

Emor: Priests, Life, Holidays, and Fellowship

Parashat Emor opens with special rules for priests — they cannot defile themselves to bury the dead, they can only marry certain people, they cannot be physically deformed etc. The other main topic in Parashat Emor is the holidays. It is difficult to understand how these things are related, especially given that in Vayikra, unlike most of the other books of the Torah, all of the parshiot are fairly cohesive. How does this one hang together?

To begin to hazard an answer to that question, I want to begin with the priestly restrictions concerning death. A priest is prohibited from all contact with the dead — that means attending a funeral or burial or preparing a body for burial — except in the case of close relatives — his mother, his father, his children, his brother, or an unmarried sister. If you have been following our reading of the book of Leviticus, the reasoning is clear — the priest ministers in the holy sanctum and embodies holiness. Holiness in Leviticus is equated with life; death is its antithesis. Whereas other pagan cultures, Egypt in particular, valorized death, building shrines to dead Pharaohs and placing death at the center of their religions, Judaism is all about the sanctity of life. Nowhere is this more clear than in the book of Leviticus — the whole purpose of the sacrificial system is to remind Israel of the divine imperative to reject death and choose life.

I want to keep that background in mind, as we move to current events. Last week Israel celebrated its 72nd anniversary. In a country that usually marks yom ha'atzmaut on its beaches and in its streets, with dancing, music, and parades, Israelis this year were forced to sing and celebrate from their balconies, separate yet together.

At this juncture, it is worth asking how Israel has fared during this pandemic? “Pretty well,” is, I think the right answer. In a country of nine million people, 16,400 people have been infected with the virus and 245 have died. Israel’s deaths per million are just over 27. The US, by contrast, has had 1.3 million cases, and 75,000 deaths or 231 deaths per million. The US leads the world in deaths with roughly 10x as many deaths per capita as Israel. Israel, by contrast, is one of several developed nations that have thus far weathered this crisis best.

Although Israel is undoubtedly smaller than the US and it is much easier to seal its borders, Israel also faces significant challenges in dealing with a health crisis. A large population of haredim who do not necessarily follow government orders. An Arab population who might be seen as similarly disenfranchised and disaffected. A health system that has been underfunded for 20 years. And Purim was celebrated in Israel in early March without restrictions even as the virus had already struck. A significant portion of Israeli infections emanated from Purim celebrations.

And still the vast difference in our two countries. Why? Why did Israel do so well and why are we faring so poorly? There are a number of technical responses including early preventative steps taken by the Israeli government before there was even one case of

the virus in Israel, and the outstanding performance of the healthcare system. But there are additional cultural factors to point to — Israel — its people, its government, its military — has significant experience with emergencies. They know how to act quickly and decisively to save life. Moreover, even though the Israeli military is known for its culture of questioning and challenging — even a low-ranking soldier can challenge his commanding officer — once a decision is made, it is followed. Most Israelis have served in the military — that culture of obedience permeates. There is a respect for science. Moshe Bar Siman-Tov, Israel's deputy health minister, describing Israel's massive antibody testing now going on to determine its future course, said, simply, "We want to know the truth." Stunning words in contradiction to American dissimulation and denial.

Prime Minister Netanyahu, not my favorite politician, has provided strong, clear, and consistent leadership throughout the crisis. From the get-go, he told Israelis that this was different from other crises like terrorism — whereas when terrorists attack, Israelis show defiance by going about their lives, he argued that in the case of virus, they would have to do the opposite. They would have to stop going about their lives. They would have to transform them. They would have to stay home. As the pandemic bore down and Israel went into lockdown, the prime minister warned: The danger lurks for everyone. It does not distinguish between those who are bareheaded and those who wear kipot, or between those who wear a kipa and those who wear a kafiyyeh; everybody must obey. There are no discounts. 'Take good heed unto yourselves.' [Deuteronomy 4:15]Throughout the crisis, Netanyahu has been truthful, sober, compassionate, and reassuring. That is leadership.

I would like to touch on two more factors that I think are highly significant. First, Israelis have a tremendous sense of mutual responsibility. Although Israelis are often argumentative, divided politically and religiously, and sometimes abrupt, even rude, underneath all that there is a tremendous sense of kol yisrael aravim zeh l'zeh — all of Israel are responsible for one another. I will return to this idea shortly.

