



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Session 31 Emor— Priestly Purity

Text

ויקרא כא

א וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אָמַר אֶל-הַכֹּהֲנִים בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן וְאִמְרַתְּ אֲלֵהֶם לִנְפֹשׁ לֹא-יִטְמָא בְּעַמּוּי. ב כִּי אִם-
לְשֹׂארוֹ הַקֶּרֶב אֵלָיו וְלֹאֲבִיו וְלִבְנוֹ וְלִבְתּוֹ וְלִאֲחִיו. ג וְלֹאֲחִיתוֹ הַבְּתוּלָה הַקְּרוּבָה אֵלָיו אֲשֶׁר לֹא-הֵיטָה
לְאִישׁ לֶה יִטְמָא. ד לֹא יִטְמָא בְּעַמּוּי לְהַחֲלוֹ. ה לֹא-יִקְרַח (יִקְרָחוּ) קְרָחָה בְּרֹאשׁוֹ וּפְאֵת זָקְנָם לֹא
יִגְלַחוּ וּבִבְשָׂרָם לֹא יִשְׂרְטוּ שְׂרָטָתוֹ. ו קֹדֶשׁ שִׁיִּם יִהְיוּ לֹאֵל הֵיחָם וְלֹא יִחַלְלוּ שֵׁם אֵל הֵיחָם כִּי אֶת-אֲשֵׁי יְהוָה
לֶחֶם אֵל הֵיחָם הֵם מִקְרִיבִים וְהֵיוּ קֹדֶשׁ. ז אִשָּׁה זֹנֶה וְחֻלְלָה לֹא יִקְחוּ וְאִשָּׁה גְרוּשָׁה מֵאִשָּׁה לֹא יִקְחוּ כִּי-
קֹדֶשׁ הוּא לֹאֵל הֵיוּ. ח וְקִדְשָׁתוֹ כִּי-אֶת-לֶחֶם אֵל הֵיךְ הוּא מִקְרִיב קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה-לָךְ כִּי קִדּוֹשׁ אָנֹכִי יְהוָה
מִקְדָּשְׁכֶם. ט וּבֵת אִישׁ כִּי הוּא כִּי תַחַל לְזִנוּת אֶת-אִבִּיהָ הִיא מְחַלֶּלֶת בְּאֵשׁ תִּשְׂרָף. {ס} י וְהַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל
מֵאֲחָיו אֲשֶׁר-יוֹצֵק עַל-רֹאשׁוֹ שְׂמֹן הַמִּשְׁחָה וּמֵלֵא אֶת-יָדָיו לְלִבָּשׁ אֶת-הַבְּגָדִים אֶת-רֹאשׁוֹ לֹא יִפְרֹעַ וּבִגְדָיו
לֹא יִפְרֹם. יא וְעַל כָּל-נִפְשׁוֹת מֵת לֹא יִבֹּא לְאָבִיו וְלֹאֲמוֹ לֹא יִטְמָא. יב וּמִן-הַמִּקְדָּשׁ לֹא יֵצֵא וְלֹא יִחַלֵּל
אֶת מִקְדָּשׁ אֵל הֵיוּ כִּי נָזַר שְׂמֹן מִשְׁחַת אֵל הֵיוּ עָלָיו אָנֹכִי יְהוָה. יג וְהוּא אִשָּׁה בְּתוּלָיָה יִקַּח. יד אֲלֵמְנָה
וְגֵרוּשָׁה וְחֻלְלָה זֹנֶה אֶת-אֵלָהּ לֹא יִקַּח כִּי אִם-בְּתוּלָה מֵעַמּוּי יִקַּח אִשָּׁה. טו וְלֹא-יִחַלֵּל זָרְעוֹ בְּעַמּוּי כִּי אָנֹכִי
יְהוָה מִקְדָּשׁוֹ.

