**S.A.L.T – PARASHAT EMOR**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Emor begins with God instructing Moshe to convey to the *kohanim* the prohibition against coming in contact with a human corpse: “Speak to the *kohanim*, the sons of Aharon, and say to them that one shall not become impure to a soul among his nation.” This section continues with other restrictions imposed upon the *kohanim*, specifically, on the women they are permitted to marry.

Noting the seemingly redundant expressions, “Speak to the *kohanim*” and “say to them,” the Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 26:5) comments: “The beings in the upper world, in whom the evil inclination is not found – a single statement suffices for them… But the beings in the lower world, who have an evil inclination – if only two statements would suffice!” The repetitious formulation of “*Emor…ve-amarta*,” according to the Midrash, reflects the fact that human beings, unlike angels, often require multiple repetitions of a command before they are willing to comply – and even then, compliance is not guaranteed. Whereas the angels immediately and instinctively react to every command they are given, obeying without any reluctance or hesitation, we human beings are insubordinate by nature, and experience a wide range of strong drives and impulses that need to be resisted in the process of observing the *mitzvot*. And thus for the angels, a single command suffices to elicit the desired response and compliance, but for us, multiple commands are necessary as we struggle with ourselves and try to overcome our innate resistance to subservience.

The question, though, arises, why is this message conveyed here, specifically in the context of the laws of the *kohanim*?

Rav Dovid of Kotzk ([*Emet Mi-Kotzk Titzmach*, p. 297](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=22061&st=&pgnum=302)) explained that this message is especially poignant in the context of the *kohanim*, who served as the nation’s spiritual figures. One might have assumed that while ordinary people require the double command of “*emor*” and “*ve-amarta*,” as we struggle with our drives and instincts, the *kohanim*, the sacred officiates in God’s Temple, resemble the angels, and respond immediately and without any reluctance to every command. The Midrash comes to teach us that even the *kohanim* require “*emor*” and “*ve-amarta*,” that even those who have achieved spiritual greatness must struggle. As human beings, we are unable to act upon our religious obligations with the instinctive compliance of the heavenly angels. All of us, regardless of how much we grow and achieve, face the challenges placed before us by the *yetzer ha-ra*, and thus we will all feel reluctance even if we are sincerely committed to obey God’s commands.

The struggle of “*emor ve-amarta*” is endemic to the human condition, and will always be an integral part of religious life. And the Torah thus emphasizes specifically in the context of the special laws of the *kohanim*, the nation’s spiritual elite, that observance does not always come easily, and is often fraught with difficult obstacles and struggles.

Sunday

Yesterday, we noted the comment of the Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 26:5) explaining a seemingly repetitious expression in the opening verse of Parashat Emor. When God instructs Moshe to convey to the *kohanim* the special laws that apply to them, He says, “**Speak** to the *kohanim*…and **say** to them,” suggesting that the command needed to be repeated. The Midrash explains that as human beings must struggle against their negative inclinations, commands must be repeated for us to comply. This is in contrast to the angels, who respond immediately and instinctively, without any hesitation or struggle.

In yesterday’s discussion, we raised the question of why this concept is expressed specifically here, in the context of *tum’at kohanim* – the prohibition that forbids *kohanim* from coming in contact with a human corpse. Why is the message of “*Emor…ve-amarta*,” the need to struggle against our negative tendencies, presented specifically in this context?

One possibility, perhaps, is that this command offers a classic example of two legitimate and important values that conflict. Our tradition has always ranked tending to the needs of the deceased and attending burials among the most significant acts of kindness that a person can perform. For this reason, even *kohanim* are allowed to bury immediate family members, and even a *kohen gadol*, who may not bury family members, may bury a person who has no one else to bury him. In all other instances, however, despite the value of giving honor to the deceased by participating in burials, *kohanim* may not attend, due to the need for them to maintain their special status of purity. *Kohanim* are prohibited to become *tamei* not because tending to the needs of a deceased person is not important, but rather because the need to preserve their special sanctity overrides the value of attending a burial (except in the cases noted above).

