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בס"ד

Parashat Emor Part I

1. Brief Overview of Leviticus 21–27

After the ordinances addressed to all Israelites designed to sanctify their lives in all realms of human behavior, *Parashat Emor* (21–24) follows with a code of law for those already “sanctified,” the priests. Charged with the spiritual leadership of a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6), they were expected to comport in their personal lives on a higher level of sanctity than their fellow Israelites. The *parasha* then proceeds to regulations pertaining to sanctuary service and partaking of priestly perquisites, emphasizing the importance of purity and banning service by blemished priests or with blemished animals. After several general regulations it turns to that aspect of sanctuary service that we may term legislation of “sanctified time,” that concerning the holy days of the year.

The latter begins with the Sabbath and follows with details concerning Passover, Shabuoth, Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Shemini Asseret. These days are termed מִזְמַנֵי ה' מְקֻדְשֵׁי קִדְשׁ (“designated times of Hashem, declarations of holiness” [Lev. 23:4]). The phrase מְקֻדְשֵׁי קִדְשׁ has also been translated “holy gatherings” (Koren), “sacred occasions” (NJPS) and “occasions for reading from Holy Scripture” (Rabbi S. D. Sassoon). We are informed that on each of these occasions the assembly is required to offer sacrifices to G-d although for the most part specific details are not provided, a function that Numbers 28–29 serves.

Next are instructions concerning service associated with two of the furnishings of the holy section of the Tabernacle, the kindling of the lampstand and the procedures for preparing the bread of display that is placed on the golden table. The formulation of the lampstand verses is practically identical to what it was in the earlier attestation of lampstand regulations in Exodus 27:20-21. There, the presence of a passage

describing a priestly service, any service, appeared to be premature. It followed instructions for construction of Tabernacle artifacts and was at the beginning of a section that was going to prescribe the regulations for priestly garments. The passage was likely transmitted or placed there to introduce the section that was to deal with priestly matters, to serve as an opening “bookmark” for the section, as we discussed in our study on *Parashat Tesavveh Part I*. Accordingly, its earlier attestation did not serve the primary purpose it serves in its present location.

Service associated with the third article of the Holy section, the incense altar, is not mentioned in our context, an absence that has fostered much speculation. It should be recalled that the incense altar was a “late” addition to the Tabernacle program, as we discussed in our study on *Parashat Ki Tissa Part I*.

At this point, the narrative of the blasphemer appears (Lev. 24:10-23). One wonders why the story of an individual who cursed and rejected Hashem, and whose punishment was to be put to death, was placed where it is. He represents the negation of the covenantal enterprise, whose exposition was almost completed. Did it occur at this chronological point in the transmittal of instructions to Moses? (It would then seem to be part of a phenomenon that when the nation is on the threshold of completing a milestone some episode disturbs the tranquility. The golden calf occurred just before Moses returned with the tablets, Nadab and Abihu’s “strange fire” and death occurred on the Tabernacle dedication day, and now this.)

Perhaps the blasphemer narrative occurred at some time during the transmittal of Leviticus legislation and was placed where it is, at the end of the law section, because there was no really appropriate location for it. Although there is one more segment of laws to the Holiness Code (*Parashat Behar*), the conclusion of

that segment was not at all suitable for insertion of an extraneous subject. The last verses of *Parashat Behar* were clearly designed to close the “envelope” that was begun with the beginning of the Decalogue, as we will explain in our study on that *parasha*. The final chapter of Leviticus (27) is a type of appendix – and it surely is inappropriate to conclude the book on the note of the blasphemer – so the present location is essentially the last spot available to incorporate the law associated with the case of the blasphemer.

Parashat Behar (Lev. 25) follows with laws concerning the seventh year cessation of agricultural labor and the Jubilee year. These laws are formulated as extensions of the Sabbath principle and invested with a significant degree of sanctity. With them, the legislation of the Holiness Code and Leviticus’ primary program concludes. Then, in accordance with contemporaneous covenant protocol,* come the blessings and curses. This concludes the finalization details of the Sinai Covenant that were begun in Exodus 24 and interrupted so as to attach the Tabernacle with the Leviticus legislation to the Decalogue and the Mount Sinai lawgiving, enriching and expanding it. The final two verses of chapter 26 conclude the long covenant section. Leviticus’ final chapter (27), as mentioned, is a type of appendix, and its final verse concludes the book. (See our study on *Parashat Behar Part I.*)

2. Parashat Emor Laws Concerning the Priesthood

Only Aaron and his male descendants (a branch of the tribe of Levi) were sanctioned to serve as priests in the sanctuary. Levites were assistants. The Torah spells out a number of strictures that apply only to the priests. In addition, all priests were required to meet certain standards of bodily fitness to perform service in the sanctuary. Concerning the high priest, several strictures above and beyond those of ordinary priests apply to him.