ויקרא כב

י וְכַל-זָר לֹא-יֵאָכֵל קֹדֶשׁ תּוֹשֵׁב כִּי הוּא וְשֹׁכֵר לֹא-יֵאָכֵל קֹדֶשׁ. יא וְכִי הוּא כִּי-יִקְנֶה נֶפֶשׁ קִנְיָן כִּסְפוֹ הוּא
יֵאָכֵל בּוֹ וְיִלִּיד בֵּיתוֹ הֵם יֵאָכְלוּ בְּלַחְמוֹ. יב וּבֵת-כִּי הוּא כִּי תִהְיֶה לְאִישׁ זָר הוּא בְּתֵרוּמַת הַקֹּדְשִׁים לֹא
תֵאָכֵל. יג וּבֵת-כִּי הוּא כִּי תִהְיֶה אֲלֵמְנָה וְגֵרוּשָׁה וְזָרַע אִין לָהּ וְשִׁבָּה אֶל-בֵּית אִבִּיהָ כְּנִעוּרֶיהָ מִלֶּחֶם אִבִּיהָ
תֵאָכֵל וְכַל-זָר לֹא-יֵאָכֵל בּוֹ. יד וְאִישׁ כִּי-יֵאָכֵל קֹדֶשׁ בְּשִׂגְגָה וַיִּסַּף חֲמִשִּׁיתוֹ עָלָיו וְנָתַן לָכֵן הוּא אֶת-
הַקֹּדֶשׁ. טו וְלֹא יִחַלְלוּ אֶת-קֹדְשֵׁי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת אֲשֶׁר-נִרְיָמוּ לִיהוָה. טז וְהַשִּׂיאוּ אוֹתָם עֹר וְאִשְׁמָה
בְּאֲכָלָם אֶת-קֹדְשֵׁיהֶם כִּי אָנֹכִי יְהוָה מִקְדָּשָׁם.

Vayiqra 21

1 The Lord said to Moses: Speak to the priests, the children of Aaron, and say to them:
None shall defile him/herself for any [dead] person among their kin, 2 except for the relatives that are
closest to him/her: his/her mother, his/her father, his/her son, his/her daughter, and his/her brother; 3 also
for an unwed sister, close to him/her because she has not married, for her s/he may defile him/herself. 4
But s/he shall not defile him/herself as a kinsman by marriage, and so profane him/herself.

5 They shall not shave smooth any part of their heads, or cut the side-growth of their beards, or make
gashes in their flesh. 6 They shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God; for they
offer the Lord's offerings by fire, the food of their God, and so must be holy.

7 They shall not marry a woman defiled by harlotry, nor shall they marry one divorced from her spouse.
For they are holy to their God 8 and you must treat them as holy, since they offer the food of your God;
they shall be holy to you, for I the Lord who sanctify you am holy.



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9 When the daughter of a priest defiles herself through harlotry, it is her father whom she defiles; she shall be put to the fire.

10 The priest who is exalted above his/her fellows, on whose head the anointing oil has been poured and who has been ordained to wear the vestments, shall not bare his/her head or rend his/her vestments. 11 S/he shall not go in where there is any dead body; s/he shall not defile him/herself even for his/her father or mother. 12 S/he shall not go outside the sanctuary and profane the sanctuary of his/her God, for upon him/her is the distinction of the anointing oil of his/her God, Mine the Lord's. 13 He may marry only a woman who is a virgin. 14 A widow, or a divorced woman, or one who is degraded by harlotry — such he may not marry. Only a virgin of his own kin may he take to wife — 15 that he may not profane his offspring among his kin, for I the Lord have sanctified him. . . .

Vayiqra 22

10 No lay person shall eat of the sacred donations. No bound or hired laborer of a priest shall eat of the sacred donations; 11 but a person who is a priest's property by purchase may eat of them; and those that are born into his household may eat of his food. 12 If a priest's daughter marries a layman, she may not eat of the sacred gifts; 13 but if the priest's daughter is widowed or divorced and without offspring, and is back in her father's house as in her youth, she may eat of her father's food. No lay person may eat of it: 14 but if a man eats of a sacred donation unwittingly, he shall pay the priest for the sacred donation, adding one-fifth of its value. 15 But [the priests] must not allow the Israelites to profane the sacred donations that they set aside for the Lord, 16 or to incur guilt requiring a penalty payment, by eating such sacred donations: for it is I the Lord who make them sacred.

