**SALT – PARSHAT EMOR**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Emor begins with the prohibition of *tum’at kohanim*, which forbids *kohanim* from coming in direct contact with a human corpse. God introduces this command by instructing Moshe, “Speak to the *kohanim*, the sons of Aharon, and say to them: One may not defile himself to a deceased person among his nation.”

Many commentators noted the seeming redundancy in this verse, as God instructs Moshe to “speak to the *kohanim*” and then to “say to them…” Rashi, based on the Gemara (Yevamot 114a), famously explains this redundancy as implying that the adult *kohanim* must assume responsibility for the child *kohanim* in this regard (“*le-hazhir gedolim al ha-ketanim*”). Moshe was to instruct the *kohanim* both to avoid *tum’at meit* (the impurity resulting from contact with a corpse), and to ensure that their sons avoid *tum’at meit*. Ibn Ezra explains differently, suggesting that the phrase “*emor el ha-kohanim*” (“speak to the *kohanim*”)means that Moshe should teach the *kohanim* the series of laws presented in the previous section. The *kohanim* were to serve not only as ministers in the *Mishkan*, but also as the nation’s religious mentors and guides, and so they needed to master the Torah’s laws for the purpose of teaching and instructing the people. God therefore commanded Moshe, “*Emor el ha-kohanim*” – to impart to the *kohanim* the aforementioned laws, and then “*ve-amarta aleihem le-nefesh lo yitama*” – to warn them to avoid *tum’at kohanim*.

Rav Avraham Chaim of Zlotchov (*Orach Le-chaim*) finds in this verse an allusion to the tension that exists between the value of sociability, and the importance of protecting oneself from negative influences. The Rebbe of Zlotchov explains that God first commanded Moshe, “*Emor el ha-kohanim benei Aharon*” – to instruct the *kohanim* to be truly “the sons of Aharon,” following his example of kindness and love for people. Aharon is famously described as “a lover of peace, a pursue of peace, who loves people and brings them close to Torah” (Avot 1:12), and as someone who worked tirelessly and creatively to bring peace among people (*Avot De-Rabbi Natan* 12:3). He did not avoid social interaction for the sake of spiritual protection and focusing on his personal growth; to the contrary, an integral part of his piety was his intensive engagement with people in order to help, influence, inspire and contribute. Moshe was thus to exhort the *kohanim* to be “*benei Aharon*,” to follow this example of social engagement, to not think that their unique spiritual status necessitates withdrawal from communal life.

However, God then instructed Moshe, “*Ve-amarta aleihem le-nefesh lo yitama*” – to warn the *kohanim* to avoid “impurity” as they interact with other people. Friendly social interaction is a vital part of religious life, but it poses the risk of exposure to negative influences. And thus alongside the exhortation to be “*benei Aharon*,” to follow Aharon’s example of social engagement, we are instructed to make a special effort to preserve our “purity” and maintain our standards of religious commitment even as we interact with those who do not adhere to these standards. The double command of “*emor…ve-amarta*” alludes to the dual obligation to be socially engaged, on the one hand, and, on the other, to exercise caution to avoid “impurity,” to ensure not to embrace the bad habits and improper behaviors of the people with whom we interact.

Sunday

Parashat Emor concludes with the disturbing story of the *megadeif* (“blasphemer”), who blasphemed God publicly in the middle of the Israelite camp, for which he was sentenced to execution.

Rashi (24:10) famously brings two views from the Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 32:3) as to what led this man to blasphemy. One view links this episode to the preceding verses, which present the *mitzva* of *lechem ha-panim* – the “showbread” which was placed on the table in the *Mishkan*. The bread was produced weekly – it was baked on Friday and placed on the table on Shabbat, and it remained there until the next Shabbat, when it was removed, eaten by the *kohanim*, and then replaced by the newly baked bread. According to one opinion in the Midrash, the *megadeif* ridiculed the *lechem ha-panim*, finding it absurd that bread should be left out for an entire week to become stale. In God’s palace, he said, it would be fitting for the bread to be baked fresh each day, rather than be produced only once a week after the old bread had lost its freshness.

Later writers raised the question of how to reconcile this view with the Gemara’s comment (Chagiga 26b and elsewhere) that the *lechem ha-panim* miraculously remained fresh throughout the week. The Gemara relates that on the *regalim* (pilgrimage festivals), when the people would assemble in the courtyard outside the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, the *kohanim* would lift the table and show the bread to the people, drawing their attention to this miracle. The Ritva (Yoma 21a) explains that the people would see steam rising from the *lechem ha-panim* – even though it had been baked several days earlier. The question thus arises, if the *lechem ha-panim* visibly remained fresh all week, then why did the *megadeif* ridicule the “stale bread” in the Temple?

