Portion of Emor

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

An open road, on a beautiful day, your kids in the back seat, perhaps a packed picnic lunch; what could be more perfect? What thoughts go through your mind at such times? Is your mind focused on all the challenges tomorrow always seems to bring, or do you take the time to appreciate the moment? Are you listening to the news about a recent referendum vote, the country's economic woes, and the ever- looming threat of terrorism, or do you take the time to appreciate the gift of the moment?

I imagine the radio was on, but maybe it wasn't tuned to the news; instead, maybe the achingly beautiful sounds of Shlomo Artzi's voice wafted through the car singing of love to be found, and joy to be discovered.

I will always wonder what Tali Hatuel, eight months pregnant, with her four daughters Hila, Roni, Hadar and Meirav, ages 11 to 2 in the back seat, was thinking in those last moments. Was she considering what she and her husband David would name their soon-to- be born child? Was she wondering how Meirav, their two-year-old, would accept the newest addition to the Hatuel family? Or was she just appreciating the pure joy of the open road, the dunes of the beach in the distance, and her growing family with her in the car? Were they singing songs together as Israeli families on the road are wont to do, or were they playing a game, debating what their favorite moment of the week was?

And what went through her mind; their minds, as the sounds of gunfire filled the air and bullets tore through the car? What does a mother think as armed terrorists walk calmly over to a car lying on the side of the road, and one by one, shoot each of her children while she lies helplessly watching? Is she lost in the moment, or is she still capable of seeing the future, and dreaming of a day when the guns will finally be melted down into plowshares?

Indeed, coming from a community that lives with the future hanging by a thread, and the sounds of mortars and gunfire never far away, how do these people nonetheless succeed in plowing their magnificent fields and harvesting their bioponic gardens? How do you find the balance between learning to live in the moment, and yet remaining aware of the challenges of tomorrow?

On a road near Gush Katif, south of Ashkelon and Ashdod along Israel's coastline, the beautiful sounds of a family on a road trip gave way to the horrible silence that follows gunfire when terrorists opened fire on the Hatuel family and murdered Tali Hatuel and her four children and unborn baby.

How do you fill that silence? What words can break the barrier of such a tragedy? What can one say to David Hatuel, a husband and father who has lost his entire world? Can a person whose entire future just die on the side of the road ever succeed in stepping outside the pain and tragedy of the moment he must be locked into?

During the mourning period, a heartrending meeting took place as Boaz Shabo, who lost his wife and three of his children in a terrorist attack in Itamar two years earlier, came to comfort David Hatuel. He struggled to find the words, but of course, there are no words.

During their meeting, David Hatuel asked Boaz Shabo the unanswerable question: "Boaz, how, how am I supposed to get up in the morning?" And Boaz responded: "You get up in the morning, and you get up - to no one. But ...Tali [your wife] is looking at you from above, spurring you on to continue."

This week's Torah portion, *Emor*, has much to say on the both the challenge and the nature of this question.

In general, every weekly portion contains a theme to which all the topics of that portion are connected. This week, however, the divergence of the topics leaves us wondering what common thread could bind these different ideas together as a thematically connected portion.

Usually, the first and last topics of any given portion are the 'bookends' that allude to the message of that portion. But that seems to be a challenging prospect this week.

Emor opens with an exhortation to the Kohanim (the priestly class) not to come into contact with a dead body:

"Vayomer Hashem el Moshe: 'Emor el ha'kohanim, b'nei Aharon, ve'amarta' aleihem: 'Le'nefesh lo yitama' be'amav'."

"And G-d said to Moshe: 'Say to the Kohanim (Priests), sons of Aaron, and tell them: he (each Kohen) may not become Tameh (defiled) to a (dead) person amongst his people." (Vayikra (Leviticus) 21:1)

And it closes with a story that seems completely unconnected to this idea. In short, an Israelite whose mother was Jewish (an Israelite) and whose father was Egyptian, argued in the camp with another Jew. In the course of the argument, this son blasphemed by cursing G-d's name in public. He was brought before Moshe, who, unsure of what to do, placed him under guard, until he could receive guidance from Hashem (G-d) as to what to do.

