

PARSHAT EMOR  
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In a new book written by friend, colleague, teacher and successor as President of the Rabbinical Assembly entitled *The Torah Revolution*, Rabbi Reuven Hammer writes: “An important task of the pagan priests concerned the realm of the dead and the many rituals that had to do with death, the afterlife and the rights of mummification. Perhaps the most important book of Egyptian religion was *The Book of the Dead*. Yet the Israelite priests had nothing to do with any such cult, since none existed in the religion that Moses taught. On the contrary, the priest was forbidden to even come into contact with the dead, but for very few exceptions.”

At the beginning of our Torah reading of this morning, the Torah is very strict concerning this point. “None (the priests) shall defile himself for any dead person among his kin, except for the relatives that are closest to him: his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, and his brother; also for a virgin sister, close to him because she is not married.” The rules for the high priest, who has a higher degree of sanctity and may perform rituals that no other priest may carry out, are even more restrictive. Rabbi Hammer points out that the Israelite priest is totally removed from the realm that was most central to the pagan cults of Egypt. The Israelite priest deals only with the living, never with the dead.

While the institution of the High Priesthood no longer exists, priests, Kohanim, are still subject to the rules having to do with them coming into contact with a corpse. Many Kohanim are extremely careful not to enter funeral chapels, cemeteries, or to come into contact with the dead unless they have no choice. These laws continue to teach us, though the Temple no longer stands, that being a member of the priesthood necessitated a higher level of sanctity than that expected of the ordinary Israelite. Rabbi Hammer suggests that this is a reaction to the pagan world promoting the teaching of Judaism which stresses: “and you shall live by them,” meaning that life is meant to be lived to the very fullest and should not be built on a theology concerning death and afterlife scenarios.

In another section of the book, Rabbi Hammer points out that the verse in the Book of Exodus, “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and holy nation,” signifies that Israel is the priesthood for the nations of the world; while the descendants of Aaron are the priesthood for Israel. In other words, members of the Israelite people, today the Jewish nation, must live a life of great sanctity and follow some of the dictates that were once incumbent upon the ancient priesthood. No, we do not have to be as careful as the priests in terms of coming into contact with the dead, but the rationale of that law, the necessity of living life to its fullest and being concerned with the living is something that must be translated by us into everyday living.

As many of you know, my sister, Janice Freedman, passed away four weeks ago. In a few days, my family and I will end the Sheloshim period, the 30-day period of

mourning. Janice's rather sudden passing taught me some lessons, which I know only too well from my profession as a Rabbi, concerning the fragility of life.

First of all, as I have learned in the past and as I have taught members of this community, Jewish mourning rites are extremely helpful. While we made sure that Janice was buried properly according to Jewish law, and the community showed a great deal of respect to her life and her legacy, our family had to get on with living. Thus, we sat the entire shiva period, the full seven-day period, and opened the home to visitors at all times of the morning, afternoon and early evening. We held services morning and evening at the shiva house and people from all walks of life – family, friends of the family, co-workers with Janice, and acquaintances of many of us who were sitting shiva – came through the house to bring us a measure of comfort, to reconnect, and to tell us stories of Janice's life which were not known to us. While it was an exhausting and difficult week, I felt again the wisdom of Jewish tradition which reminds us that death's finality is only physical. A person's memory and legacy continues.

It also taught me, once more, that a supportive community is essential during this period of mourning. Meals were provided for us, people served our every need, the community was present for minyanim and, in my case, people reached out to me from all sectors of the globe. I received phone calls, letters and e-mails, as well as donations, from many people here in the Chicago area, from all over the States and Canada, from Israel, Europe, and South America. All of those notes of encouragement, all of the expressions of sorrow, all of the donations that have memorialized my sister's name, have been extremely helpful.

Rabbi Hammer points out that the lesson of our Torah reading is that there is no cult for the dead in our tradition. We are to remember them as they lived and build upon that memory to recognize their lasting influence upon us. It was, in its time, a great lesson for the Israelite people and its surrounding cultures and it continues to be an extremely important and vital lesson for us.

We are now in the period of Sefirat HaOmer, the counting of the days between Passover and Shavuot. At our Seder on the second night of Pesach we started the counting and a full seven weeks later, on the eve of Shavuot, we will complete it, with the fiftieth day being the holiday of revelation, the holiday of Shavuot. Each evening at our Ma'ariv service we stop for a moment to count the days and to signify how many weeks and days have passed since the Festival of Freedom as we look forward to celebrating the moment we stood at Mount Sinai. The challenge presented by the Omer is that not only must we count the days, we must make each day count, and not only during the period of Sefirat HaOmer, but indeed each day of our lives.

You will recall that one of the last prayers on Rosh Hashanna morning is "HaYom" – "this day." Rabbi Sidney Greenberg has written that some of the saddest words too frequently spoken at the end of one's life go something like this: "He worked so hard all his life but never took time to enjoy any pleasures. Now, when he could enjoy life, he ran out of years." Rabbi Greenberg was saddened when he heard this statement

because there is no way of rewinding and replaying the film of life. “There is no future joy,” he writes, “which can compensate us from the legitimate joys we needlessly deny ourselves today.

Making each day count reminds us that lost time can never be recovered. Each hour, each day, each month, each year that passes we lose one of the most precious items that we have been given – moments of our lifetime here on earth. Perhaps the saddest part of my sister’s passing, at the age of 54, is that she did make each day count and we were looking forward to more days in the future. She was a loving daughter, wife, mother, sister, aunt, great aunt, cousin and friend. Her work, both as a vocation and avocation, was found in the Jewish community of Toronto. She had learned to read Torah and Haftorah and was hoping to use those skills many more times in the future. What we learned about her life from her co-workers and her many friends was a corroboration of what we knew as a family and, that is, that she made a difference in all of our lives each day that she lived. What her passing taught me and others is that we cannot count on having limitless days on this earth and whatever we can do during the time we have must be significant and meaningful.

Making each day count, because we don’t know when our last day may come, means that we must express our love in word and in deed to those closest to us. Making each day count means that we must be contributing members to our society and our community. Making each day count means that we must share our gifts with others – personal, financial and skill-oriented. Making each day count means that as members in a link of a long chain of Jewish tradition we must pass that heritage on to others. Making each day count means we must continue to grow each day to become better people.

Rabbi Irving Greenberg in commenting on the first part of the Torah portion of Emor writes: “Judaism is the religion of human partnership with God to achieve Tikkun Olam. Since God is completely on the side of life, Jews must totally be on the side of life. Ideally, every action should advance and nurture life and/or fight and reduce death.” He writes that “Priests are people totally dedicated to God. They work in the Temple, the place dedicated totally to God. By shunning contact with the dead, priests represent the fundamental Jewish opposition to death, the infinite commitment to work hard so life wins.”

Rabbi Greenberg concludes his comments with the thought that since Jews are to be priests to humanity, as told to us in the Book of Exodus, “Jews should advance life; every act, every moment of life should be devoted to the living. It should be built on love, mutual care and respect for family ties that bind and make us human.”

Once more the wisdom of Jewish tradition has taught me to hold onto life and to celebrate it. It is appropriate to mourn the passing of my sister and I am bidden to perpetuating her memory. At the same time it is my task to make each day count as I strive to make the world a better place for all.

These are lessons for the living as taught to us by the ancient restrictions on the priests in the Torah by the reality of human mortality and by the life of my sister, of blessed memory. May we look forward to a world in which we can celebrate life and the living.