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Let Your Left Hand Push Away While Your Right Hand Draws Near

I don't know when the first human being is going to be cloned, but I do know where the first human being will be cloned and I know who that person will be and I know why. I'm talking about the reproductive cloning of human beings - not cloning an extra kidney or an extra liver in a lab to heal someone with organ failure - but the actual cloning of an entire person. It will take place in Israel because Israel is perhaps the only country on Earth where there are no government restrictions on research into human cloning. What could explain that fact?

At the beginning of *Parashat Emor* the Torah describes the prohibition of a kohen becoming impure through contact or proximity with any dead body. He cannot walk-in a cemetery, or be in a room with a deceased person even attend a funeral. The Torah does, however, allow the kohen to attend the funeral of his mother, father, sister, brother, son, and daughter. Who isn't listed on the list of exceptions? The kohen's wife.

My Great-Uncle Felix a"h once said in jest to his wife, when lovingly teasing her together with their daughter, "she and I related to each other by blood but I'm only related to you by marriage."

Could that be what the Torah is saying? Can a kohen only attend the funeral of a blood relative?

No. A kohen does indeed attend the funeral of his wife but she is implicit on the list of relatives rather than being explicit.

The Torah introduces the list of relatives whose burial the kohen can attend in these words:

בִּי אִם־לְשֵׂאוֹ הַקָּרֵב אֵלָיו לְאִמּוֹ וּלְאָבִיו וּלְבָנָו וּלְבִתּוֹ וּלְאָחִיו:

"except for the relatives that are closest to him: his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, etc..."

The rabbis of old noted (in *Torat Kohanim* and the Gemara in *Yevamot*), as quoted by Rashi and others, that the phrase בִּי אִם־לְשֵׂאוֹ the relative closest to him, can only refer to the kohen's wife. Hazel are saying the kohen's wife is so close to the kohen that she does not need to be explicit.

The Torah can be read as saying that *only* ties of blood and kinship matter. Only someone related to the kohen from the day you he is born can warrant his exit from the *beit hamikdash*. Hazel reject that opinion and say that the marriage, a relationship that requires the choice and consent of the kohen and his wife can also create bond that is significant and substantial. A kohen leaves *beit hamikdash* to bury his wife. We learned last week that the *kohen gadol* must be married if he is to serve on Yom Kippur. He needs a nuclear family of his own, he needs a family he chose and built, for whom he can effect atonement before he can earn atonement for the rest of the *kohanim*, the family he was born into, before finally bringing atonement to all of Israel. (Remember the three times we bow on Yom Kippur when we reenact the Yom Kippur service in the *beit hamikdash*).

These verses, and the way they were understood by the rabbis, tell us something about the Torah's perspective on marriage. These verses tell us something about those we are related to on the day we are born, and those who become family because of our choices. But there are some things that these verses don't say.

Nowhere in *Sefer Vayikra* - not in the description of the Kohen's family life in *Parashat Emor* and not in the long list of incest prohibitions in last week's *parshiot*, is there a prohibition against cloning or against assisted reproductive technology of any kind. Christians learn about medical ethics from Genesis; Jews learn about medical ethics from *Sefer Vayikra*. Christians look to Genesis and the Biblical narrative there and see the

human population of the world growing through natural and unassisted procreation. This eventually led to Catholic teachings that condemn many forms of assisted reproductive technology as well as artificial birth control. This, in turn, influenced ethicists of every religious background to condemn human cloning as a form of “playing God” and interfering with nature. Ethicists from every religious background, that is, except for one.

My friend and colleague, Don Seeman, a rabbi and anthropologist has suggested that much of Christian medical ethics is rooted in Biblical stories, especially the creation account of Genesis, whereas we look first to the Torah’s laws for normative guidance.

The Torah is assumed to have 365 distinct prohibitions. That’s one prohibition for each day of the year. That’s a very long list. If something isn’t on that list, it’s probably OK. The reproductive cloning of human beings might be a terrible idea and usher in the dystopian future imagined by science fiction and that probably comes to your minds when I say “cloned human beings.” But, I’m also glad that the State of Israel affords Jews the chance to experiment with our own unique and distinct ethical traditions and priorities.

Of course many things are indeed prohibited by the Torah or by rabbinic legislation, or by norms and customs that develop among observant Jews over the generations. Here too, we need to relate to prohibitions and to limits and to restrictions in a positive and affirming way. I recently had the chance to study with Rabbi Yosef Tzvi Rimon, a popular *halakhab* teacher and author, and the rabbi of the “southern neighborhood” of Alon Shvut in Gush Etzion. At the annual convention of the Rabbinical Council of America earlier this week, Rav Rimon shared a compelling philosophy of mitzvah education that every prohibition and every restriction and every burden that Judaism imposes must be about something positive and affirmative if it will appeal to the next generation. He is correct. But he isn’t only correct about transmitting Jewish commitments to our children. A positive and affirming vision is also necessary to reinforce our own commitments.

We cannot impose the burdens of a dual-curriculum on our day-school students without showing them that Torah study animates and inspires us as adults. We cannot limit the non-kosher foods that our children eat or teach them to recite *berakhot* before and after eating, without showing them how we ourselves cherish the opportunity for *kedushah* - real holiness and reflection - that is afforded by eating in a Jewish fashion.

And we have no hope of maintaining a commitment to Shabbat, among ourselves, let alone among our community’s children, unless we make the day about creating something positive instead of merely avoiding lots and lots of prohibited details.