Closely related to this idea, is the one with which I began this sermon — the sanctity of life. This is not just a saying in Israel — Israelis live it. We know about the heroic efforts the Israeli army makes not to leave anyone behind and to redeem captives. When an Israeli is killed, all of Israel grieves as if it was their own child. Even the prime minister, on March 25 in his statement to the press, quoted mishna: "Whoever saves one life, it is as if he saved the whole world." Then he added a coronavirus corollary: "Whoever infects one person, it is as if he infected the whole world."

The mishna he quoted is from Sanhedrin and it describes the warning given by the judge to witnesses in a capital case. Before the witnesses testify, the judge warns them of the devastating harm that can result from the destruction of even a single human life. The judge is to say that God created human beings from one single human being, Adam, to teach us that to destroy a single life is to destroy a whole world, even as to save a life it save a whole world. A human being is a whole world; a human being contains within him a whole world; a human being gives birth to a whole world.

The mishna goes on to say that we are created from a common ancestor, so that we cannot say my ancestor was greater than yours. And the fact that humanity begins with a single human being proclaims the greatness of the creator. For a man stamps many coins from a single die and they all come out alike, but the Holy One stamped every human being with the die of Adam, and yet no two people are the same.

In other words, if a human being is a world, then human life is of infinite value. If no one can boast that their ancestor was better than someone else's, then we are all equal. And if we are stamped with the same die and yet different, then we are each unique. Human life is of infinite value, all humans are equal, and each of us is unique.

In the Bible, human beings uniquely reflect God's image — we are created b'tzelem elohim. Abraham Joshua Heschel famously said that the proscription against idolatry is because no statue or idol looks like God. If you want to know what God looks like, look at the person next to you.

In Israel, with all its warts and challenges, life still remains sacred. All lives. Rich lives. Poor lives. The lives of the religious. The lives of the secular. The lives of the old. The lives of the young. The life of an Arab. The life of a Jew. All sacred. All equal.

This stands in stark contrast to the direction America appears to be heading. Not only was our response to this pandemic painfully slow, woefully uncoordinated, and riddled with denial and a disrespect for science, but suddenly after a month or two, depending on where you live, of this pandemic, the country is reopening. In Israel, the country is also reopening, but it is doing so after essentially conquering the disease. It is doing so slowly. It is doing so with abundant virus testing and antibody testing and contact tracing.

In America, on the other hand, 27 states reopened this week, some without restrictions, despite the fact that in almost all of the country, deaths are rising fast. You heard me! Not only has the curve not been flattened across most of the country, not only have deaths not declined for two weeks, as public health officials decreed they must before reopening — but the death rate is on a steep incline. Whereas we had been predicting 62,000 deaths, that number has now been revised to 130,000, because we are reopening, and surely it will be more.

And why are we reopening? Because we are tired of staying home. Because there is great economic hardship. Well, I have news for you. There is great economic hardship in Israel too, although there, the government does a better job of mitigating that hardship for its citizens. There is economic hardship around the world. But the economy is not sacred. Human life is. There is no number of human lives that it is OK to risk for the sake of the economy. Not even one. And yet, in Israel where life is sacred, here it appears expendable. Never mind that the choice between the economy or health is false — if people are dying, they will not feel safe to go out or go to work, no matter how many governors open their states and the economy will suffer as well.

Right now about 1750 Americans are dying daily from coronavirus. Recent estimates are that by June 1, less than a month from now, that number will reach about 3000 per day, a 70% increase. That is a terrifying number and yet Vice President Pence blithely reassures us that the virus will be gone by Memorial Day, with no science other than wishful thinking to support him. The President has urged protestors to rise up and liberate their states from coronavirus lockdowns, equating liberty with the ability to do whatever one chooses.

Will coronavirus become like gun deaths in this country? The rest of the world mandates strict gun control and vastly limits its gun deaths. But in America, liberty reigns supreme. And so we tolerate 30,000 deaths a year from gun violence. We tolerate children being killed in schools. We tolerate citizens being shot down while attending a concert or dancing in a nightclub. We tolerate people being murdered where they work, on the street, in the mall, in the movie theater, almost anywhere you could think of. Will we just tolerate deaths from coronavirus too? Will 3000 deaths a day become acceptable? Will we call this success, as the President has thus far? Will we just say it is OK if old people, and sick people, and transit workers, and healthcare professionals, and meatpackers and some random other people die, just so my life can go on, just so I can go to the beach or the mall or the movies this weekend? Is that what the value of life means? When the founders wrote, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" is that what they meant? Or is life sacred? All life. No exceptions. And does freedom mean nothing left to lose? Or, as defined by the Bible and the founders, does it also imply collective duty and responsibility?

