



## **Around the Shabbat Table**

**Shabbat Emor 5765  
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*This week's writer: Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan, Director of Nassau/Queens Services, BJE of Greater New York; Coordinator, Around the Shabbat Table*

**Shalom!**

### **Introduction**

This week's Torah portion continues the past weeks' theme of the laws and responsibilities pertaining to *kohanim*, the priests. The first verses of the parasha tell us the limitations that are placed on *kohanim*:

- they are only permitted to come into contact with death in cases involving close relatives
- they are limited in how they may shave (particularly avoiding what were probably Canaanite mourning customs about tearing out hair)
- specifics about the women that they could or could not marry
- physical defects that disqualify a Kohen from officiating
- avoidance of coming into contact with dead animals

Laws pertaining to sacrifices serve to conclude this part of the parasha.

The parasha continues by discussing Shabbat and other holidays of the Jewish year. The agricultural significance, offerings, rituals and some of the spiritual meanings of these days are conveyed by these verses.

The parasha concludes with a variety of laws, some pertaining to articles to be built for the tabernacle and Temple, others relating to cases of murder or assault by one person against another. This is one of two places in which the famous quotation of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" is found.



## **Questions for your Family's Discussion**

The law of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” as punishment for assault is often called *lex talionis*, the law of retribution, as it was known in the Roman system of justice. The rabbis always interpreted the law as meaning that one pays certain amounts as punishment and restitution for injuring another person.

1. Why did the rabbis reject a literal understanding of “eye for eye, tooth for tooth”, that would mean if a person injures you in a certain way, you may injure him/her in the same way?
2. Some scholars believe that the Torah originally meant for an attacker to be punished in the way that he injured the other person, while other scholars believe that the Torah was always understood as monetary payment, as the rabbis understood it. What do you think was actually meant by the Torah?
3. The Talmud, which recorded discussions of Jewish practice (among other things), taught that the rabbis listed certain types of monetary payments in order to both punish the attacker, and to assist the victim of an attack. If you were writing these laws, what would you require the attacker to pay to his victim?

## **Texts to Wrestle With**

Yom Kippur is mentioned in the parasha, beginning with the quote:

*On the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement; there shall be a sacred occasion for you; you shall afflict your souls; and you shall bring an offering made by fire to the Lord.*

(Leviticus 23:26)

In discussing “afflicting your souls,” the Mishnah (rabbinic collection of law completed in the third century) ruled that:

*On Yom Kippur it is forbidden to eat, to drink, to bath, to anoint oneself, to put on sandals, or to have sexual intercourse.*

1. Why did the rabbis specify refraining from these five behaviors as ways for a person to “afflict” one’s soul?
2. An alternative translation of the word “ve-initem,” “afflict” is “practice self-denial”. Which do you think more accurately reflects the teaching of the Mishnah as a way of observing Yom Kippur?
3. Why do you think the Torah felt that denying certain things to ourselves was a good way to raise oneself spiritually as part of Yom Kippur?



## **Towards an Action Agenda**

This week's Torah portion states that "One who kills an animal shall make restitution for it, but one who kills a human being must be put to death."

Some Jews believe that this text was understood to prevent a murderer from simply paying monetarily for his/her crime, and then being free to walk away. If this is so, then perhaps (as indeed was taught in the Talmud) the death penalty was rarely given. Others said that, in fact, the Torah did intend for there to be a death penalty, and that the Talmud's intent was simply to make sure that the criminal would be given a proper trial.

One Jewish view which appears to support the possibility of capital punishment can be found at:

<http://shma.com/oct02/nathan.htm>

The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism uses Jewish values in discussing capital punishment at:

<http://rac.org/advocacy/issues/issuedp/index.cfm?#values>

A statement by the Orthodox movement, calling for a moratorium on the death penalty is at:

<http://www.ou.org/public/statements/2000/death%20penalty00.htm>

At any of these sites, you can make up your mind, and then write to any of these organizations and/or your state legislators, telling them how you feel about the death penalty.



## **Shabbat Shalom**

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