

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Emor LEVITICUS 21:1-24:23

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Parashat Emor Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Keeping Them Holy—Regulations for the Priests

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INTRODUCTION



Parashat Emor is part of the Holiness Code, a group of laws authored by reform-minded priests. Scholars believe that these priests, perhaps influenced by the teachings of the prophet Isaiah, wrote the laws contained in Leviticus 17–26 as a response to laws created by earlier priests in Leviticus 1–16. The laws in the Holiness Code—like the laws in the rest of Leviticus—seek to mold the Israelites into a holy people and to safeguard the ritual purity that is necessary for contact with the Divine. Leviticus depicts God as the creator of a harmonious, good, and orderly universe. To keep the world in proper balance, human beings must take care not to breach boundaries—whether these are boundaries of body, time, or space. A person's body, the sanctuary, and the community are all components of God's sacred world, and violations within any of these spheres have a negative impact on the whole. Boundaries of space separate the sacred from the non-sacred as well as life from death. Leviticus commands rituals, including sacrifices, to cancel or ameliorate the damage that results from boundary violations. *Parashat Emor* contains instructions for the sanctity of priests and the sacrificial offerings. Because priests are in charge of the performance of sacred rites connected with the sanctuary, they must maintain strict standards of purity to avoid profaning the sanctuary or the sacred objects it contains. *Parashat Emor* also outlines regulations concerning God's sacred times. These instructions are for the community as a whole, emphasizing that the entire community is responsible for preserving God's harmonious universe. *Parashat Emor* teaches that both the priests and the people must maintain the equilibrium in God's universe that is necessary to keep God's Presence among them.

BEFORE GETTING STARTED



Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* to provide an overview of the parashah as a whole. Draw attention to a few key quotations from the introduction to the Central Commentary on pages 723–24 and/or survey the outline on page 724. This will help you highlight some of the main themes in this parashah and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger portion. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to examine the associated comments in the Central Commentary. This will help you answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

THEME 1: KEEPING THEM HOLY—REGULATIONS FOR THE PRIESTS



Guarding the holiness of the sanctuary and the sanctuary's sacred objects—thus ensuring the possibility of God's Presence—requires that priests scrupulously observe the rules of ritual purity. These regulations, which govern the contact a priest may have with a corpse and the purity of a priest's wife and daughters, ensure that the sacred space of the sanctuary and its contents will not suffer contamination

1. Read Leviticus 21:1–4, which describes the regulations governing the contact priests may have with a dead body.
 - a. Although the Torah does not describe burial rituals and customs, presumably they included closing the eyes of the deceased (Genesis 46:4), preparing and dressing the body for burial (1 Samuel 28:14; Ezekiel 32:27), and participating in lowering the body into a burial plot or placing it in a burial cave (Genesis 23:9, 23:19, 49:31, 50:13). This parashah provides specific rules for priests who may come in contact with the dead. What does Leviticus 21:1 mean when it stipulates that a priest may not “defile himself for any [dead] person among his kin”? What are the exceptions to this rule (v. 2)? What can we infer from this rule and its exceptions about whether or not priests could have had contact with the corpses of those to whom they are not related? What impact would these regulations have on the priests' ability to participate in burial customs?
 - b. The word translated as “defile” (from the Hebrew root *t-m'*, “to make unclean”) appears three times in verses 1–4. In your view, what accounts for this repetition? According to the Central Commentary on 21:1–9, why must the priests take such care not to defile themselves? What are the reasons, according to the Central Commentary on verse 1, that a priest may not come into contact with dead bodies?
 - c. The Hebrew word *sh'eir* (translated in v. 2 as “closest to him”) literally means “flesh.” What does this translation help you to understand about

the relatives with whose bodies the priest may come into contact? Which close relative is missing from this list? Why might this be the case, based on the literal translation of this word?