Following is a listing of the Leviticus 21–22 categories of law relevant to priests with some comments:

1) Priests are prohibited from having any contact with a dead body (a cause of major ritual defilement) except as concerns the members of one’s immediate family: mother, father, son, daughter, brother and

unmarried sister. The high priest is forbidden to become defiled even in the case of the death of his mother or father. It is this law that Moses invoked for Aaron and his two remaining sons upon the death of Nadab and Abihu. In that case the sons were required to abide by the law normally pertaining only to the high priest because, in order for them to have been established as priests, the oil of anointment was placed upon them. Subsequently, priests were to be inducted by dint of birth. (In coming studies we will discuss the underlying concept involved in priests being prohibited from having contact with the dead and the issue of an ordinary priest becoming defiled for his deceased wife.)

2) Priests are not to engage in bodily disfigurement or mutilation, namely, making bald spots on the head, shaving a *pe’ah* (edge or corner) of the beard and gashing the flesh. These three prohibitions are also legislated elsewhere in the Torah, albeit with differences. The Sifra, taking such variations as complementary, each formulation shedding light on another through distinctive nuances and all part of one grand harmonized lawgiving, has much to say on how our cases should be understood. In accordance with Deuteronomy 14:1, which prohibits all Israelites from making bald spots “between your eyes for a dead person,”** our prohibition to the priests regarding the making of “bald spots on their heads” is taken as applicable to all Israelites and limited to a mourning context. Regarding use of the phrase “between your eyes,” it may have been intended to reflect the individual’s motive, intending it “as a sign,” in this case, of mourning. This would be similar to the case of *tefillin*, which are to be bound “on your hand” as a sign and placed “between your eyes” (Exod. 13:9, 16; Deut. 6:8; 11:18), albeit the sign is of commitment to G-d.

Our passage’s prohibition to the priests of shaving a *pe’ah* is expressed with the clause וּפְאַת זְקָנָם לֹא יגַלְחוּ (“The corners of their beards they shall not shave” [Lev. 21:5]). A similar prohibition addressed to all Israelites was stated in Leviticus 19:27, formulated with וְלֹא תִשְׁחִית אֶת פְּאַת זְקִנְךָ (“do not destroy the corner of your beard”). Together, they yield a prohibition applicable to all Israelites against “shaving that has the characteristic of destruction, namely, with a razor,” while permitting shaving with scissors (*b. Mak. 21a*).

Leviticus 19:28 also forbids “gashing one’s flesh” – a law addressed to all Israelites and specifically formulated as a mourning practice performed for a dead person. Both these Leviticus verses employ a form of the stem *שָׁחַט* for “gashing.” In Deuteronomy 14:1, a similar law is articulated but with use of a different term, *לֹא תִתְגַּדְדוּ*. Some translate *שָׁחַט* as “scratching” and *תִּתְגַּדְדוּ* as “gashing.” In the Talmud (*b. Mak.* 21a), some are of the opinion that *seritah* is performed by hand and *gedidah* through use of an instrument (as exemplified in 1 Kings 18:28), while others consider both terms as carrying both meanings. Rabbi David Z. Hoffman defined *seritah* as intended to make a sign on the body while *gedidah* produces a wound. In any event, the *halakhic* consensus considers the law resulting from all three sources as applicable to all Israelites, whether done by hand or instrument and restricted to when associated with a death.

The backdrop to these prohibitions seems to be the role actions such as these played in pagan practices in ancient Canaan, as illustrated with the *Baal* prophets (1 Kings 18:28). In our *Parashat Re’eh* study on Deuteronomy 14:1 we will discuss additional pertinent considerations.

Since the Torah elsewhere mandates these laws for all Israelites, why were they here specifically addressed to the priests? Ibn Ezra assumes that our context teaches that while in violation of any of these three prohibitions the priest is disqualified from performing sanctuary service. Hoffman speculates that these rituals had previously been particularly popular among the priests in association with mourning, considered part of their practice, perhaps responsibility, so the Torah explicitly cautioned the priests regarding them. Had the ban been only a general one to all Israelites, the priests might have thought that when performed by them exclusively for mourning, it would be permitted.

3) Priests are prohibited from marrying harlots, desecrated women (Talmud: those born from a priestly marriage violation, namely, from a priest who fathered a daughter from one of the banned categories of this verse) and divorcees. An ordinary priest is permitted to marry a widow. The high priest may only marry a virgin.

The prohibitions for a priest to marry a harlot or a woman born from desecration of the priesthood are self-explanatory. The problem with divorcees may be that such women often conducted themselves with lower standards of behavior. It should be borne in mind that divorce seems to have usually resulted from sexual misconduct, behavior antithetical to holiness. In Deuteronomy 24:1, where the Torah describes a case of divorce, it states (in what is generally understood as an aside, not critical to the law being legislated there), “for he found in her a matter of ‘*ervah*,’” that is, something related to sexual misconduct.

The law regarding divorcees may have been prompted by the fact that divorced women often bring a great deal of residual baggage from their previous phases of life into their new marriages. The Torah anticipates that in one way or another such a wife would interfere with the priest’s achieving the high standards of holiness of which he is capable. The presence of the former husband and children may also be complicating factors.

Some speculate that this law was necessary because a husband suspicious of his wife turns to the priest for counseling or resolution of his case (see Num. 5). For a priest to serve as a peacemaker or counselor with integrity he should be free of any unbecoming ulterior motive concerning his personal interest in the woman. Others consider marriage to a divorcee as beneath a priest’s dignity, plain and simple.