Context

Parashat Emor explains certain details about how sacredness is to be fulfilled in relation to the *mishkan*, its personnel and rituals. We begin with the many and varied restrictions on *kohanim*—priests concerning *tumah*—ritual unfitness. Donations must be offered by the people and eaten under scrupulously precise conditions. Purity, wholeness, and caring are prime considerations. A mother and her offspring may not be offered on the same day, for example. The parasha summarizes the Jewish sacred cycle of seasons—Shabbat and festival observances when people bring offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem, grain and animal. Within the Tent of Meeting, Aaron and the priests are to keep the weekly cycle of shabbat, lighting lamps, and preparing the 12 show breads. The divine Name is to be respected and profanity prevented, applying a rule of law equally among all who live in the Israelite camp.

Explorations

Unique restrictions apply to the priestly families, prohibiting them from many kinds of contact with ritual disqualification, especially with the bodies of dead persons. Nonetheless, in order to honor their own immediate family members—parents, siblings, spouse, and children—the Torah requires priests to deal with all necessary aspects of their relatives' burial. The *Kohen Gadol* is even more restricted; s/he is not permitted to attend to the burial of even the closest family



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members.

One possible reason for these restrictions is to maintain the *purity* of the mikdash and those who officiate there. In a talmudic passage, Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Meir debate the meaning of the restrictions on the Kohen Gadol. Rabbi Yehuda interprets that the Kohen Gadol may not leave the physical area of the *mikdash*, whereas Rabbi Meir says that when a relative of the Kohen Gadol dies, s/he may join the burial procession and escort the dead by following the path of the procession as long as s/he cannot see them. The gemarra explains that Rabbi Meir interprets the word *mikdash* to mean the status of *kedusha*-holiness of the Kohen Gadol (Sanhedrin 18b-19a). The Kohen Gadol is able to depart from the physical temple precinct; s/he is not to depart from a sacred state of being.

Concerning the strictures on the Kohen Gadol, Ramban comments,

...the main thrust of this verse concerns the High Priest who may not leave the sacred precinct while performing the service for any deceased person. Were s/he to leave the service to honor the deceased, it would profane the Temple. Rather, the glory of the *Mikdash* and the service must be greater to him/her than the honor due to the deceased and his/her love of the deceased. If s/he leaves the service for some other less good reason, s/he would transgress this command even more... But the verse addresses the matter of the deceased in order to permit the Kohen Gadol to serve when the deceased has not yet been buried. Since s/he may serve even under those conditions, were s/he to willingly abandon the service, it would gravely profane the Temple (Ramban commentary on Vayikra 21:11).

The High Priest's commitment to the divine service must overpower human feelings of loss and mourning. Like Rabbi Meir, Ramban also seems to suggest that the strictures about death relate to the spiritual state of the kohen. The divine service is concerned not with purity or ritual for its own sake, but with the intention to engage in an intimate relationship with the Creator, with the sacredness of being. From death, we learn to appreciate the vitality and sacredness of life.

Even for the Kohen Gadol who is meant to maintain the focus on *kedusha*, the most extreme restrictions are released when there is no one else to attend to a dead person. Like every Jew, the Kohen Gadol is required to bury a dead person, even if s/he is on the way to perform the Pesach offering, or to circumcise his/her child—the only mitzvot for which the Torah prescribes a harsh penalty for not fulfilling them, if that dead person is a *met mitzva*—a person who dies without anyone to perform the burial. This urgent human predicament momentarily annuls the stringencies pertaining to kohanim in order to honor a fellow human being who is created in the divine image (see Rashi on Megilla 3b; see also Nazir 47b).