- d. How does verse 3 describe the characteristics of a sister with whose dead body a priest may come into contact? The Hebrew word *b'tulah* (translated here as “virgin”) can be understood as a mature girl whom no man has known, most likely an adolescent. What is the distinction, in your view, between these two understandings of the word *b'tulah*? In your view, why does the text permit a priest to have contact with the body of a sister who has not married?
 - e. The phrase translated as “a kinsman by marriage” (v. 4) literally means “as a husband among his kin.” What does this strange wording suggest about the role of a priest when his wife dies? According to the laws outlined in this section, on what basis would a priest be prohibited from burying his wife? According to the Central Commentary on this verse, how did the Rabbis find a way to change the interpretation of this law? In your view, why did the Rabbis find it necessary to look for another interpretation of this law?
2. Read Leviticus 21:7–15, which describes the rules concerning whom priests, including the chief priest, may marry.
- a. According to verse 7, whom is a priest forbidden to marry? What reason does the text give for these restrictions? What do these prohibitions suggest about the relationship between the status and reputation of the priest and that of his wife? How does your understanding of the need for priests to maintain strict standards of purity help you to understand the restrictions regarding whom a priest may marry? What information does the Central Commentary on verses 7–8 add about the reasons for these restrictions?
 - b. The phrase “a woman defiled by harlotry” (v. 7) is literally translated as “a harlot woman and one defiled.” Why may priests not marry such women? According to the Central Commentary on verse 7, how can we understand the term “defiled”? What are the consequences if a man makes his daughter into a prostitute, both for her and for the land? Why is a harlot an inappropriate wife for a priest? What does this prohibition for priests suggest about whether lay members of the community could marry prostitutes?
 - c. Verse 7 specifies that a priest may not marry a woman “divorced from her husband.” This is one of the handful of times divorce is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. We learn (in Deuteronomy 22:13–14) of a man who, taking an aversion to his wife, makes up a charge claiming that she was

not a virgin when they married. In Deuteronomy 24:1, a man divorces his wife because he finds her *ervat davar*, a term that probably refers to some kind of behavioral impropriety, probably of a sexual nature. In Hosea 2:4–7 Israel, God’s metaphoric wife, is threatened with divorce because of her infidelities. What can we learn from these places in the biblical text that mention divorce about the reasons why priests are prohibited from marrying a divorcee? In your view, why were widows generally above such suspicions? According to the Central Commentary on Leviticus 21:7, what do we know about whether a woman could initiate divorce proceedings against her husband?

- d. Verse 9 shifts the focus from the priest’s wife to his daughter. In your view, why is the text concerned about the behavior of a priest’s daughter? According to the Central Commentary, what are the two possible meanings of the verbal root *z-n-h* (“harlotry”) in verse 9? How do both meanings work equally well in the context of this verse? What effect does the behavior of a priest’s daughter have on her father? What does the punishment for this offense (being put to death by fire) have in common with the two other cases in the Bible for which this is the punishment (see Leviticus 20:14; Joshua 7:25; and the Central Commentary on Leviticus 21:9)? What is the relationship between the use of fire as a punishment and the degree of pollution caused by the offender?
 - e. What are the restrictions regarding whom the chief priest may marry (vv. 13–14)? How do these regulations compare with the earlier rules for the average priest? Why must the chief priest marry a virgin and a woman “of his own kin” (v. 14)? Why do you think the restrictions noted in verses 11–15 apply to the chief priest and not to ordinary priests?
3. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Judith Hauptman on pages 741–42 (“None shall defile himself” and “A widow . . . such he may not marry”).
 - a. How did the Rabbis of the Talmud expand the prohibitions for the priests in 21:1–2? How did the Rabbis address the absence of the mention of the wife in this biblical passage?
 - b. According to the Mishnah, what constitutes a proper burial for a deceased wife?
 - c. Why did the Rabbis institute a special bill of divorce for *kohanim*?
 4. Read Contemporary Reflection by Shulamit Reinharz (pp. 743–44).
 - a. How does the dilemma of the married couple in the film “Cohen’s Wife” demonstrate some of the consequences of the laws of purity in *parashat Emor* for modern couples who want to observe Jewish law?