For this reason, perhaps, the Torah specifically in this context alludes to the struggles and hesitation we often experience with regard to *mitzva* observance. Often, the most difficult “*yetzer ha-ra*” is a legitimate conflicting value or concern, those times when the choice is not between good and evil, but between one form of good and another form of good, and *Halakha* requires us to favor one over the other. For angels, there is only right and wrong; the division is clear and unambiguous, and so they act immediately. We, however, live in a far more complex and confusing world, where important values and concerns often conflict with one another. And it is specifically for such instances, perhaps, that *Chazal* in the Midrash remind us of “*Emor…ve-amarta*,” of the difficulties and challenges entailed in doing the right thing.

Just as a *kohen* may not expose himself to *tum’a* despite the value of giving honor to a deceased person, similarly, we are often times required to favor one important value over another, and this marks one of the numerous difficult challenges that we confront as we try to live our lives as committed and faithful servants of our Creator.

Monday

In our last two editions of “S.A.L.T.,” we discussed the comment of the Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 26:5) made in reference to the opening verse of Parashat Emor. Noting that God instructs Moshe twice to convey to the *kohanim* their special laws, the Midrash writes, “The beings in the upper world, in whom the evil inclination is not found – a single statement suffices for them… But the beings in the lower world, who have an evil inclination – if only two statements would suffice!”

One possible explanation of the Midrash’s comment is that it refers to the concept of repentance. Unlike angels, who are flawless and never err, we are prone to failure. And thus whereas angels require just a single command, we frequently need two – the original command, and then a second after we fail to comply with the first. The second “statement” mentioned by the Midrash perhaps alludes to the command we must hear even after failure, after we disobey. The Midrash is telling us that although we often make mistakes and fail, the commands remain relevant and binding even then. If we fail to obey the first time, the command is issued a second time. And if we still fail, then the command is heard a third time. And so on. It is understood that we are not angels, and thus from outset, the commands are given multiple times – indicating to us that we can and must rebound from failure rather than assume that God no longer desires our *mitzvot* once we have fallen.

If so, then we can perhaps also explain why this notion of “two statements” is presented specifically here, in the context of the special laws of the *kohanim*. Spiritual leaders, perhaps more than others, must be reminded that perfection is not necessary for success. Even if a *kohen* fails the first time, he still retains his priestly status and is given an opportunity to improve. This message is important not only for the *kohanim* themselves, but also for the rest of the nation, who must remember not to expect flawless perfection from their religious leaders. While angels are perfect, human beings – even the greatest among them – aren’t. And thus even the special commands to the *kohanim* are issued with “two statements,” reminding us all that the proper response to failure is recovery, not despair, and that this is true of all people, including those from whom we rightfully expect and demand especially high standards of piety.

Tuesday

Parashat Emor concludes with the disturbing story of the *megadef* – the man who publicly blasphemed God in the middle of the Israelite camp. After the incident, the *megadef* was detained until God instructed Moshe that he should be put to death.

Rashi (24:12) cites the comment of *Torat Kohanim* that the story of the *megadef* occurred at the same time as a different unfortunate incident of a public Torah violation, namely, the Shabbat desecration of the *mekoshesh eitzim*, of which we read in Sefer Bamidbar (15:32-36). In that case, too, the violator was held in detainment while the nation waited for God to instruct Moshe how to respond, and *Torat Kohanim* tells us that the sin of the *mekoshesh eitzim* was committed at around the same time as the *megadef*’s blasphemy. However, *Torat Kohanim* tells, the two perpetrators were detained in two different places, and were not held together.

We might wonder why *Chazal* found it necessary to inform us that these two sinners were not detained together. Why is it significant that the nation’s officials held them in different locations while awaiting God’s instructions?

