

5) As we move on the rest of the list, we seem to be given yet another opening statement (23:4). Why might the Torah give a separate opening for the holidays that will follow? How do they differ from the one mentioned in v.3?



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torahsparks@uscj.org



The weekly Haftarah Commentary
By Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Senior CY Faculty in Talmud and Midrash,
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The Conservative Yeshiva at: cyoffice@uscj.org



The Shirley & Jacob Fuchsberg Center for Conservative Judaism

8 Agron Street, P.O. Box 7456, Jerusalem, Israel 94265

Tel: 972-2-625-6386 Fax: 972-2-623-4127

Israel@uscj.org • www.uscj.org/Israel/



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Emor

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Annual (Leviticus 21:1-24:23): Etz Hayim p. 717-733; Hertz p. 513-528

Triennial (Leviticus 21:1-22:16): Etz Hayim p. 717-722; Hertz p. 513-517

Haftarah (Ezekiel 44:15-31): Etz Hayim p. 734-737; Hertz p. 528-530

The Dark Side of the Quest for Sanctity

Rabbi Joel Levy, Rosh Yeshiva, the Conservative Yeshiva, Jerusalem

On April 13th this year an outspoken journalism student, Mashal Khan, was seized from his dorm room by a mob that stripped and beat him and then shot him dead. Khan had been accused of offending Islam – a dangerous charge in Pakistan, where perceived disrespect for that religion can ignite violent anger. Over 1000 people have been accused under Pakistan's blasphemy laws in the last 30 years and over 65 people have been murdered after being accused of blasphemy.

The primary Torah source dealing with the laws of blasphemy appears in *Vayikra* (Leviticus) at the very end of Parshat Emor (*Vayikra* 24:15-16): “*And you shall speak to the children of Israel saying, whoever curses his God shall bear his sin. And he who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him: both the stranger and he that is born in the land, when he blasphemes the name of the Lord, shall be put to death.*”

Rabbi Yitzchak Karo explains, in his commentary *Toldot Yitzchak*, why the laws of blasphemy are located here, following a series of laws about the sanctity of the priesthood, sacrifices, Shabbat and Holydays, and certain ritual items in the Mishkan. He explains that the blasphemer comes and “repudiates all – the offerer, the sacrifice, and the very existence of God, by blaspheming, as if there is no Law and Judge.”

In other words, the Torah first teaches us at length about the significance of sanctity in Israelite society and then presents us with the blasphemer – the arch-desecrator of the sacred. A society which concentrates on promoting the quest for sanctity will necessarily express its revulsion when that sanctity is desecrated. Such a society will certainly understand blasphemy as a most extreme form of deviance. The Torah reveals here the dark side of the quest for sanctity.

Friends remembered Mashal Khan as an inquisitive and pious Muslim intellectual. “He dreamed of a system where everyone could enjoy justice and equal rights. He was against corruption and the corrupt political setup. I can’t imagine him being against any religion,” said a friend, Saddam Hussain. Khan’s father, Muhammad Iqbal Khan, said his son was, by his nature, out of sync with the traditional values of Pakistan, “He was the kind of a person this society can never tolerate,” he said. “You can call him a revolutionary, reformist, humanist, whatever, but he wasn’t a conservative person. My son was a voice of the voiceless.”

Is it true that the stronger the emphasis on piety and sanctity in a particular society, the more likely that society will be to purge members who challenge the sense of the sacred? As we read the central chapters of the *Chumash* which extol us to be holy and then go on to describe the features of a community committed to holiness, the biblical case of the blasphemer who is to be stoned to death comes as a wake-up call.

If piety inevitably leads to this kind of acute, purging violence, then many will choose to create societies less committed to piety! Most liberal Jewish individuals and communities do indeed opt for a muted form of piety and its concomitant inclusiveness and compassion. Is it impossible to imagine religious communities that are god-fearing and pious and yet celebrate difference and allow for dissent?

A Vort for Parashat Emor Rabbi Daniel Goldfarb, CY Faculty

In Lev 23:2 the Lord says “Eileh hem mo’adai - These are my appointed festivals,” but the very next verse deals with Shabbat, “Six days do work (*malaha*), but on the seventh day...complete rest.” The Vilna Gaon explained the connection - there are seven festive days in the calendar: Rosh HaShana; Sukkot, first day and last; Passover, first day and last; Shavuot; and Yom Kippur. On the first six we are permitted to do *malaha*, specifically *malehet ohel nefesh*, preparing food to be eaten that day. But “the seventh,” Yom Kippur, is a day of *complete* rest, when “no manner of *malaha*/work may be done,” even the preparation of food (v. 28).

Table Talk

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, CY Faculty

Our Parasha speaks at length about the rules pertaining to Kohanim (priests) and sacrifices, and the holidays on the Torah calendar.

1) The Parasha opens with various restrictions on the Kohanim. One of them is a limitation on a Kohen who has a physical disability (21:21-23). What limitation is put on that person? Despite this limitation, an important privilege is granted. What is the privilege? Why might we have thought the Kohen will not be able to participate in this?

2) There are other reasons for restricting Kohanim’s participation. According to 22:3-7, what forbids a Kohen from sacrificing? How does this restriction differ from that of the Kohen who has a physical disability? Why do you think that the two cases are treated differently?

3) In 22:26-33 we are given basic sacrificial rules regarding all animals – what might be sacrificed and for how long it may be consumed. What is the minimal age for an animal to be able to be used as a burnt offering? What might be the reason(s) for this?

4) Chapter 23 speaks of holy times. What is the first special time that is mentioned (23:1-3)? Why do you think that the Torah started with this time? What is the reason given for its observance?