- b. What suggestions might you come up with addressing the situation depicted in this movie?
5. Read the passage from “The Kohain’s Wife” by Shulamith Surnamer, in *Voices* (p. 745).
 - a. Jewish tradition teaches that the month of Av is when both the First and Second Temples were destroyed. How does this information add to your understanding of the poet’s feelings as she mourns her mother?
 - b. Why might a funeral be a lonely time for the wife of a *kohein*, someone from the priestly lineage? Even though these traditions are not generally observed in the Reform community, if you are a *kohein* or if you are the female relative of a *kohein*, are there ways in which you relate to the experience of the poem’s protagonist? If you are not from a family of *kohanim*, how do you imagine you would feel attending the funeral of a loved one without the presence of your husband or sons?
6. Read “Yahrzeit” by Enid Dame, in *Voices* (p. 745).
 - a. How does the poet describe the flame of the *yahrzeit* candle? What do you think might have inspired this image?
 - b. How does the poet experience her mother in the poem’s second stanza? What is the relationship between the terror the poet feels in the first stanza and how she experiences her mother’s presence in the second stanza?
 - c. What does the poet mean when she declares that she’ll lock herself in “alongside you”?
 - d. Can you describe how lighting a *yahrzeit* candle has reminded you of “old connections, old journeys” with your deceased loved one?

THEME 2: HOLINESS IN SACRED TIMES



Parashat Emor outlines a series of sacred times that belong to God. The calendar of sacred time includes both the weekly Sabbath as well as annual festivals, and it includes restrictions concerning work. Although God establishes these sacred times, people are responsible for their proper observance.

1. Read Leviticus 23:1–8, which introduces the regulations for the Sabbath and Passover.
 - a. What is the people’s role in Moses’ proclamation about the “fixed times” in verse 2? How does this differ from the focus of the commands in theme 1? In your view, what does this focus suggest about who is responsible for maintaining holiness?
 - b. What regulations concerning the Sabbath are spelled out in verse 3? How does the description of the Sabbath as a “sacred occasion” (*mik’ra kodesh*) help you to understand the relationship between Shabbat and

the festivals? Compare this verse with the description of regulations concerning Shabbat in Numbers 28:9–10. What do you think accounts for the absence of information about sacrifices in *parashat Emor*?

- c. What “sacred occasions” does Leviticus 23:4–7 describe? What do they have in common? What is the difference between the descriptions of work in verse 3 and in verses 7 and 8? According to the Central Commentary on verse 7, how did the Rabbis interpret this difference?
2. Read Leviticus 23:15–22, which describes the First Wheat Offering (Shavuot).
 - a. The offering mentioned in verse 15 connects God’s gift of the Promised Land with the harvests the Israelites will reap there (v. 10). It is only after the first sheaf of this crop is brought as an offering that the people may eat anything made from the spring wheat harvest. In your view, what is the reason for this command?
 - b. The First Wheat Offering marks the culmination of the seven-week period of counting the *omer*, an ancient measure of grain (v. 15). Jewish tradition connects this counting, which begins on the second day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Pesach), with the amount of time it took the Israelites to travel from Egypt to Mount Sinai, where they received the Torah. How do you understand the reasons for the length of time between the Israelites’ liberation from Egypt and the giving of the Torah?
 - c. What is the significance, in your view, of the command in verse 22? What does the end of this verse (“I am *Adonai* your God”) help you to understand about this command?
 3. Read Leviticus 23:23–32, which describes the Festival of Alarm Blasts (Rosh HaShanah) and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur).
 - a. According to verses 24–25, what are the regulations concerning the Festival of Alarm Blasts? What relationship do these regulations have to the way in which we observe Rosh HaShanah today? In your view, what accounts for these differences?
 - b. What additional regulation is part of the observance of the Day of Atonement, according to verse 27? What are the consequences for a person who does not observe this commandment? In your view, what accounts for the severity of these consequences?
 - c. The phrase translated as “self-denial” (vv. 27, 29, 32) contains the Hebrew root ‘-n-h (to humble or to afflict oneself). Although these verses do not describe the specific behaviors associated with self-denial, how does the meaning of the Hebrew root help you to understand the kinds of actions that might constitute self-denial?

