

## **This Week in Torah *Emor***

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Each fall, I am invited to work with High School seniors on their college application essays. It is a true privilege to assist teens whom I have known for most [if not all] of their lives to find the right words to put into an essay. It is quite a stressful process for them as they have one shot to make an impression to show their character, a glimpse of their intellect and share what truly makes them unique. O, and it cannot exceed 500 words! As a result, every word has significance and cannot be superfluous. Every word has to be just so; used in the proper context, with perfect grammar, with no spelling mistakes.

It is not uncommon for me to compare the scrutiny of their essay to how we study Torah. Throughout the ages, biblical commentators and rabbinic sages have examined every word and nuance; digging deeper for hidden meanings. Mystics would teach that the Hebrew word *PaRDeS* [meaning orchard] represents 4 levels of understanding Torah—*pey* is for the *pashat*, the simple meaning of what is going on; the *resh* is the *remez* for the hint of something deeper; *drash* is next which is the interpretation; and finally the mystical and secretive meaning of the text is the *sod*, which is represented by the *samech*. Forgive me for being glib—but there is a lot to be gleaned in the words of Torah—more at stake than a college essay for sure; it is the essence of our souls and our very existence!

The opening verse of this week's *parasha* states: "The LORD said to Moses: Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: None shall defile himself for any [dead] person among his kin..." A simple verse--- tell the *kohanim* not to touch anything dead; if they do they will be defiled. But the rabbis noticed that the verb to speak/say [*a-m-r*] appears 3 times in the same verse of Torah. Is it for emphasis? Is it for intensity? Is this an interpretation coming out of nothing?

The Chasidic Master, Reb Dov Baer, was the heir to the Ba'al Shem Tov's legacy. His leadership helped cultivate the world of *chasidut*—Chasidic thought and theology. He

wrote: “[the first time] the *kohanim* prepares the people to strive to return to perfection... [the second time] they are to guard their souls so not to be defiled by the people’s actions.... [the third time] is to be cautious not to defile themselves and their souls because of their arrogance.” This implies that the priestly class should teach in detail all sorts of precautions. Then they personally need to be on guard in case a person who has been defiled transmits it to them. And finally, their arrogance needs to be in check lest they suppose that they are above such an infraction.

This intensity is a perfect example of how we should approach our morality and our ethical standards. We should speak of them with clarity to others, be cautious that other’s moral fallibility can’t be associated with us in a sort of guilt-by-association type of way and we should never be so arrogant as to assume that we can never transgress those standards—sin crouches at the door, as it says in Genesis 4.

Finally, a word to the High School seniors—you have put such intensity in the writing of that essay. You think that you have much riding on its merit—and that you do. But in the scope of life, that intensity should apply to the depth of your character and how you live your lives each moment of each day.