The answer, perhaps, is that our Sages sought to teach us that wrongdoers should not be “lumped together” in the figurative sense, either. Each wrongful act has its own context, background, causes, and unique set of circumstances. We should not view all acts of misconduct as being cut from the same proverbial cloth, as being all the same, and as deserving the same kind of response. *Chazal* here call for a nuanced and calculated reaction to sinful conduct, urging us to carefully consider each act on its own in light of its particular nature and context before responding. It is worth noting that *Chazal* indeed commend the *mekoshesh* for his noble intentions, as he chose to violate Shabbat and be put to death in order to demonstrate the relevance of the commands after the sin of the spies (Midrash cited by Tosefot, Bava Batra 119). When it comes to the *megadef*, however, *Chazal* seem less charitable in their assessment of his offense. Accordingly, we might suggest that our Sages’ depiction of these violators as being incarcerated in separate locations is intended to warn against mindlessly grouping all mistakes together, and to instead respond to each in a sound, prudent fashion.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Emor introduces the story of the *megadef* (“blasphemer”) by saying, “The son of an Israelite woman…**went out** among the Israelites…” (24:10). Rashi, noting the seemingly peculiar description of the *megadef* “going out” to curse the Name of God, cites three readings from the Midrash of this word, “*va-yeitzei*” (“went out”). The first interprets the term as “*mei-olamo yatza*,” which literally means, “he left from his world.” The *Sefer Ha-zikaron* (cited in the *Torat Chayim* edition of the Chumash) explains that the *megadef* condemned himself to death – to departing from this world – through his grievous sin, for which he was sentenced to capital punishment.

The [Klausenberger Rebbe](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=36046&st=&pgnum=78&hilite=), however, explained “*mei-olamo yatza*” differently, suggesting that it relates to Rashi’s other two interpretations of this verse. The first of these is that the *megadef* arrived at blasphemy after learning the *halakha* presented in the previous section – the obligation of *lechem ha-panim*, the special bread baked and placed on the table in the *Bet Ha-mikdash*. The bread would remain on the table for an entire week before being removed and replaced with fresh bread. The *megadef*’s decline to blasphemy began when he angrily objected to this law, arguing that having stale bread on the table in the Temple is disrespectful. Rashi’s final interpretation is that the *megadef* arrived at blasphemy when he lost a court case brought against him. In his frustration and resentment, he cursed God. The Klausenberger Rebbe suggested that the *megadef*’s fundamental flaw which led him to his tragic end was “*olamo*” – the fact that he lived in his own world, convinced that the truth was found only with him, that he was always correct and everybody else was always wrong. He left his “world” only to condemn and criticize, not to consider other possibilities or learn from others. In his arrogance and inflexibility, he refused to accept a policy in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* which in his mind was improper, and he refused to acknowledge that his stance in a civil suit was wrong. The *megadef* cloistered himself in “*olamo*,” in a very narrow, rigid mindset that could not consider alternatives or different perspectives, and this is what led to his downfall.

Certainly, there will be times when we need to stick firmly to our convictions in the face of opposition. However, the Rebbe’s insight warns against closing ourselves off in a narrow ideological and conceptual space that does not allow room for even considering different perspectives. There may be times when, as in the case of the *megqdef*, we might be sincerely troubled by something we perceive as dishonorable to God, but which in truth is what God Himself wants. We must not rush to conclusions based on our intuition and instinctive reactions. Rather, we must always consider whether perhaps other perspectives may be valid, that our understanding is limited and often flawed, and that we do not always have the absolute and definitive truth about any given subject.

Thursday

Yesterday, we noted the different interpretations cited by Rashi in explaining the Torah’s introduction to the story of the blasphemer (the “*megadef*”): “The son of an Israelite woman **went out**” (“*Va-yeitzei ben isha Yisraelit*” – 24:10). Rashi first presents a somewhat ambiguous interpretation, writing, “*mei-olamo yatza*” (literally, “he left from his world”). While the simplest explanation of this remark is that the blasphemer brought about his own death by cursing the Name of God, writers and *darshanim* have offered other possibilities to uncover the possible deeper meaning of the phrase “*mei-olamo yatza*.”