The *Imrei Emet* (cited by his son, Rav Simcha Bunim Alter of Ger, in *Lev Simcha*) answered that the people’s impression of the *lechem ha-panim* depended upon their perspective. Those who generally viewed things positively would see the steam emanating from the week-old bread; those who preferred cynicism and negativity saw stale bread. The *Imrei Emet* boldly proposed that this might be the meaning of the term “*lechem ha-panim*” (literally, “face bread”). The word “*panim*,” he explained, could refer to two different “faces.” The bread in the *Mikdash* represented the notion of perspective, that the same object could be viewed and assessed from drastically different angles and viewpoints. One person could see the *lechem ha-panim* as nothing but stale bread, and another could see loaves with a miraculous freshness.

According to this explanation, the story of the *megadeif* perhaps teaches us to look at the people and the world around us from a positive outlook, so we can discern and appreciate their “freshness” – their beauty and value. As in the case of the *lechem ha-panim*, there are spectacular “miracles” occurring all around us. There are so many people who are “fresh” and inspiring despite all that they’ve been through, which could have left them “stale” and broken. There are so many events which could have resulted in “stale bread,” in grief and sorrow, but ended happily. We must try to keep our eyes open to see the “miracles,” to see all that is good in the world, so we can serve God with joy and enthusiasm, and avoid cynicism and negativity.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Emor commands that a kohen with a “mum” – physical defect – may not perform the service in the Beit Ha-mikdash, and that an animal with a “mum” may not be offered as a sacrifice. One of the defects listed as disqualifying a kohen or an animal is a broken bone. The Torah disqualifies a kohen with a “shever ragel or shever yad” – broken hand or leg (21:19), and also disqualifies an animal that is “shavur” – “broken” (22:22).

*Torat Kohanim* (to 21:19) posits that in truth, this disqualification is one and the same in *kohanim* and in animals; both are disqualified on account of the same kind of injury. As for the different terms used in these two contexts, *Torat Kohanim* notes that the phrase “*shever ragel or shever yad*” seems to suggest that only a broken arm or leg disqualifies a *kohen* or animal, whereas the term “*shavur*” implies that any broken bone constitutes a disqualifying defect. The Torah uses both these expressions, *Torat Kohanim* explains, to instruct that all outwardly discernible fractures disqualify a *kohen* or animal. Broken arms and legs are readily visible, and all similar breaks likewise render a *kohen* unfit for service and an animal unfit for a sacrifice. The Torah therefore specified broken arms and legs, to limit this disqualification to visible fractures. *Torat Kohanim* establishes that this excludes a broken rib, which is not outwardly recognizable.

Rav Shaul Yedidya of Modzitz, in *Yisa Berakha*, offers an insight into the symbolic meaning of this disqualification. A famous verse in Tehillim (34:19) states, “*Karov Hashem le-nishberei leiv*” – “God is close to the brokenhearted.” Similarly, David proclaims later in Tehillim (51:19), “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken, subdued heart – God will not scorn.” Citing his father (the *Divrei Yisrael*), the Rebbe of Modzitz notes that these verses speak of only the heart’s “brokenness,” and not of visible brokenness that is manifest on the body. As human beings, our hearts will occasionally feel broken, pained by feelings of remorse, shame, loss, disappointment and fear, and God compassionately hears our prayers expressing these emotions. However, at least ideally, only our hearts should be broken, and not the rest of our beings. We are to strive not to wear our pain on our faces, to remain pleasant and amicable even in times of distress when our hearts feel broken. And thus the Torah designated an outwardly discernible break as a “*mum*” – because when we come before God to serve Him, we are to come with a broken heart, but with outward joy and serenity.

Of course, during times of personal tragedy, it is expected that we mourn and grieve, even externally. Parashat Emor begins with the exceptional law permitting – and requiring – *kohanim* to tend to their family members’ funerals and mourn, despite the prohibition against *kohanim* coming in contact with human corpses. The Torah acknowledges that even the *kohanim*, the nation’s spiritual elite, need to disrupt their usual spiritual devotion when personal tragedy strikes, and to observe a mourning period. (The lone exception is the *kohen gadol*, who is not permitted to expose himself to *tum’a* even upon the death of an immediate family member.) Generally, however, the Torah urges us to strive to conceal our broken hearts. Even when we feel anxious or distressed, we should try to keep our visible “bones” whole and not broken, and retain our composure. We must endeavor to engage warmly and cheerily with our fellowman despite our struggles and pain, as part of our obligation to help create an upbeat atmosphere of camaraderie and friendship, and of joy in the service of our Creator.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Emor (23:15) introduces the *mitzva* of *sefirat ha-omer*, which requires counting each day from the offering of the *omer* sacrifice on the 16th of Nissan until the 49th day, the day before Shavuot.

