



Around the Shabbat Table

**Emor 5764
May 2004**

This week's writer: Rabbi Laurence Sebert, Town & Village Synagogue, New York City

Shalom!

Introduction

This week's *parasha* has two major topics:

1. Limitations to preserve the holiness of the Kohanim and the sacrifices
2. A detailed description of the Jewish calendar

I. Laws Governing the Priesthood

The name of the parashah is derived from the first verse which states; “*Emor el ha-Kohanim* – Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron.” In general the laws that follow this statement place restrictions upon the activities of the Kohanim. The context and justification for these laws is contained in this key verse; “They shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God; for they offer the Lord’s gifts, the food of their God, and so must be holy [21:6].” This idea of holiness is woven into the fabric of all the laws that follow.

The restrictions detailed in this parasha emphasize some aspects of personal relationships and appearance. In dealing with death, a kohen is only allowed to be near the dead body of a close family member. This law limits the ability of the kohen to participate in funerals. In addition, the kohen may not marry certain women. These limitations on death and marriage are even more stringent for the Kohen Gadol – the High Priest. The law that seems most at odds with our modern sensibilities is the ruling that a priest who is offering a sacrifice may not have any physical defects.

The second part of this section focuses on the sacrifices. Here, in chapter 22, are detailed the requirements for the purity of the offering and the one who consumes it. Like the priest who makes the offering, the sacrificial animals must be free of any defect or blemish. Likewise, an Israelite is excluded from eating the sacrifices and restrictions are even placed upon whom among the kohanim may eat from the offering.

The section concludes with a repetition of the command to be holy and not to profane God's name. In most commentaries, these verses apply to all Jews, not just the priestly class.



2. Sacred Occasions

Continuing the transition to the role of the Israelite, the section on holidays is directed to “the Israelite people.” Beginning with Shabbat, the Torah then describes the cycle of holidays beginning with Passover. After Passover is a seven week period of counting that leads to the festival of Shavuot – weeks. In the seventh month are three more holidays. On the first day, “a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts,” the Day of Atonement and the festival of booths – Sukkot.

The parashah continues with laws concerning the menorah and bread offerings, keeping to the theme of sacred offerings. The conclusion is a story that details a case of blasphemy and includes punishments for the most serious of crimes. The inclusion of this section serves as a perfect bookend to the opening segment. Both deal directly with the nature of God's and our holiness and how we as human beings are expected to behave in order to preserve that sense of the sacred.

Questions for your Family Discussion

As your family shares a meal this Friday night, you might want to discuss the following questions:

1. In the parashah, the kohanim are set apart by special laws and restrictions which they must observe. Are there any individuals or groups of people today that are held to a more strict set of standards? Why is that?
2. The Torah states that when the daughter of a kohen commits a certain crime, “it is her father whom she defiles.” In what ways does our behavior sometimes reflect badly on our families? How does your family handle such potentially embarrassing situations?
3. What are the implications of the verse that states: “no animal from the herd or from the flock shall be slaughtered on the same day with its young (22:28)?

4. What dates are used for the holidays? Which holiday is celebrated in the first month and which in the seventh? How do you explain that (look at Exodus 12:2)?



Some Texts to Wrestle With

You shall observe the Feast of Weeks, of the first fruits of the wheat harvest.

- Exodus 34:22

When you enter the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the first sheaf of your harvest to the priest... and from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering – the day after the sabbath – you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete: you must count until the day after the seventh week – fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to the Lord... On that same day you shall hold a celebration; it shall be a sacred occasion for you

- Leviticus 23: 10-21

You shall count off seven weeks; start to count the seven weeks when the sickle is first put to the standing grain. Then you shall observe the Feast of Weeks for the Lord your God...

- Deuteronomy 16:9-11

What do these texts from the Torah tell us about the period of Sefirah (the days between Pesach and Shavuot) and the holiday of Shavuot? Compare this to what the following texts discuss:

“On that same day you shall hold a celebration” This refers to the fiftieth day, the day the people of Israel stood before Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. Our ancestors received the Torah fifty days after leaving the land of Egypt, and therefore the Festival of First Fruits falls fifty days after the first day of Passover.

- Pesikta Zutarta, Parshat Emor

Because the Torah is the essence of Israel and for it they were redeemed and elevated to greatness, we were commanded to commence counting from the day after the first day of Passover until the day of the giving of the Torah. This demonstrates our great desire to reach that awesome

day..., because keeping count of time is an indication of a person's longing and hope to reach that particular time.
- Sefer HaChinukh, Mitzvah 273: Mitzvah of Counting the Omer



Towards an Action Agenda

The Shabbat table is often compared to the altar for sacrifices. One way to make the Shabbat holy and talk at the table holy is to share good things with one another.

Kiddush Hashem – Sanctifying God's name can be found in doing things that makes us all proud of one another. Have each family member share highlights of his or her week. Take turns telling each other the actions that make you proud of other members of your family.

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

Around the Shabbat Table is a project of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York. If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: www.bjeny.org

This project is supported through the generosity of Joyce & Fred Claar.

BJE is an agency of UJA-Federation of New York