After discussing some of the rules governing the *kehunah*, *Parashat Emor* shifts to an overview of the Jewish calendar. When describing the schedule of Shabbat and holidays that comprise our calendar, the Torah uses the word “*shabbaton*” to describe Shabbat and also to describe some of the holidays. So, for example, the Torah says:

שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲשֶׂה מְלָאכָה וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבַּת שַׁבְּתוֹן מְקַרְא־קֹדֶשׁ כָּל־מְלָאכָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ שַׁבַּת הוּא לַיהוָה בְּכָל מוֹשְׁבֹתֵיכֶם:

That’s obviously referring to Shabbat.

And the Torah also says:

דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאַחַד לַחֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם שַׁבְּתוֹן זְכָרוֹן תְּרוּעָה מְקַרְא־קֹדֶשׁ:

“Speak to the Israelite people thus: In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts.”

This is obviously referring to Rosh Hashannah.

So what is a *Shabbaton*? Shabbat is supposed to be a “*shabbaton*” and Rosh Hashanah is supposed to be a “*shabbaton*.” Also Sukkot. Also Yom Kippur. What does it mean?

Ramban, in his commentary to the Torah, says that “*Shabbaton*” is the positive and affirmative vision that we strive for when we observe Shabbat and holidays.

“We are commanded on Yom Tov [and Shabbat] to rest from those activities that technically do not qualify as *melacha*, [the activities that the Torah prohibits].” This means that it isn’t enough to avoid plowing or reaping or writing or any of the Biblical forms of labor, but that all of the everyday activities that the Torah itself never prohibited, like schlepping furniture around our homes, buying, selling, and bartering items, or going to work, need to cease on Shabbat and Yom Tov for those days to become true days of rest.

“Therefore,” he concludes, “the Torah commands us ‘*Shabbaton*’ -- that these should be days of rest and cessation of work, and not days of labor and toil.”

The details of Shabbat are indispensable. But they are indispensable because they clear away a space wherein we can create something spectacular. We can tell our children that Shabbat is not a day to go to the movies or visit the mall. And at times we may struggle with a temptation to head back to the office, or to offer our edits to the latest draft of a report written by our colleagues. We may want to check the stock market in Tokyo. I personally feel a temptation every time some breaking political scandal occurs on a Friday afternoon - it seems they all happen on Friday afternoon - and I want to see what everyone has to say about it.

We won’t be successful in preserving Shabbat in the long term without being able to tell ourselves what it is all for. Restrictions on Shabbat and yom tov clear a space for family, for community, for God, for reading a book that requires concentration, and for the sort of thoughts and reflections and decisions that require tranquility.

The Talmud in Sotah says:

תנו רבנן לעולם תהא שמאל דוחה וימין מקרבת

Push away with the left hand, while drawing near with the right hand. Boundaries need to be drawn, but never for the sake of having boundaries, only for the sake of creating a space within the boundaries for building something positive. We are to use our weaker hand, our left hand, to push away things that need to be kept outside the boundary, but then we use our more dominant hand to bring close to us around a positive and compelling vision. (With apologies to everyone who is left-handed).

We see a tragic failure of this dynamic at the end of Parashat Emor.

וַיֵּצֵא בְּרֵאשִׁית יִשְׂרָאֵלִית וְהוּא בְּרֵאשִׁית מִצְרַיִם בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּנְצֹחַ בְּמַחְנֶה בֶן הַיִּשְׂרָאֵלִית וְאִישׁ הַיִּשְׂרָאֵלִי:
There came out among the Israelites one whose mother was Israelite and whose father was Egyptian. And a fight broke out in the camp between that half-Israelite and a certain Israelite.

וַיִּקַּב בֶּן־הָאִשָּׁה הַיִּשְׂרָאֵלִית אֶת־הַשֵּׁם וַיִּקְלַל וַיִּבְיֵאוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְשֵׁם אִמּוֹ שְׁלֹמִית בַּת־דִּבְרִי לְמַטֵּה־דָן:
The son of the Israelite woman pronounced the Name in blasphemy, and he was brought to Moses—now his mother’s name was Shelomith daughter of Dibri of the tribe of Dan—

What is this about? Rashi fills in some missing details from the Midrash that emerge from some clues in the Torah itself. This individual wanted to pitch his tent among the tribe of Dan, the tribe of his mother’s family. But his father was Egyptian and the members of the tribe of Dan would not allow him to do so. Moshe had to conclude that they were correct. Jewish identity follows the maternal line and is passed down from mother to child, but tribal affiliation is passed down from father to child. He didn’t belong among the tribe of Dan.

But he still needed a place. Where was he supposed to belong? This individual confronted boundaries and exclusion with no hope of ever finding a place of his own. It's fine to be proud of one's lineage. Apparently it is OK to preserve tent-pitching rights for those who can prove they deserve one based on their lineage. But to what end? Being proud of one's family only makes sense if there is room for everyone to find a space.

We should push away with our left hand while drawing near to us with our right!

The bonds to our kin that accompany us from birth are important and those bonds need to be preserved. Maybe it would be too much to have an outsider pitch his tent in a place he doesn't belong.

But the bonds we create through our own choices also matter. A kohen leaves the *beit hamikdash* to bury his wife even though that relationship was one that the two of them chose for themselves of their own free will. Wouldn't it have been better if this excluded man had found a place to live among us?

We push off with our left hands and draw near with our right hands. Every boundary has to be about creating a space inside that boundary to build something positive. Too often in our community, we have nothing to fill the space created for the boundary and we compensate by building higher and higher walls. Until we fill the space with something positive, the high walls will be for naught.