The Ramban, in what has become a famous passage in his Talmud commentary (Kiddushin 33b-34a), surprisingly includes *sefirat ha-omer* in his list of *mitzvot asei she-lo ha-zman gerama* – affirmative commands that are not bound to a specific time. The Mishna (Kiddushin 29a) establishes the general rule that women are exempt from *mitzvot* *asei* which apply only at specific times (though with certain exceptions), and the Ramban presents a list of *mitzvot asei* which do not fall under this category, and which are thus binding upon both men and women alike. He includes *sefirat ha-omer* in this list, without providing any explanation for why this *mitzva* is to be regarded as *she-lo ha-zman gerama* – not bound to a specific time-frame. Seemingly, *sefirat ha-omer* is a classic example of a time-bound obligation, as it requires counting 49 specific days starting from the 16th of Nissan.

One approach that was advanced by a number of writers (such as Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank, *Mikraei Kodesh – Pesach*, vol. 2, 67:2) to explain the Ramban’s position is that the *sefirat ha-omer* obligation is created not by a specific time, but rather by an event. The Ramban perhaps felt that when the Mishnaspeaks of a “time-bound” *mitzva*, it refers to a *mitzva* which is directly a function of a particular time period, meaning, a time of day or a calendar date. The *mitzva* of *sefirat ha-omer*, however, is a function of the offering of the *omer* sacrifice, as the Torah states, “You shall count for yourselves…from the day you bring the waved *omer*…” As a practical matter, of course, the obligation of *sefirat ha-omer* will always take effect on the 16th of Nissan and continue for the next 49 days. Fundamentally, however, this is a *mitzva* which is a function not of a particular time, but of an event, and it therefore does not fall under the category of *mitzvat asei she-ha-zman gerama*.

These *Acharonim* suggest applying this theory to the controversy regarding the status of the *sefirat ha-omer* obligation after the destruction of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. The Gemara in Masekhet Menachot (66a) cites Ameimar as stating that *sefirat ha-omer* is observed nowadays “*zekher le-Mikdash*,” to commemorate the counting that was performed in the times of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. Accordingly, the majority of *Rishonim* understood that the Torah obligation of *sefirat ha-omer* applies only in the times of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, when the *omer* sacrifice was brought, and nowadays we observe this *mitzva* commemoratively. The Rambam, however, in *Hilkhot Temidin U-musafin* (7:24), writes that the Torah command of *sefirat ha-omer* applies in all time periods, implying that even in the absence of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, this obligation is binding on the level of Torah obligation. In this same passage, the Rambam writes that women are exempt from the *mitzva* of counting the *omer*. Perhaps, it has been suggested, these two questions – as to whether the Torah obligation applies only during the times of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, and whether women are included in the obligation – are interdependent. If we view the *mitzva* of *sefirat ha-omer* as a function of the *omer* sacrifice, then it stands to reason that the Torah obligation does not apply after the Temple’s destruction, when this offering is not brought. And, as discussed, there is then room to argue that this *mitzva* does not fall under the category of *mitzvat asei she-ha-zman gerama*, because it is a function not of a specific time period, but rather of the offering of the sacrifice. As such, women would be exempt from this *mitzva*. The Rambam, who maintains that the Torah obligation applies even after the Temple’s destruction, clearly felt that this *mitzva* is not integrally connected to the *omer* sacrifice, and is simply a requirement to count each day starting from the 16th of Nissan. Naturally, then, he rules that women are exempt from this *mitzva*, as it constitutes a *mitzvat asei she-ha-zman gerama*.

The accepted view, however, is that *sefirat ha-omer* is observed today commemoratively, as the Torah obligation does not apply without the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, but it is also accepted that women are exempt from *sefirat ha-omer.* The likely explanation is that according to the accept opinion, the definition of *mitzvat asei she-ha-zman gerama* is based upon the practical reality of specific periods when the *mitzva* takes effect. Even if *sefirat ha-omer* is integrally bound to the *omer* sacrifice, it can still be regarded as a *mitzvat asei she-ha-zman gerama*, since it does, after all, take effect only at specific times. Therefore, it is certainly possible to maintain, on the one hand, that the Torah obligation of *sefirat ha-omer* does not apply nowadays, and, on the other, that women are exempt from this *mitzva*.