I want to return to the idea of mutual responsibility and to the parsha, specifically to the latter part of the parsha which enumerates the Jewish holidays. Celebrating the Jewish holidays, or any nation's holidays, for that matter, is about telling the nation's story. We were slaves — now we are free. In the Bible, the holidays were celebrated at the Temple in Jerusalem — the nation gathered and brought first fruits or brought lambs or brought lulavim and etrogim. They brought their gifts to the Temple, they sat down and ate together, they sang, they danced, they celebrated. We do the same. We mandate it. There is no minyan without ten, a bris also needs ten, so does a wedding. What is a Shabbat or holiday meal without guests? (Unfortunately, we have had to learn.) Micah Goodman of the Hartman Institute, points out that "God didn't give the Torah to each person, but it was given to Am Yisrael, which is one organism." Similarly, on Yom Kippur or during the amidah we don't say, "Forgive me," we say, "Forgive us." You are by definition part of a larger group.

Goodman notes that this runs counter to Western culture, which is hyper-individualistic. When you think about staying healthy, you generally think about yourself — what I should eat, what exercise I should do, what I need to keep myself healthy. "But the pandemic challenges our individualistic instincts to stay healthy since to stay healthy I need to keep you healthy. If you are not healthy, I am not healthy."

Israel is indeed a more homogenous society than America, but even at its most secular, its Jewish roots are deep. There is a sense of mutual responsibility, of shared destiny, perhaps shaped by war, perhaps shaped by Jewish history, perhaps shaped by Torah and holidays and liturgy and minyanim. Perhaps by all of the above. In the face of a pandemic, Israelis have pulled apart — together.

Initially you will recall there were reports of huge outbreaks of the virus in religious neighborhoods and of ultra-Orthodox Jews flaunting social distancing regulations. But quickly this was dealt with. The army was brought in — it turned out that people were more ignorant than defiant — they don't read the news, they don't engage in social media, they didn't know — word was put out through Orthodox channels, meals were delivered to people in isolation at considerable expense, paid for by the government, and hotels were commandeered to serve as coronavirus centers where people who did not have to be hospitalized could be quarantined. Quickly, the secular army and the ultra-Orthodox population found ways to work together to bring the virus under control. There were also initial reports of discrimination against Arabs, but those seem to have quieted. It is undoubtedly better to be in Ramle than Rome right now. Israel has cared for all its citizens.

Have Americans lost our sense of collective identity? When the president says, “my fellow Americans,” does he mean all of us? Does he feel it? Does our right to carry deadly weapons wherever and whenever we want and our right to go to the mall or the movies or the beach, trump the rights of others to live? Is this what freedom means? How has a great country like America with the world's best scientists and doctors, the world's wealthiest nation, with unmatched military power to coordinate a response, been brought to its knees while little Israel has written such a different story?

David Eggers writes, “It's just like how we all pulled together in World War II, every element of society, from the White House to Rosie the Riveter, with common purpose and shared sacrifice. This is just like that, except instead of coordination, we have competition, and instead of common cause, we have acrimony and chaos. Instead of fireside chats, FDR and Churchill, we have tweets, Lysol and Ron DeSantis. Other than that, it's exactly the same.”

Returning to my initial question — what is the relationship between the sanctity of the priests and the celebration of the holidays — I think we have arrived at an answer. If the sanctity of priests is all about the sanctity of human life, that sacred value, it turns out, can only live, can only be real, when a society is joined in mutual respect and fellowship. It is not sufficient that the priests embody this ideal — everyone must see it as their responsibility to help their neighbor, to ensure their health and wellbeing. The pandemic's paradox — that my life is dependent on yours — must be deeply rooted in the culture.

Perhaps when American holidays like Memorial Day, President's Day and Labor Day became more about shopping than what they originally celebrated, perhaps when we

became American consumers instead of American citizens, the blow was struck. Life was no longer sacred; the dollar was. Our collective story was not about our values and our collective endeavor to ensure their endurance; in fact, there was no more collective story. Instead, it was about each of us pursuing our happiness, without regard to our neighbor's health and well-being.

Is this the end of America? It could be. That terrifies me. But it also could be a wake up call to renew our covenant, to renew our commitment to one another and to the values for which our ancestors fought and died, the values that still make us proud to be Americans and the fellowship that leaders have invoked across the centuries. I hope we can do that. I know that Americans are good. Thousands of examples of the heroic acts of doctors, health care workers, grocery store clerks, ambulance drivers, and regular citizens could fill any newspaper right now. But will America also be good? Will life again be sacred — all life — and will we understand that we each hold one another's life and wellbeing in our hands — will we again learn to cherish each life?