the Israelites showed in leaving a land where they had lived for 210 years and travelling out into the desert, "a land not sown", not knowing what would befall them on the way, but trusting in God to bring them to their destination.

Perhaps it took Rabbi Akiva, the great lover of Israel, to see that what was truly remarkable about the wilderness years was not that the Israelites were surrounded by the Clouds of Glory but that they were an entire nation without a home or houses; they were like nomads without a place of refuge. Exposed to the elements, at risk from any surprise attack, they nonetheless continued on their journey in the faith that God would not desert them.

To a remarkable degree, Succot came to symbolise not just the forty years in the wilderness but also two thousand years of exile. Following the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews

were scattered throughout the world. Almost nowhere did they have rights. Nowhere could they consider themselves at home. Wherever they were, they were there on sufferance, dependent on a ruler's whim. At any moment without forewarning they could be expelled, as they were from England in 1290, from Vienna in 1421, Cologne, 1424, Bavaria 1442, Perugia, Vicenza, Parma and Milan in the 1480s, and most famously from Spain in 1492. These expulsions gave rise to the Christian myth of "the wandering Jew" – conveniently ignoring the fact that it was Christians who imposed this fate on them. Yet even they were often awestruck by the fact that – despite everything – Jews did not give up their faith when (in Judah Halevi's phrase) "with a word lightly spoken" they could have converted to the dominant faith and put an end to their sufferings.

Succot is the festival of a people for whom, for twenty centuries, every house was a mere temporary dwelling, every stop no more than a pause in a long journey. I find it deeply moving that Jewish tradition called this time zeman simchatenu, "the season of our joy". That, surely, is the greatness of the Jewish spirit that, with no protection other than their faith in God, Jews were able to celebrate in the midst of suffering and affirm life in the full knowledge of its risk and uncertainty. That is the faith of a remarkable nation.

R. Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev once explained why the festival of Nissan has two names, Pesach and Chag haMatzot. The name Pesach represents the greatness of God who "passed over" the houses of the Israelites in Egypt. The name Chag haMatzot represents the greatness of the Israelites who were willing to follow God into the wilderness without provisions. In the Torah, God calls the festival Chag haMatzot in praise of Israel. The Jewish people, however, called it Pesach to sing

the praise of God. That, it seems, is the argument between R. Eliezer and R. Akiva about Succot. According to R. Eliezer, it represents God's miracle, the Clouds of Glory. According to R. Akiva, however, it represents the miracle of Israel – their willingness to continue the long journey to freedom, vulnerable and at great risk, led only by the call of God.

Why then, according to Rabbi Akiva, is Succot celebrated at harvest time? The answer is in the very next verse of the prophecy of Jeremiah. After speaking of "the devotion of your youth, how - as a bride - you loved Me," the Prophet adds:

> Israel is holy to God,
> The first fruit of His harvest. Jeremiah 2:3

Just as, during Tishrei, the Israelites celebrated their harvest, so God celebrates His – a people who, whatever else their failings, have stayed loyal to Heaven's call for longer, and through a more arduous set of journeys, than any other people on earth.

Emor: Holy Frustration by Yitz Landes
https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/holy-frustration/

The anthropologist Mary Douglas once called the Book of Leviticus "an elaborate intellectual structure of rules." The rules that fill Leviticus are utopian in nature—the book describes a perfectly ordered world, in which everything—each animal, each sacrifice, each ablution—is in its right place. When something is done wrong—like when the sons of Aaron offer "a strange fire" (Lev. 10:1–3)—God intervenes, and the system immediately corrects.

Like much of Leviticus, Parashat Emor opens with yet more of

these rules. But now the Torah needs to acknowledge that even when everything is in the right place, there is still death. What's a priest to do when tragedy strikes? "Speak [Emor] to the priests, the sons of Aaron," God tells Moses, "and say to them: None shall defile himself for any [dead] person among his kin, except for the relatives that are closest to him" (Lev. 21:1). In order to stay pure, priests are limited in terms of when they can come near a dead body; even though they may mourn the death of another, the Torah says that they can only be near the corpse of a close relative. After a few terse verses about mourning practices, the Torah enumerates further rules that are meant to keep the priests and High Priest pure, with the upshot being that a priest is "holy to their God" (21:7).