Wednesday

The Gemara in Masekhet Menachot (66a) notes a debate among the *Amoraim* regarding the *mitzva* of *sefirat ha-omer* – the counting of the 49 days from the 16th of Nissan (the second day of Pesach) through the day before Shavuot. In the academy of Rav Ashi, the Gemara relates, the rabbis counted both days and weeks; on each day, they mentioned the number of days that had passed, as well as the number of weeks. (On the 18th night, for example, they would count, “Two weeks and four days.”) Ameimar, however, counted only the days and not the weeks, explaining, “*Zeikher la-Mikdash hu*” – the counting is purely commemorative, a reminder of the counting of the *omer* in the times of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. It seems that in Ameimar’s view, the Torah obligation of *sefirat ha-omer* applies only in the times of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, when the *omer* sacrifice was offered on the 16th of Nissan, and this *mitzva* is observed nowadays, after the Temple’s destruction, merely as a commemoration. Therefore, it is treated less stringently, and it suffices to count the days without counting the weeks.

The Rambam, in *Hilkhot Temidin U-musafin* (7:24), indicates that he does not accept Ameimar’s position, and maintains that *sefirat ha-omer* is required even after the Temple’s destruction on the level of Torah obligation. The *Kessef Mishneh* explains that the Rambam understood that the *Amoraim* debated this precise question – whether the Torah obligation applies only when the *omer* sacrifice is offered. Rav Ashi, who counted both the days and the weeks, maintained that the *sefirat ha-omer* obligation stands independent of the *omer* sacrifice, and thus applies even after the Temple’s destruction, such that we must count both the days and the weeks, and the Rambam accepted this position.

Rav Chaim of Brisk (“stencil,” Menachot), as well his son, Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik (*Chiddushei Ha-Griz*), explained the Rambam’s position differently. They posited that the question concerning the status of the *sefirat ha-omer* obligation nowadays hinges on the halachic status of the area of the *Beit Ha-mikdash* after the Temple’s destruction. According to their analysis, the Rambam agrees that the *mitzva* of *sefirat ha-omer* is integrally linked to the offering of the *omer* sacrifice. After all, he presents the laws of *sefirat ha-omer* in *Hilkhot Temidin U-musafin*, amidst his discussion of the *omer* sacrifice. This arrangement would certainly appear to reflect the perspective viewing *sefirat ha-omer* as part of the process of the *omer* sacrifice on the 16th of Nissan (which concludes with the *shetei ha-lechem* offering brought on Shavuot, after the seven weeks of counting). However, Rav Chaim explained, the Rambam felt that *sefirat ha-omer* requires not the actual offering of the *omer* sacrifice, but the possibility of offering the *omer* sacrifice. Now the Rambam, in *Hilkhot Beit Ha-bechira* (6:15-16), famously rules that the halakhic sanctity of the territory of the *Beit Ha-mikdash* endures permanently, even after the destruction of the *Mikdash*. Therefore, in principle, as the Rambam there discusses, it is possible to offer sacrifices even nowadays. Various factors make it impractical to offer sacrifices in our time, but fundamentally, sacrifices can be offered on the site of the *Beit Ha-mikdash* even when the *Beit Ha-mikdash* does not stand. For this reason, the Rambam maintained that *sefirat ha-omer* remains obligatory on the level of Torah law even in the absence of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, since the *omer* sacrifice could, in principle, be offered on the 16th of Nissan. The *Amoraim*’s discussion in Masekhet Menachot, however, followed the position taken by some views (see, for example, Megilla 10a) that the halakhic sanctity of the *Beit Ha-mikdash* no longer exists after the Temple’s destruction. These *Amoraim* therefore maintained that *sefirat ha-omer* nowadays is not required on the level of Torah obligation, and is performed commemoratively. Accepting this premise, they then debated the question whether our commemorative counting must follow the same format as the Biblical counting – with both the days and the weeks being mentioned – or if it suffices to count only the days. The Rambam, however, did not accept this entire discussion, as he follows the opinion that the halakhic sanctity of the area of the Temple remains intact even today, and he therefore ruled that the Torah obligation of *sefirat ha-omer* still applies.

Thursday

Parashat Emor begins with God instructing Moshe, “Speak to the *kohanim*, the sons of Aharon, and say to them: One may not defile himself to a deceased person among his nation” – introducing the prohibition of *tum’at kohanim*, which forbids the *kohanim* from coming in direct contact with a human corpse.