The hasidic master, [Mordecai Yosef Leiner of Izbica](#) in his work *Mei Shiloach* interprets the reason for the restrictions on the kohanim. He explains that while nothing in the world happens by chance, and that everything is intended for good by the divine will, exposure to divine judgment can be traumatic. Witnessing death, particularly when it clashes with our own will and seems incomprehensible to us (the death of an infant or child, for example), challenges our faith and our behavior. We might be inclined to believe that judgment is chance, and does not emanate from the divine source of life. Therefore the Torah warns, “whispering” to the



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kohanim—do not expose yourselves to experiences that might taint the purity of your souls, disillusion you, and compromise your role as spiritual leaders among the people. The restrictions try to minimize the trauma to which religious leaders are subject in order to nurture a clear sense of the goodness of divine will (Parashat Emor). While this teaching probes the spiritual dimensions of dealing with death, and the possible fragility of faith, it proposes a debatable attitude about leaders and their worldliness—that they should be aloof from many challenges that mortality presents.

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach once sent a message to a large “New Age” gathering attended by hundreds of young Jews searching for spirituality in Berkeley, California during the 1960s. Based on this Emor teaching of the *Mei Shiloach*, Reb Shlomo explains that in the Holocaust, the souls of an entire generation of rabbis and Jewish teachers became impure—disillusioned from exposure to cruelty and death. He expressed gratitude to leaders of other traditions for imparting their spirituality to young Jews hungering for the divine. Reb Shlomo dedicated his life to inspiring Jewry to experience the deep spirituality of Judaism through refreshing teaching and music, to awakening the passion and ecstasy of Jewish life in the wake of unfathomable suffering and destruction.

Reb Shlomo extends the *Mei Shiloach* line of interpretation—both are concerned about the spiritual impact of death on leaders.

Reb Shlomo's idea of applying the concept of *tumat met*—ritual unfitness from exposure to death—to the entire generation is supported by the Torah. Rashi mentions in his commentary on our verse concerning kohanim that the Torah restricts mourning practices not only for Kohanim but also for all Jews—[They shall not shave smooth any part of their heads, or cut the side-growth of their beards, or make gashes in their flesh](#) (Vayikra 21:5),

You are children of the Lord your God. You shall not gash yourselves or shave the front of your heads because of the deceased. For you are a holy people to God your Lord, and S/He has chosen you to be Her/His treasured nation from all of the peoples who are upon the face of the earth...(Devarim 14:1-2).

On these verses, Ramban explains,

The Torah here indicates that these prohibitions were not only for the Kohanim because they are "holy to God", but rather the entire congregation is holy, all of them are children to God your Lord like the kohanim, and therefore must observe these rites as they do.

The Ramban emphasizes the Torah's view that the entire nation must be vigilant about how to relate to death in order to live according to principles of holiness. Read together with the hasidic teachings, these insights contribute to healthy struggles with the meaning and impact of death, mortality on our lives—a matter that affects the entire people, not only leaders.

In Emor, the text does not explicitly limit the restrictions against contact with the dead to male kohanim. Though most traditional Jewish communities only count men for the purposes of



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priestly functions and related restrictions, the grammatically masculine plural Hebrew form potentially includes women. (Therefore, I have translated the verses above using male/female pronouns.) In our text, women-kohanim explicitly do partake of the sacred offerings (Vayiqra 22:12-13). The Torah specifically restricts priestly privileges for both male kohanim and female kohanim according to marriage. A male kohen is prohibited from marrying a woman who was divorced, and a female kohen who marries outside of the priestly tribe loses her access to priestly meals.

The priestly strictures govern intensely embodied aspects of our humanity, acts which are relevant to every person's life, women, men, kohanim, and laypeople. After the Exodus from Egypt, the Torah states, “you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Shmot 19:6). While the Torah only binds kohanim with these strictures, after the destruction of the priestly service, and with the spread of rabbinic Judaism, every Jew becomes more responsible for daily Jewish functions in our homes and synagogues. These strictures direct our intention toward kedusha-holiness in relation to eating, sexuality, and death.

Questions for Discussion

Consider how the strictures on kohanim relate to the functions of the mikdash—how is death meant to be foreign to a ritual system that involves the sacrifice of life?

Contemporary commentator Stephen Arnoff [writes](#),

As for the regulation against priestly contact with the dead, in traditional communities *kohanim* continue to maintain a remnant of the Temple service by avoiding such contact. While traditional legal authorities agree that all Jews are classified with the status of *tameh met* (impurity due to contact with a corpse), preserving special status for *kohanim* is a gesture to the possibility of their return to ritual importance during a third Temple, as well as a vestige of their former place in the hierarchy.