As anyone following along in Leviticus until now knows—the priests are special. And in a ritual system in which impurity abounds and priests must remain on call to serve God, it is unsurprising to see the Torah set extra strictures to keep them pure. But what do we make of such passages today? While many of the practices listed at the opening of this week's parashah are still observed by Jews who maintain priestly lineage, they can feel remote to the rest of us—rules for a religious elite in a Temple-era world that no longer exists.

R. Mordechai Yosef Leiner (1801–1854), the founder of the Izhbitza-Radzyn line of Hasidic rabbis, read this passage in a way that allows it to speak not only to the priests, but to anyone. In his book theMei ha-Shiloach, "the Izbicer" reads this passage allegorically. First, the word "priest" can be understood—based on a comment of Rashi—not merely as a descendant of Aaron, but as anyone "who seeks to serve God," an Oved Hashem.

Having made this first move, the Izbicer then reads the

passage at the start of this week's parashah as speaking not just about the specifics of corpse impurities, but about the challenges that face a religious person when they encounter death or other tragedies. "A person like this," the Izbicer says of the Oved Hashem, "can become angry with God's actions." By contrast, someone who "thinks the world operates by chance" cannot be truly angry with God, "because they can say," when dealing with a tragedy, that "it's just happenstance."

The Mei ha-Shiloach explains that this capacity for anger—for frustration with the way things are—is not a failure of faith but is actually an expression of faith. This is a striking inversion of how religious anger is often perceived. We tend to think of protest as a sign of weakened faith. The Izbicer suggests the opposite: that the person who cannot be angry with God has simply stopped believing that God is responsible for anything.

The frustration of the Oved Hashem comes from a place of care. To challenge the order of things is to believe not only that they can be different but that they should be, because ultimately there is an overarching ethics according to which the world should operate, that even God should be held to. Only someone who takes God seriously, who believes the world is ordered with intention and purpose, can be genuinely outraged when that order seems to fail. Indifference is the luxury of those who expect nothing.

As an educator teaching in a world full of ever more injustices, my greatest fear is not that my students will be upset with the order of things, but that they will stop caring at all. True faith carries with it the burden of expectation, and with expectation comes the possibility of disappointment. The Izbicer reminds us that we should hold on to that disappointment. Our

disappointment—our own and that of our students—should inspire us to do good: to remain invested enough in the world to be troubled by it, and to fight and strive for something better.

Leviticus imagines a perfectly ordered world—one in which everything is in its right place. The Izbicer would say that the person of faith has internalized that vision. They know what the world should look like, and so when it doesn't, they cannot simply shrug. To be frustrated with the world as it is, is to believe in the world as it ought to be. *(Yitz Landes is Assistant Professor of Rabbinic Literatures and Cultures at JTS)*

Emor: The Social Revolution by Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz
https://thekotel.org/en/155323/

Parashat Emor deals with the unique status of the kohanim who served in the Temple. The Torah sets a particularly strict standard of conduct for them: they must maintain a special level of purity and avoid contact with the dead, except for their seven closest relatives.
At first glance, these laws seem to apply only to the kohanim. But when we look deeper, a profound and highly relevant human message emerges – one that speaks to each of us.

This portion is read during the days of the Counting of the Omer when Judaism emphasizes mutual respect and love between people as preparation for receiving the Torah on the festival of Shavuot. The Torah was given at Mount Sinai when the people stood "as one person with one heart," without division.

During this same period, 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva died because they did not treat one another with respect. Their

teacher was the one who coined the famous teaching: “Love your fellow as yourself – this is a great principle in the Torah.” Precisely because of this, the expectation from his students was especially high, and their failure was considered particularly severe. Every year during the Omer, we seek to repair that flaw.

Against this background, it is interesting to consider the wording of the opening verse of the parasha:

> “Say to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and tell them: none shall defile himself for the dead among his people, except for his close kin…” (Leviticus 21:1–2)

Seemingly, the law could have been phrased more directly and simply, specifying who a priest is allowed to become impure for. Why does the Torah choose a more general and somewhat ambiguous wording: “he shall not defile himself among his people”?

Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye, a leading disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, offered a Hasidic interpretation that sees a moral hint: the prohibition is not only about physical impurity, but also about a “defilement” of attitude. A person considered a public figure or someone of status must be especially careful not to look at others with arrogance or dismissal. That too is a form of impurity. Therefore, the priest is commanded: “he shall not defile himself among his people.”

This idea is sharpened in the famous Talmudic story (Shabbat 33b) about Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son Rabbi Elazar. After 12 years of hiding in a cave, they emerged and saw people engaged in ordinary worldly activities. Their initial reaction was harsh: how could people abandon spiritual life for

temporary matters? According to the description, their gaze burned whatever they saw. Immediately, a heavenly voice declared: “Have you come to destroy My world? Return to your cave!” And so they returned for another 12 months of reflection.

When they emerged again, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai had undergone a profound transformation. He learned to view the world with greater acceptance. In contrast, Rabbi Elazar still viewed reality with sharp criticism. The difference between them became clear: wherever Rabbi Elazar saw fault and reacted negatively, Rabbi Shimon intervened, corrected, and healed. He had internalized that everyday life is also part of a complete picture full of value and meaning, and that every person has a unique role in the world.

Many years later, the Talmud recounts another incident involving Rabbi Elazar:

> Once, Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Shimon was returning from his teacher, feeling proud because of the Torah he had learned. He encountered a man who was extremely unattractive. The man greeted him: “Peace be upon you, my rabbi!” but Rabbi Elazar did not respond. Instead, he said: “How ugly this man is! Are all the people of your city as ugly as you?”
>
> The man replied: “I do not know, but go and tell the Craftsman who made me how ugly is the vessel He has made.”

> When Rabbi Elazar realized he had sinned, he dismounted from his donkey, prostrated himself before the man, and said: “Forgive me!” The man replied: “I will not forgive you until you go to the Craftsman who made me and tell Him how ugly is the vessel He made.” (Talmud, Ta’anit 20a)

The Talmud continues: they arrived in the city, and the townspeople, who knew of Rabbi Elazar’s greatness, pleaded with the man to forgive him, explaining that he was a righteous person who had momentarily failed. Only after their urging did the man forgive him.

Following this, Rabbi Elazar entered the study hall and through recognition of his mistake, formulated a guiding principle for life:

“A person should always be soft like a reed, and not hard like a cedar.”

Here we have a familiar human situation: a successful person encounters someone he perceives as inferior and fails to treat him with proper respect. And it is the “simple” person who responds with a statement that shakes his perspective: “Go to the Craftsman who made me” – meaning, we are all created by one Creator, all possess value, and no one has the right to look down on another. Rabbi Elazar immediately understands his mistake and, from that awakening, teaches a fundamental principle: a person must train himself in humility and acceptance of others – to be flexible like a reed that bends in the wind, rather than rigid like a cedar.

This idea was most strongly expressed by Rabbi Akiva. Before becoming one of the greatest sages, he himself, despite being modest and of good character, felt distant from Torah scholars,

sensing that they looked down on ordinary people. From that place, he arrived at the great declaration of loving one's fellow as a central principle of the Torah.

The message that emerges from all of this is clear: true greatness is not measured only by knowledge or status, but by the ability to see every person as equal in value. A healthy society is not built on rigid hierarchy, but on mutual recognition, respect, and shared responsibility.

In our world, where social, cultural, and economic differences often create deep divisions, this call is more relevant than ever. If we can remove even some of the labels, stereotypes, and the urge to compare and elevate ourselves above others, we will discover a different society, one based on respect, goodwill, and partnership.

