

Sermon: Parshat Emor
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Parshat Emor includes the passage that we recite daily during this time of the year before we fulfill the *mitzvah*, the divine instruction, to count the days of the Omer, the days between Passover and Shavuot. Two nights ago we counted thirty-three days of the *Omer*, making four weeks and five days of the *Omer*. Typically, such a pronouncement is greeted with joy and celebration. The thirty-third day of the Omer is known as *Lag B'Omer* because the Hebrew letters *Lamed* and *Gimmel*, *Lag*, have the numeral value of 33. This day marks the end of the mournful period which preceded it, recalling the plague that decimated the students of Rabbi Akiva, and which ended on the thirty-third day of the *Omer*. In Israel, the celebration is marked by many religious Israelis with a pilgrimage to Mount Meron, to the tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, one of Rabbi Akiva's students who was spared by the plague, and whose *yahrzeit*, the anniversary of his death, coincides with Lag B'Omer. Many religious Israelis make this pilgrimage to dance, celebrate, and sing. But this year's celebration turned to an awful tragedy, and forty-five people were killed in what reports are describing as a stampede. We pray for a full recovery of those who were injured, and we pray for peace and comfort for the victims and their families. In moments like these, we often ask: Why? Why did this happen? How could it have happened? To phrase it with even more *chutzpah*: Why would God allow such a thing to happen, especially on a day that is supposed to be one of joyous celebration? Parshat Emor offers us guidance in addressing the question.

There is a rather bizarre incident at the end of the *parsha*: Two individuals get into a fight, and the Torah does not tell us explicitly what caused their altercation. Suddenly, one of them pronounces the Divine Name of God in a blasphemous way, וַיִּנְחָהוּ בַמִּשְׁמַר לְפָרֵשׁ לָהֶם עַל־, פִּי ה' "he was placed in custody until the decision of God should be made clear to them."¹ Moses and the people were dumbfounded and perplexed. They knew that what this person did was wrong; they sensed that it was improper to curse the Divine Name of God; they understood that this was disrespectful and problematic. They did not, however, know what to do about it. Commenting on this passage, the Talmud compares it to other situations where Moses did not know what to do. In this case, Moses did not even know the consequence for this behavior. What should be the community's response to the blasphemer and his words? This was a challenging moment for Moses, leader of the people, prophet of God. How should he respond to this situation?

I never tire of sharing this particular bit of trivia: There are actually four passages in the Torah where Moses is presented with an unprecedented situation to which he does not know how to respond. These are Moses' moments of uncertainty. The case of the blasphemer here in our *parsha* is the first. The other three are all found in the Book of Numbers. There is the case of *Pesach Sheni*, the Second Passover in Numbers 9; the man who gathers wood on Shabbat in Numbers 15, and the daughters of Zelophehad who protest the laws of inheritance in Numbers 27. Without getting into the details of these other three, suffice it to say that in each

¹ Leviticus 24:12.

case, Moses encounters an unprecedented situation to which he does not know the right response. And in each case, he responds as he does here in the case of the blasphemer: He puts everything on hold and seeks an answer from God.

Moses could have made a judgment in the moment. He had been entrusted by God to lead the people. We know from earlier in the Torah that at one point in time, he spent much of his day adjudicating difficult legal cases. But in these four instances, he does what some of us struggle to do: He admits that he does not know the answer. He is unsure of how to move forward. So he pauses, puts the situation on hold, and seeks counsel from God. There is a great deal for us to learn from Moses' example here. Whether we are leading an entire nation through a wilderness, or trying to get ourselves through some difficult or trying time: pausing to better understand the situation before us could be invaluable. An immediate response is not always possible. For some of us, it is instinctual to try to solve problems as soon as they arise, to fix them and moved beyond them, to treat uncertainty as a sort of puzzle or riddle to be solved. But many of the situations that we encounter during our lives are not riddles to be solved. Moses understood that certain situations were beyond his expertise, beyond his capacity to adjudicate. So he pauses, he puts things on hold, and he turns to God.

Whether it is trying to make sense of the tragedy of this Lag B'Omer at Mount Meron, or grappling with any other challenging situation, we have the opportunity to emulate Moses and his humility. We can humbly acknowledge that we simply do not understand. We do not know *why* this particular thing happened, at least not in the cosmic sense. News reports from Israel have already started pointing the finger to this or that thing, assigning blame to this or that party. There will be a time and place for that. Surely something must be done to prevent such tragedies in the future. But the dead have not yet all been buried, some have not even been identified as of yesterday morning when I wrote this sermon. The initial response is to step back and turn to God. We can ask: Why did this happen? What can we do? What should we do?

Moses was lucky. When he turned to God for counsel and support, God always provided him with an answer, albeit not always the answer that Moses may have wanted. But for us, when we turn to God, we may not always have the satisfaction of receiving a timely response from the Creator. Nevertheless, our tradition teaches us to turn to God.

When I taught about the Omer on Passover, I shared a teaching from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory. I want to share it again now because it speaks to this moment: "The custom of mourning during the Omer without saying exactly why testifies to the extraordinary Jewish capacity to suffer tragedy without despair, surviving and enduring through faith in the future and in life itself."² When we mourn, we turn to God and say בֵּינֵינוּ הָאֱמֶת, Blessed is God, the Judge of Truth. We cannot explain the past, but we take comfort in knowing that God will comfort us and lead us into the future. When we celebrate, we turn to God and say שְׂהֵחֵינּוּ הַדָּהָה, praising God for life and the profound sense of gratitude we feel in moments of joy. We take comfort in the idea that even if we do not know why—we we are blessed with good times and why we must suffer the unfortunate ones, God knows why. We need not hold all of the answers or explanations to life's quandaries, whether they are matters of legal minutiae or theological predicaments. If Moses could emulate the value of humility, acknowledging that there were things that even he did not know, then we too may do the

² Jonathan Sacks, *Ceremony & Celebration*, p. 224.

same. Not knowing is not an admission of defeat; it is a demonstration of humility. And it is an opportunity to turn towards God, seeking answers, seeking comfort, seeking hope. We hope that those who were injured are healed, that those who suffered the loss of loved ones are comforted, and that, in due time, answers will help prevent this from happening again.