With the Jerusalem sanctuary no longer functioning, discuss the relevance of the distinctiveness of the kohanim and the special strictures concerning ritual purity, marriage, death, and burial. How do you interpret the significance of inherited priestly status to Jewish life today?

Many egalitarian Jewish communities reject the inherited privilege of the kohanim and hold all Jews to be equal in respect to ritual. Without any special status, kohanim are also not subject to any restrictions concerned with death and burial. Discuss the significance of the special ritual status of kohanim with regard to the value of social equality.

To what extent do the practices and institutions of our society expose us to death and dying?--where do most people die, and under what conditions? Who attends to the preparation of the



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body for burial? How might exposure or lack of it, affect our lives and society?

Discuss how exposure to death in its different aspects affects your life—inspiring appreciation for life or, possibly, evoking disillusionment, or anger. Consider whether you experience a feeling of defilement. How do these feelings and attitudes affect your attitudes about your own mortality and the sacredness of life?

Discuss whether you think that spiritual leaders—in order to inspire their communities—ought to be involved in the traumas and suffering of their people, or remain aloof and untainted?

According to the American Federations [website](#) about Jewish burial practices that is meant to transmit Jewish tradition about death and mourning to a general Jewish audience:

A Jew who is a Cohen, a descendant of the priestly class, will only attend the funeral and burial of his immediate family as he is otherwise forbidden to come near a corpse. You may see a close friend or relative who is a Cohen remain outside the funeral parlor or cemetery because of this law.

Evaluate the gender assumptions underlying the writing of this passage. With the purpose of explaining Jewish rituals to an uninitiated audience, does this passage, perhaps unintentionally, indicate that the priestly strictures are or are not binding on women Jews as well as men Jews? Who does this passage implicitly consider to be a Jew and a Cohen, a close friend or relative? Discuss your views about these gender issues and how we do or do not intend and/or notice how messages about women's exclusion might be broadcast.

Study Links

Rabbi Joel Roth writes the Conservative Movement's ruling concerning one current, practical ritual question regarding kohanim—women priests, “[The Status of Daughters of Kohanim and Leviyim for Aliyot](#)”. [Here](#) is a congregation's announcement of its policy.

[Here](#) is a synopsis of the importance of the priestly rituals restricting contact with a corpse from an Orthodox perspective.

[This YouTube recording](#) offers a taste of Reb Shlomo Carlebach's music and theology concerning the significance of the service of the kohanim. He reframes returning to the sacred service in terms of the Jewish People returning to “the land of your soul”.

Read [this intriguing story](#) about how a learned, traditional rabbi in Prague performed the wedding of a wealthy kohen to a divorcee. The story follows the questions and answers at the top of the page. [Here](#) is serious satire about the prohibition for kohanim to marry divorcees, “Older Single Kohanim are stuck because they can't marry prostitutes.”



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[This essay](#) investigates the current ratios of women to men in non-Orthodox rabbinic training in America.

Read Deborah Grenn's, “Claiming the Title Kohenet: Examining Goddess Judaism and the Role of the Priestess Through Conversations with Contemporary Spiritual Leaders” [here](#).

[This report](#) describes how “12 students were initiated into a class of women studying to become *kohanot*, or Hebrew priestesses.”

In the Catholic Church, women are struggling fervently to achieve full priestly ordination. [Here is the website](#) of one of the prominent groups.

Summary of Issues

Even in the absence of the Jerusalem Temple, the strictures that bind descendants of the priestly tribe to refrain from contact with the dead aim to contribute to the sanctity of the community and life itself.

Methods & Observations

Hebrew grammar in the Torah, *kohanim*, for example, does not determine the extent to which women are included in the priestly rituals. This ambiguity opens the possibility to conceive a more inclusive Jewish practice where women observe and serve as community leaders alongside men, a trend that is ascending among all denominations of the Jewish People.

Contact

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