Perhaps this is the deeper lesson of Parashat Emor: true purity is not only in external actions, but first and foremost in the way we look at others. *(Rabbi Shumuel Rabinowitz is Rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites)*

Emor: All Torah Is Within Us by Rabbi Michaela Brown
https://truah.org/resources/michaela-brown-emor-moraltorah_2026_/

Eighteen years ago, I stood on the bimah of Congregation Sha'are Shalom in Leesburg, VA, and delivered a d'var Torah about Parshat Emoras I marked my entry into Jewish adulthood. Nestled within Leviticus, Emor starts out by providing Aaron a list of rules for the priesthood to abide by. I remember as a 13-year-old being disturbed by the inherent ableism of the text: People with several different physical disabilities could not serve as priests. While the contents of

my d'var Torah remain hazy, I maintain compassion for the younger me, who was tasked with making meaning of a legal code meant for a form of Judaism long past. I also recognize that although reconciling with a problematic text is one way to engage with Torah, my own relationship with Torah has evolved in ways that have led me to seek out less literal interpretations and speak to my own living spiritual questions.

Nearly 20 years later, with decades of life experience, Jewish and Hebrew literacy, and rabbinic ordination, I returned to wrestle with this parshah, this time with a dear chevrutah, Rabbi Jacob Weiss, and the Chasidic commentary of the "Me'or Enayim," the seminal work of the Chernobler rebbe.

In engaging with the introduction of Parshat Emor, the "Me'or Enayim" is quick to expand the subject of the mitzvot from the priesthood to all Jews. He invokes Menachot 110a, which states, "Rabbi Shmuel bar Naḥmani says that Rabbi Yonatan says: These are Torah scholars, who engage in Torah study in every place. God says: I ascribe them credit as though they burn and present offerings to My name." In other words, through engaging in Torah study, anyone has access to the reward of fulfilling mitzvot assigned to priests.

The "Me'or Enayim" takes his argument one step further. In traditional Jewish teaching, the 613 mitzvot correspond to the combined 613 limbs and sinews of the human body (note: Don't rely on rabbis for accurate human anatomy). Each human body is comprised of the entirety of the mitzvot, the entirety of the Torah.

I had not fully considered this before. Of course, I knew that there were certain mitzvot I was not able to fulfill. I do not complete the mitzvot related to farming in the Land of Israel. And even if I could trace my lineage to the priestly caste, I

have no Temple to perform sacrifices in. And yet, all of Torah is within me. The “Me’or Enayim”says, just as in Bereshit we learn that humanity was made b’tzelem Elohim, in the image of the Divine, that means that we were made b’tzelem Torah, in the image of Torah, of Instruction, of Divine Wisdom.

In conversations with college students participating in Carleton’s Religious Leadership Fellowship, I asked them to consider what specific pathways of leadership they could imagine taking on. We used Deepa Iyer’s Social Change Ecosystem Framework and Rabbi Jill Hammer’s 13 models of the Hebrew Priestess to see which roles spoke most to our gifts and calling.

I brought this live question to my students because, as a rabbi, I have been grappling with what my own role is in justice movements. Living in the Twin Cities and experiencing the horrors of federal occupation and the harm inflicted upon my most vulnerable neighbors, I felt a deep sense of inadequacy as I grappled with how to properly show up.

Surprisingly, I think that those same feelings of inadequacy are related to reading the pieces of Torah that feel most distant to one’s lived experience. There is a desire to do the right thing, to do all of the things, regardless of whether we have the ability to take on those tasks.

The “Me’or Enayim”’s teaching can offer us a sense of wholeness and a sense of purpose. All of Torah is within us, even if we are only able to demonstrate it through a more limited array of actions. The options that we can individually access may be different than our neighbor’s, but no less vital to the project of bringing justice and healing to this world.

We may not be priests, but the “Me’or Enayim,” also gently reminds us that we all have the power to serve God, that the

whole Torah is alive within us, and that we, too, can live into the words of Pirkei Avot 1:12: “Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving humanity and drawing them close to the Torah.” *(Rabbi Michaela Brown serves as an associate chaplain at Carleton College and St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN. She was ordained by Hebrew College in 2024)*

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Yahrtzeits

Ronnie Klein remembers her father Walter Leibowitz on Tues. May 5

Blossom Primer remembers Irwin’s sister Anne Levinson on Wed. May 6

Burt Solomon remembers his sister Judi Solomon Rosenberg on Wed May 6