The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 26:8) takes note of the seeming redundancy in this verse, as God instructs Moshe to “speak to the *kohanim*…and say to them” (“*emor…ve-amarta aleihem*”). To explain these two expressions, the Midrash comments that one instruction refers to the general rule, and the second, to the exception. God commanded Moshe to inform the *kohanim* of the prohibition against coming in contact with a human corpse, and then to inform them of the exceptional provision allowing handling a body in the case of a *meit mitzva* – a body with nobody to bury it. If a *kohen* happens to see a body that has been left unburied, or is in a position to bury somebody with no family members or friends to care for the burial, then the *kohen* is allowed and in fact obligated to bury the body, as the needs of a *meit mitzva* override the prohibition of *tum’at kohanim*. Therefore, God instructed Moshe, “*emor…ve-amarta*” – to speak to the *kohanim* twice: first to present the general rule, and then to present to them the exception to this rule, when handling a dead body is not only allowed, but a sacred religious act.

As committed Torah Jews, we must carefully listen to all the different “*amirot*” (“statements”) that the Torah makes, the wide range of instructions that it gives for how to live our lives. The Torah’s system of obligations, prohibitions, values and ideals is broad and complex, often featuring competing values that need to be carefully weighed against one another. The Midrash here teaches us that listening to one “*amira*” (“statement”) is not sufficient, because an “*amira*” might be qualified or counterbalanced by a different “*amira*.” We must have the patience, sophistication and open mind to listen to and integrate all the Torah’s many different “*amirot*,” rather than oversimplify Torah by reducing its complex code of law and values into just one or several straightforward concepts.

Rav Yehuda Amital *zt”l* suggested that this might be the significance of *Benei Yisrael*’s pronouncement of “*na’aseh ve-nishma*” (“we will do and we will hear”) at the time of *Matan Torah* (Shemot 24:7). He explained that *Benei Yisrael* committed to continue “listening” even after “doing,” pledging that they will always realize that there is more to learn and understand, that the information they’ve received does not encompass the totality of the Torah’s broad, complex system. The Torah speaks to us with many different voices, conveying numerous different “*amirot*,” and we must therefore avoid the lure of oversimplification and be attentive to all the various principles by which we are to live our lives. Even after “*na’aseh*” – after we’ve learned and obeyed one precept – we must continue “listening” and seeking to understand the full range of the Torah’s demands and expectations of us as the Almighty’s servants.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Emor (21:8) commands giving respect to the *kohanim*: “You shall make him sacred, for he offers the bread of your G-d; he shall be sacred to you, for I, the Lord who makes you sacred, am sacred.” As Rashi cites from the Gemara in Masekhet Gittin (59b), this verse requires granting *kohanim* certain honors, such as the privilege of receiving the first *aliya* to the Torah in the synagogue.

A number of writers noted the seeming redundancy in this verse, as God first commands, “*Ve-kidashto*” – “You shall make him sacred,” and then states, “he shall be sacred to you.” A remarkable explanation of these two phrases is offered by Rav Nechemya Yosef Kurnitzer (*Chiddushei Rabbeinu Yosef Nechemya*, Parashat Emor). He writes that the initial command of “*ve-kidashto*” requires the people to give a *kohen* respect despite the mistakes he will invariably make as a youngster. Like all people, *kohanim* are likely to engage in inappropriate behaviors during their youth. The Torah was thus concerned that the people would publicly denounce and ridicule a young *kohen* for his misconduct, such that even when he matures, he would be unable to fill his role as a spiritual guide and figurehead, as he will have already been labelled as a delinquent. Rather than cynically castigate a *kohen* for his youthful follies, we are required to continue respecting him, trusting that as he matures, he will grow into the model of religious devotion which he is to become. The *mitzva* of “*ve-kidashto*,” according to this explanation, requires the people to respect young *kohanim* despite their less impressive moments, and to allow these youngsters the opportunity to grow, mature, develop and become worthy of the lofty role assigned to them. The Torah then assures, “*kadosh yiheyeh lakh*” – “he shall be sacred to you,” that if a young *kohen* who has made mistakes is given such an opportunity, he will, indeed, become “sacred” as he is expected to.

We mustn’t rush to judge and scorn those who have erred, particularly those who have acted wrongly in their younger years. It is precisely by expressing to people our confidence in their potential for greatness that they feel driven and motivated to work towards maximizing that potential. If “*ve-kidashto*” – we treat people with respect despite their youthful blunders, then “*kadosh yiheyeh lakh*” – they will be more likely to move past their mistakes and become the outstanding individuals that they are capable of becoming.