- d. What is the relationship between the Day of Atonement and Shabbat, according to verse 32? What is the significance, in your view, of this relationship?
4. Read Leviticus 23:39–43, which describes the regulations for the Festival of Booths (Sukkot) and the Solemn Gathering (Sh’mini Atzeret).
 - a. What are the commandments connected with the Festival of Booths?
 - b. What ritual object has its origins in the instructions in verse 40? According to the Central Commentary on this verse, what may the term translated as “*hadar trees*” describe?
 - c. According to verse 43, why are the people to live in booths? Other verses in the Torah that describe the Festival of Booths do not give this reason for observing the festival. Why is it significant, in your view, that the command to live in booths is connected with what “future generations may know”?
 5. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Judith Hauptman on page 742 (“These are My fixed times”).
 - a. Hauptman notes that the instructions about God’s “fixed times” in this parashah are rendered in the second person masculine plural, with no references to women. What questions does this raise for you?
 - b. What is the basic premise underlying the Rabbis’ view of women’s obligations regarding these “fixed times”? From which commandments are women exempted? For which commandments are women obligated?
 - c. To which time-bound festival observances does the Talmud obligate women? What are the grounds for including women in these observances?
 - d. How do the liberal movements in Judaism foster and include women’s participation in festival and holiday rituals and observances?
 6. Read “Looking toward Shabbat” by Shelly Goldman, Lara Laufer, and Shari Lore, in *Voices* (p. 746).
 - a. What is your reaction to the list in the poem’s first stanza? What things would you add to this list?
 - b. How does the poet see the difference between the hours during the week and the arrival of Shabbat? What does Shabbat give her?
 - c. How does lighting the Shabbat candles (one of the ritual observances for which women are obligated, according to BT *Shabbat* 23a) link us to the women who came before us and to “those who will follow”?
 - d. Given your personal experiences, how can “taking in” Shabbat give us strength for the rest of the week?

7. Read “The Sabbath Song” by Kadya Molodowsky, in *Voices* (p. 746).
- a. How does the poet describe the six days of the week leading up to Shabbat? What do these descriptions have in common?
 - b. How does the Sabbath Queen transform the poet’s world? How does the poet’s description of the dove at the end of the first stanza and the way she describes the dove in the second stanza help you to understand this transformation?
 - c. What does the poet suggest about the relationship between Shabbat and the rest of the week in the poem’s third stanza? What connection does she make between Shabbat and nature? What role does being in nature play in your own “battle with the six emperors”? What role can it play?
 - d. How does Molodowsky’s description of the days leading up to Shabbat compare with the description of these days in the poem “Looking toward Shabbat”? What does each add to your understanding of the “six days of the week” and of Shabbat?

OVERARCHING QUESTIONS

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, keep in mind the following overarching questions. If time permits, conclude the class with these broader questions:

1. The belief that dead bodies are highly defiling underlies this parashah's prohibitions against priestly contact with the deceased. In what ways does this view of dead bodies manifest itself in our society? What has been your own experience being with the body of a loved one who has died? What role did being able to see and touch the body play in your mourning process?
2. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel refers to Shabbat as a "palace in time," a day when we savor the holiness of the seventh day. Are there times in your own life when you have experienced the holiness of Shabbat? What are the challenges you face not only in "taking in Shabbat" but also in keeping it with you during the rest of the week?

CLOSING QUESTIONS

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today's study?
2. What other new insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions remain?



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