4) All Israelites have a responsibility to “sanctify” the priests. To sanctify a priest means to help him fulfill his calling, to instruct him when appropriate, to relate to him in such a manner that it increases his awareness of holiness and his holy status. It also refers to treating him with the respect consistent with his position of serving in the sphere of the holy. In this spirit the sages expounded *v’qidashto* (“and sanctify him” [Lev. 21:8]) as instructing non-priests to provide priests the privilege in religious matters of “opening first [to read from the Torah], blessing first and taking a choice portion first” (*b. Ned.* 62a-b). In this manner he is constantly reminded of his lofty responsibility.

5) A priest’s daughter who engages in harlotry (Talmud: adultery) is put to death by burning. Her behavior is described as “desecrating her father” (Lev.

21:9). Children's actions reflect on their parents; hence, she is punished more severely than someone else behaving in a similar manner. Although the Torah only provided this one explicit particular of a higher expectation from the children of a priest, the point is clearly applicable – aside from the punishment – to all areas of personal conduct. The Torah is understood as placing responsibility on children to respect the spiritual leadership position of their parents in their personal comportment.

6) A physically blemished priest may not serve in the sanctuary. He does, however, share in priestly emoluments. The physically “unfit” priest includes one who is blind, lame, a hunchback or dwarf or is disfigured or blemished in one of a number of specified ways. He is excluded from performing sanctuary service at the altar or any sanctuary service that involves entering the holy areas (Lev. 21:16-24). In the ancient Near East such disqualification was widespread and generally much more comprehensive than it is in Torah legislation. Here, the blemished priest remains a priest, is permitted in sanctuary precincts, shares in priestly emoluments including portions from the most holy sacrifices and is permitted to participate in certain sanctuary procedures. Disqualification reflects the intent that those selected to perform service on behalf of the nation before the Deity represent the best that the nation can put forth.

In addition, in order for the priest to maximize his positive impact on the worshiper he must have his respect. In acknowledgment of the limited understanding of the populace-at-large, these disqualification laws lessen the possibility of there being a lack of esteem for the serving priests. They help ensure that sanctuary service will not be frowned upon as the province of the unfortunates and “losers” in life, regardless of whether the blemished may be competent and proficient.

Finally, we note what the sages legislated concerning recital of the priestly blessing, a function that blemished priests were permitted to perform in the sanctuary. Since it was recited from a platform-like area, distraction of the public was an issue. Hence, only those whose blemish was not visible were permitted to participate “because the people gaze at them” (*t. Sotah* 7:8), a distraction resulting from an

aspect of human nature that the sages recognized was still common in their days.

Of course upright character and moral qualities are what ultimately count. Priests who act immorally, violating their leadership status and exploiting their position of power, cause the destruction of the sanctuary and decline of the nation. But since character and moral qualities are not readily apparent and the public cannot easily evaluate them, they are often taken for granted. Physical imperfections, however insignificant on the true scale of values, are noticeable and affect many people. In the world of symbolism, appearance is important.

Blemishes and imperfections also apply to animal offerings. G-d's chastisement to the priests for presenting on the altar animals that were blind, lame and sick may also be applied to the nation's officiating representatives. “To you, O priests, who disgrace My name...when you bring forth a blind animal to sacrifice, [you say] ‘not so bad!’...try offering it to your governor, will he accept you?...You imply the table of Hashem is contemptible...Cursed is the one who deals craftily, who has a [normal] male in his flock and offers a defective one” (Mal. 1:6-14). The priests must “interact” with Him who is perfect and be a reflection on Him; they should epitomize the ideal.

7) A priest defiled by any of the sources of ritual impurity may not perform sanctuary service, partake of the sacred offerings or have contact with sancta until undergoing the relevant purification process.

8) The priest's family and slaves may partake of the food he receives as *terumat haqodashim*, the priestly gifts of agricultural produce, as well as his portions from *shelamim* sacrifices. A daughter who married a non-priest may no longer enjoy this privilege. However, if she is widowed or divorced and has no children she is once again permitted to partake of her father's gifts of agricultural produce.

9) A priest may not eat of a *נבלה וטֶרֶף* (a creature that had died without ritual slaughter and one that was mortally “torn,” generally by a predator). As this prohibition applies to all Israelites (Deut. 14:21) why was it necessary to state it for the priest? Ibn Ezra's answer to the similar question concerning bald spots

and gashing (above) would also apply here. In commenting on Ezekiel 44:31 where this law is also stated, the Radaq suggests that it was necessary to specifically address the priests because the transgression also includes defilement and is of greater severity for them.

Endnotes

* See our study *The G-d-Israel Covenant: On Meaning and Format*

** Making bald spots “between your eyes” is obviously not literal. That “between your eyes” refers in the first instance to “forehead” is consistent with Ugaritic usage, which parallels “between the eyes” with *qodqod* (“forehead”). Making bald spots on the head is often attested in the writings of the prophets (see Isa. 15:2; Jer. 48:37; etc.).

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