

Parashat Emor אָמֹר

Torah: Leviticus 21:1–24:23

Haftarah: Ezekiel 44:15–31

The Highest Kind of Holiness

General Overview

In Israel during the days of the Second Temple, it was common to follow a three-year Torah reading cycle in the synagogue rather than the present one-year one. This means, among other things, that the length of the *parashiyot* tended to be shorter. When we come to a parasha such as *Emor*, how we wish we were still following a three-year cycle! It is really impossible to adequately comment on all of the important teachings in a parasha of this length in the short amount of space available in this commentary.

Exposition

This sidra can be divided into three sections. The first part, chapters 21–22, centers on teachings directed specifically toward the kohanim. The second section, chapter 23, deals with the Holy Day Cycle. The third division, in chapter 24, contains instructions about the menorah and sacred Bread. In addition, the Holy One provides more teaching on how to be holy in our administration of justice within the redeemed community. This then will be our outline for this week's commentary:

- I. The Kohanim — The Highest Kind of Holiness
- II. The Mo'adim Cycle — A Calendar of Holiness
- III. Eye for Eye, Tooth for Tooth — Justice in Holiness

In this excerpt from Parashat Emor, we will focus on section, The Kohanim — The Highest Kind of Holiness.

I. The Kohanim — The Highest Kind of Holiness

This parasha comes at the end of the section on holiness that began in chapter 17. There are three kinds of sanctification described in these chapters.

The principles of holiness as experienced by the Jewish nation are developed in three major stages: from the broad base of the nation, up to the level of the Levites, and then to the highest level, the kohanim, with the Kohen Gadol at the very summit of human holiness.¹

Having explained the first two kinds of holiness in previous parashiyot, the Torah now expounds on the last kind in chapters 21 and 22.

The main concept from the content of these chapters is basically a review of the need for the priests to be *tahor* [ritually pure] in order to perform their duties, but the teaching here is more specific than previously. For example, we are now informed that even if there is a minute physical blemish or a broken finger (21:16–21), the man may be disqualified as the High Priest. Therefore, because of the stress in chapters 21 and 22 on the need for the kohanim to be different

from the rest of the Israelites, we find that most of the teaching is designed to give specific examples which would serve to remind the kohanim to be tahor. These examples cover every area of life: from what kind of woman to marry, to skin blotches.

There is however a fascinating teaching contained in this section that deserves a little more attention. At least four times we are given the reason for the necessity of a kohen to remain tahor, to not have a blemish, a physical handicap, or any bodily imperfection. We are told that it is because of the food that he offers to his God. For example, 21:8 says that the kohen shall be sanctified, “for he offers the food of your God.” In this explanation, there are at least two curious matters.

A. God’s Food

The first peculiarity about these statements is the observation that the sacrifices are called God’s food. Is God hungry? Does He need to be fed? What does the statement “God’s food” mean?

Unfortunately, the commentators, both Jewish and Evangelical, do not share our curiosity! There are few helpful comments on this matter. Keil and Delitzsch, however, offer some help. They equate the phrase in verse 8 “food of your God” with Leviticus 3:11 and 16. They suggest that the “food” of God is the “sweet savor” of the fat portions being burned in the daily sacrifices.² In this connection the “food,” therefore, is the sweet aroma arising unto the Lord.

If this is the correct interpretation, then it lends itself to a very rich application. The sweet smell, or “food,” which pleased God, was not necessarily the literal aroma of burning fat. It seems that what gave Him great joy was the fact that sinful man obeyed him and offered the prescribed sacrifice as He had directed, because of the sinner’s desire to draw near to Him. This is what pleased God and became a sweet aroma to Him.

In other words, God’s food was man’s seeking to draw near to Him. Of course, it goes without saying that sinful man does not, in and of himself, seek God without God first reaching out to him. In fact, the very desire for him to draw close to God comes from God. Nevertheless, when man *does* seek after God, it is a sincere longing coming from within man, placed there by the God of grace.