Rav Chaim Valkin (in [*Beit Hillel*, Nissan, 5768](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=50273&st=&pgnum=66&hilite=)) suggested explaining this phrase in light of Rashi’s other interpretation of the verse. Rashi writes that the *megadef* committed his offense after leaving Moshe’s court, where he had lost the case brought against him by the tribe of Dan. As his father was Egyptian, the *megadef* had no tribal affiliation through his father, and so he naturally pitched his tent among his mother’s tribe, the tribe of Dan. The tribe of Dan insisted that he leave, as he did not legally belong to their tribe, and Moshe ruled in their favor. Angry and resentful, the man blasphemed God. Rav Valkin suggested that the phrase “*mei-olamo yatza*” also refers to this background to the story. The *megadef* had created a life for himself among the tribe of Dan. This was where he saw himself, and where he looked forward to building his family and his home. Unfortunately, the Danites cruelly expelled him from their midst and manipulated the legal system to achieve this sinister goal. The *megadef* was sent out of his “world,” the life that he had built for himself, and this sent him on the road to blasphemy.

One of the lessons that emerge from this explanation is that the “world” we build for ourselves should not be bound to our material assets or other transient, unstable factors. If we are too emotionally bound to our possessions or to a specific set of circumstances, then we will feel shattered when those possessions are lost or those circumstances change. We need to build a “world” – our identity, our dreams and our aspirations – that can survive upheavals and drastic change. The *megadef* resorted to blasphemy because he was too emotionally invested in his membership among Dan, to the point where his entire “world” depended on it. We should try, as much as possible, to build an emotional world that is not bound to any particular set of circumstances, so that we will be able to overcome even the most difficult challenges and weather any storm with our faith, confidence and optimism fully intact.

Friday

Towards the end of Parashat Emor, we read the law condemning to capital punishment one who curses the Name of God (“*ve-nokeiv sheim Hashem mot yumat*” – 24:16).

The Gemara, in Masekhet Sanhedrin (56a), discusses the pragmatic issue of how the court hears testimony to such an offense. In order for the *Beit Din* to sentence an offender to punishment, they must hear clear and precise testimony of what occurred. In the case of blasphemy, of course, we do not wish to have the witnesses repeat verbatim the words which they heard. The solution, as the Gemara instructs, is that throughout the proceedings, the witnesses repeat the curse they heard with a *kinui* (“nickname”); that is to say, they substitute God’s Name with a different name. (The example given by the Gemara is “Yossi.”) This way, they are able to testify to having heard words of blasphemy without actually repeating them. However, even this does not suffice for the *Beit Din* to act upon the testimony. The Gemara teaches that after the court reached its decision to convict the alleged blasphemer, it would still not carry out the sentence until hearing the precise words that he spoke, without any distortion. The judges would therefore send everyone out of the courtroom, and ask one of the witnesses to repeat precisely what he heard. Upon hearing the blasphemy, the judges would stand and rend their garments. The other witnesses would then say, “I, too, heard what he heard.”

The Tolna Rebbe noted the significance of the fact that *Halakha* requires the witness to repeat the words of blasphemy without any changes. This occurred at the end of the judicial process, after the *Beit Din* had thoroughly interrogated and cross-examined the witnesses, and after intensive deliberation. As we know, a *Beit Din* would not sentence a suspected violator to capital punishment if there was any question whatsoever surrounding the truth and accuracy of the witnesses’ testimony. And thus by the time the judges reached the point of instructing one witness to repeat the curse verbatim, they were convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt of the blasphemer’s guilt. Yet, this did not suffice. This thorough process of interrogation did not allow the judges to act upon their sentence until they heard the precise words without modification. *Halakha* demands the extraordinary measure of requiring a witness to repeat words of blasphemy, which then necessitated the judges’ rending of their garments, because of the minuscule possibility that there was some mistake or misunderstanding.

The Tolna Rebbe drew upon this fascinating *halakha* to underscore the importance of delaying judgment upon hearing negative information about others. If this is how far the Torah goes in considering the remotest possibility of a mistake, then certainly we should react skeptically to rumors and murmurings about other people. It is wrong to jump to conclusions about people based on hearsay or our impressions. We must always consider the possibility – even the remote possibility – that there was some mistake or misunderstanding, that the situation is not precisely as it was reported, or there are some mitigating factors involved. The Torah here teaches us of the need to view others favorably and find any basis we can to cast their actions and words in a positive light, and to avoid as much as possible assigning guilt and blame.