G-d's response was to direct Moshe to remove him from the camp and have anyone who heard the blasphemy (cursing of G-d) actually place their hands upon his (the blasphemer's) head, whereupon he was subsequently killed, *by the entire congregation*.

What connection can there possibly be between the beginning of the portion advising Kohanim (priests) they are not allowed to become impure by direct contact with a dead body, and the story at the end of the portion describing the death of a blasphemer?

Equally confounding is the content of the rest of the portion, which forms the 'middle of the sandwich' or the 'meat' of the parsha. After fifty some odd verses (chapters 21 and 23 of Vayikra) specifically addressed to the Kohanim, the portion then switches (in Chapter 23) to a review of all the Jewish festivals: Pesach (Passover), the counting of the Omer (during the seven weeks following Pesach), Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Sukkoth, and the festival of Shemini Atzeret. Lastly, it describes once again the process whereby the eternal flame (ner tamid) is lit in the Beit HaMikdash (Temple) every day, before concluding with the story of the blasphemer.

Again, what is the common theme that binds these seemingly divergent, even incongruous topics of Priesthood, the festivals, the Menorah, and the case of blasphemy?

Perhaps one detail will help us to shed light on this entire topic: in describing the mitzvah of counting the days and weeks from the offering of the Omer sacrifice leading up to Shavuot, the Torah tells us:

"U'Se'fartem Lachem, Mi'Macharat HaShabbat, Mi'Yom Havi'achem et Omer Ha'Te'nufah, Shevah Shabbatot Temimot..." (Leviticus 23:15)

"And you shall count for yourselves, from the day after Shabbat, from the day you bring the waved Omer offering, seven complete weeks..."

It is interesting to note that the day we bring (and wave before the altar) the *Omer* sacrifice is called here "*Macharat HaShabbat", "the day after Shabbat"*. Our oral tradition teaches, however, that Shabbat here refers not to the seventh day of the week, but rather to the first day of Pesach, also called Shabbat.

This important point was the source of great controversy in Jewish history. Over two thousand years ago, a sect of Jews who believed only in the literal translation of the Bible, known as the Sadducees, understood this verse to mean that the counting of the *Omer* always began on the first Sunday after Passover, a point bitterly contested by the Rabbis of the time.

So if this wording became the source of such controversy, one wonders why the Torah chose to use such ambiguous terminology. Why not just say that the counting of the *Omer* begins on the day after Passover? Alternatively, as is done with each of the other festivals listed here in our portion, it could simply have said that the counting begins on the sixteenth day of the first month (of Nissan), which would have left no doubt as to the day specified.

Obviously, as witness to the fact the Torah also terms this day "*Macharat HaShabbat*" in discussing the *Omer* offering itself (v. 11), there must be some connection between this mitzvah of the *Omer* and the theme of Shabbat. So what does Shabbat have to do with the *Omer*, and for that matter with Pesach (Passover)?

Further, a closer look at the portion begins to uncover other allusions to Shabbat: In discussing the mitzvah of blowing the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah, the Torah tells us:

"...Ba'chodesh ha'shevi'i, be'echad la'chodesh, ye'hiyeh' la'chem zichron teruah, mikra kodesh."

"...In the seventh month, on the first of the month, you shall have a rest day (Shabbaton), a remembrance of Shofar, a holy calling."

The Talmud in tractate *Rosh Hashanah* (fourth chapter) explains that this 'remembrance' of the Shofar refers to the fact that when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, the Shofar is not blown, and only remembered. And one wonders why, in the midst of teaching us both the mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah itself, as well as the central mitzvah of the day (blowing the Shofar), the Torah feels a need to allude to the mitzvah of Shabbat. What is the connection between Rosh Hashanah and Shabbat?