B. The Reason for Being Tahor

The second peculiarity about these verses is that grammatically they provide a “purpose clause” for the holiness of the kohanim (21:8).

The reason for holiness is introduced by the Hebrew preposition *ki* (כי), which means “for” or “because.” This preposition tells us that the reason for the high standards of holiness for the kohanim was because they were the ones who offered up God’s “food.” They were the ones who facilitated sinful man to be close to the Holy God by means of the sacrifice. Since the animal offered was required to be free from imperfections, the priest offering it on behalf of the sinner, had, therefore, to be just as free from them.

Hence, the text in Leviticus states that because the kohen’s responsibility was to assist in the offering of the sacrifice (“food”) to God, he was required to be tahor, free from physical, sexual, marital, and other imperfections.

C. Kiddush HaShem

Before we leave chapters 21 and 22, there is one more subject on which we need to comment. We want to direct our thoughts to 22:32, 33. Here the text states,

Do not profane my holy name. I must be acknowledged as holy by the Israelites. I am the Lord who makes you holy and who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord.

These verses come at the end of a long section about holiness that began in *Parashat Kedoshim*. The precepts taught here relate to all activities of life. This includes the life of both the individual (especially of the priests) and of the community at large. Every area of life is mentioned, such as the family, one's sex life, work and agriculture, human relations in general, relationships between rich and poor, debtor and creditor, buyer and seller, lessor and lessee, man's relationship with the vegetable and animal kingdom, with his Creator, and finally the Temple service in all its details. All these things are designed to lead the Jew to his ultimate mission in life — to be holy.³

The Jewish Sages assert emphatically that the sanctification of one's life enables one to fulfill the ultimate duty of mankind (especially the Children of Israel) — to sanctify the name of God. Nehama Leibowitz summarizes the task at hand for us when she says,

How can man carry out this awesome task of sanctifying the name of God and being a witness to His existence and sovereignty? The answer is: Through his life and death.⁴

The sanctification of God's Name takes first place in a person's life. That is why both *Kedoshim* and *Emor* stress holy living. However, there is another way of sanctifying God's Name. We can also sanctify God's Name through our death. Listen, again, to what Leibowitz has to say:

Sometimes, however, a Jew is faced with no alternative but to fulfill the precept of sanctifying the name of God at the expense of his life. Our Sages ordained that a Jew is enjoined to sacrifice his life rather than violate the three cardinal prohibitions of murder, idolatry, and immorality...This precept is based on the idea that man was created for the sole purpose of serving the Creator. Whoever is not willing to lay down his life for his master, is not a good servant.⁵

For a child of God, there is no greater privilege in life than to sanctify the Name of God in one's death. To live righteously by following Torah despite the threat of the persecutor, is truly setting apart the greatness of God so that all can see that He is worthy to follow. We turn to Leibowitz one last time on this subject because she has so many wonderful insights on the issue:

Throughout Jewish history this precept has been faithfully carried out by Jews, both individuals and communities, scholars and ordinary folk, from Hananya, Nishael, and Azarya, the ten martyrs comprising R. Akiva and his colleagues, right down to the loving, upright, and blameless ones, the holy congregations, who laid down their lives for the sanctification of the Divine Name in all ages.⁶

In keeping with the teaching of Torah, another Jewish Sage, Simon Peter, also teaches about sanctifying the name of God, only he adds a different twist. He says,

But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be Holy because I am holy.” But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Messiah suffered for you, leaving an example that you should follow in His steps. (1 Peter 1:15, 16; 2:20–21)

For the child of God, the sanctification of the Name of God is not an option. Both in our lives and in our deaths we are called to glorify the Name of Him who purchased us for Himself — with the precious blood of Messiah Yeshua. The sanctification of the name of God is part of our unique calling.

1 Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Leviticus*, 250.

2 C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1, book 3, 301.

3 Nehama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Leviticus*, 399.

4 *Ibid.*, 403.

5 *Ibid.*, 404–405.

6 *Ibid.*, 405.