

(Dvar Torah continued from the front page...)

Temple” which Rabbi Yehudah takes to mean that under no circumstances may the kohen gadol leave the Temple compound. As long as he is serving in his role as *kohen gadol*, he must remain quarantined in the Temple. The *kohen gadol* emerges from R. Yehudah’s ruling a tragic figure. This one individual has to protect himself so that he can serve his people and in doing so gives up on one of the basic rights assumed by all, the right to bury a loved one.

Over the course of the Torah readings of the past several months I have been struck over and over by pieces of Torah which had felt irrelevant that have suddenly taken on new meaning and resonance. In general the laws of *tumah* and *tahara* that are a protection from contagion - physical or spiritual, are newly relatable as we are all taking extreme precautions to protect ourselves and the ones around us from coronavirus. The account of the Exodus from Egypt in which families are told to shut themselves in their homes to protect themselves from the *negef*, attack of the plague of the killing of the first born sounded strikingly familiar as we all sat on Seder night in our homes with the doors shut. Here too I am struck with the way in which the passage gains new depth in our current reality.

Sadly, many now know what it feels like, for our loved ones to die alone with tiny funerals. We know what it is like to not be able to leave our homes to protect ourselves. This is especially true of people in service, medical professionals and other essential workers, who must live in fear and guilt of being absent from their loved ones.

These legal prohibitions in Parshat Emor have a parallel in the Biblical narrative as well. In Parshat Shemini Aharon was confronted with the sudden death of his sons, Nadav and Avihu. Aharon’s response to the tragedy is famously, silence, “Aharon was silent” (Lev 10:3). We do not know exactly what Aharon’s silence was about but now, more than ever we can hear in it a deep loneliness. Perhaps Aharon, like so many of us today, felt that in addition to profound sadness at the loss of his loved ones, he also was alone in his mourning with no one to comfort him and no one to talk to about his loss, closed off as he was inside the sanctuary.

This story may not be one of comfort, but drawing a connection between the kohen gadol, Aharon, and our own experience, could give us a chance to engage more precisely with the emotional challenges we face, with the ways in which challenges we are accustomed to confronting may be deepened by the loneliness and isolation. It is also up to us to recognize the difficulties faced by others and to reach out, in whatever way we can, in order to comfort them.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parshat Emor

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Annual | (Lev. 21:1-24:23): Etz Hayim p. 717; Hertz p. 513
Triennial | (Lev. 21:1--22:16): Etz Hayim p. 717; Hertz p. 513
Haftarah | (Ezekiel 44:15-31): Etz Hayim p. 735; Hertz p. 528

Rabbi Shoshana Cohen

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Last week as Israel celebrated Yom HaZikaron with a lockdown, families were told that they would not be able to visit the graves of their fallen loved ones. For many this was the first time in decades that they left their loved ones “alone” on this day. Unfortunately this scene of empty cemeteries and sparsely attended funerals has been in the news all around the world as death tolls from COVID-19 rise. Questions about saying kaddish and sitting shiva remotely have surfaced since the beginning of the crisis. Parshat Emor begins with the laws pertaining to priests, with special laws for the high priest, the *kohen gadol* who has been anointed with oil. One of the limitations put on these functionaries is their ability to participate in the mourning of their families. A regular *kohen* is allowed to participate only in the burial of his immediate relatives and the *kohen gadol* may not even bury his own parents so as not to become impure and unable to serve in the Temple. Mishnah Sanhedrin 2:1 picks up where the Torah left off and elaborates on these restrictions. Rabbi Meir seems to limit the prohibition by saying that the *kohen gadol* can take part, in a modified way, in the funeral procession of his close relatives. R.

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Yehudah, in contrast, takes a more stringent approach. In verse 21:12 “he should not leave the

D’var Haftarah: To Judge the Judge

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, From the Archives

Ostensibly Ezekiel’s message in the haftarah is part of a larger vision of the role of priests in the restored Temple. Ezekiel, who prophesied soon after the destruction of the first Temple, envisioned a priesthood with expanded responsibilities and regulations. He clearly saw the kohanim as both the spiritual and the temporal leadership of the nation. The kohanim were accorded, among their many roles, judicial responsibility: “In lawsuits, too, it is they who shall act as judges, they shall decide them (qere: yishpetuhu) in accordance with My rules.” (Ezekiel 44:24)

This translation is based on what we call the “qere” or “read tradition” of the Biblical text. It is to be contrasted with the “ketiv” or “written tradition” of the text. The “ketiv” represents the text as it is found written in the Bible itself. The “qere”, on the other hand, is a parallel tradition of how the text is to be read. It is usually found in the margins of the Biblical text. The “pshat” or plain meaning of the text that Jews accept as authoritative usually follows the “qere” reading. Consequently, the verse quoted above, refers to the judicial responsibilities of the priests as leaders of the people.

Rabbi Meir Simcha Hacohen from Dvinsk, the prominent 19th-20th century Lithuanian Talmudist, chose, however, to interpret the “ketiv” tradition of this text. Instead of reading the text as “they shall decide them”, he adopts the reading “and be judged” (ketiv: v’shaphtuhu). According to this interpretation the verse reads: “In a lawsuit, they too shall stand trial, and they shall be judged according to my rules.” This leads him to discuss the idea that no legal system should hold its leaders to a different standard of laws. Rather, when they need to be judged they should be tried by the same standards as everyone else. (See Meshech Hochmah Parshat Emor) This interpretation conforms to the following teaching from the Mishnah: “A High Priest (kohen gadol) may judge and be judged.” (Sanhedrin 2:1) The Jewish tradition holds its leadership responsible not only as leaders but also as human beings. Position does not carry with it exemption from the consequences of the law. Rather, each of us is responsible for his/her actions, no matter what position one holds.

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Counting Our Days?

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Text: Vayikra 23:10-16

(10) When you come into the land that I am about to give you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring an Omer, first of your harvest, to the Kohen... (14) And bread and roast grain and fresh ears you shall not eat until this very day, until you bring your God’s offering... (15) And you shall count for you from the morrow of the sabbath, from the day you bring the elevation Omer, seven whole weeks shall they be. (16) Until the morrow of the seventh sabbath you shall count fifty days, and you shall bring forward a new grain offering to the LORD.

- The first of the harvest is to be brought before God. What might be the reason for this?
- Why should we not eat of the new harvest before bringing an Omer? (a dry biblical measurement, about a day’s worth of food for a person.)
- From the time of bringing the first of the grain we count time (known as Sefirat HaOmer which lasts from the second night of Pesach until Shavuot). How long do we count for? Why do you think that we count?
- When we get to the end of the counting, we bring a new grain offering. Looking at the text, what frames the counting? Why do you think that we count the days between these events?

Commentary: HaKtav VeHaKabbalah Vayikra 23:15

You shall count for you – “for you” is not an unnecessary addition... but rather this is the essence of this text, and it comes to instruct that the counting of these seven weeks is not for their quantity... but rather for checking the quality of the behavior of a person in all the details of one’s actions... so that one will not be careful only about their number, but will take great care of every detail of this period... with all of them one will be careful to be complete with the LORD.

- The comment suggests that the essence is the quality of one’s behavior. How does the quantity that seems to be measured in counting affect the quality?
- What is the value of counting both days and weeks?
- Do you think that in counting the Omer we count towards something or away from it?
- Try to think of a period in which you counted time. What did the counting make you cognizant of?

We welcome your comments: torahsparks@uscj.org