There is yet another topic briefly mentioned here which again seems difficult to connect to the rest of the portion: Sandwiched in between the discussion of Rosh Hashanah, which follows it, and the *Omer* and Shavuot preceding it, the Torah suddenly jumps to a mitzvah that doesn't seem to have any connection to either of them:

"U've'kutzre'chem et k'tzir artzechem, lo techaleh pe'at sad'cha, be'kutzrechah', ve'leket ke'tzircha' lo' telaket; le'ani ve'lager ta'azov o'tam, Ani Hashem Elokeichem."

"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not remove completely the corners of your field as you reap and you shall not gather the gleanings of your harvest. For the poor and the stranger shall you leave them; I am Hashem your G-d." (23:22)

Now, certainly, this is a beautiful mitzvah, which tells us that we are not simply enjoined, but *obligated,* to set aside a corner of our field for the poor and needy. And we are not allowed to pick up sheaves that drop or are forgotten in the fields and on the threshing floor. Indeed, most of us when thinking about kosher food usually think of kosher hamburgers or chicken. In Israel, however, an entire field and all its crops are unkosher and cannot be eaten until a portion of it is set-aside for the poor. What does this mitzvah have to do with the *Omer* and Rosh Hashanah, and why is it inserted here?

Even more strange, the Talmud (*Rosh Hash*anah 32a) when searching for the Biblical source for the notion of *Malchuyot*, or G-d's Kingship on earth (a part of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy), actually quotes the last three verses of *this* verse: *"Ani Hashem Elokeichem." "I am Hashem your G-d.",* (presumably because of its proximity to the verses on Rosh Hashanah.) What does this verse have to do with the idea of G-d being our King? If anything, I would have expected a verse with at least the word *Melech* (King) in it! What does this verse, concerning the crops I set aside for the poor, have to do with Hashem as King, much less Rosh Hashanah?

The truth is, it makes a lot of sense that there are so many references to Shabbat in this week's portion, because the theme of this entire Parsha is **time**, and Shabbat, just like the festivals, is all about time.

When the Jewish people left Egypt, the greatest gift Hashem gave them, was the gift of time. In fact, the very first mitzvah given to the Jewish people, while they were still in Egypt, was the counting of the months, and the fact that:

"This month (Nissan, when the Jews left Egypt) will be for you the first of the months..." (Exodus 12:2)

A slave, you see, has no time, because his time is not his own, it is his master's. A slave doesn't spend much time thinking about what he wants to do, because his master decides that for him, every day. Even when he thinks he has a little time, he is ever- conscious of the fact that in an instant, his master can decide, often on the spur of a moment, that he wants his slaves to do something else. There is no thought given to building a future, because the slave has no future, he lives only in the present, which is really part of the future and the present of someone else.

And then one day, the Jewish people were suddenly free, with no one else deciding for them what they had to do with every hour and every minute of the day. On the one hand, this must have been an intoxicating experience, much like the student who graduates and can suddenly decide to sleep in; the Jews had the ability to get up in the morning not to satisfy the desires of someone else, but to live for themselves.

At the same time, however, it must have been somewhat frightening, because now they had to decide what they were going to do. There is a certain security and comfort in the knowledge that someone else is worrying about where tomorrow's food will come from, and even how the day will be filled. A slave has no budget to balance, no bills to pay, no worries about whether the crop will come in; it's all in the hands of the master.

And this was the challenge facing the Jewish people as they journeyed forth towards the land of Israel, knowing the miracles of the desert would soon be behind them, and a land needed to be conquered, and then its fields plowed and planted.

Indeed, a slave, with no time, also has very little purpose, he lives from day to day, and his purpose is wrapped up in the daily struggle for a piece of bread or a drink of water, a few hours of sleep, or even a comforting word.

The Jews became a nation only when they left Egypt, because now they had a mission and a purpose: to be a "*Mamlechet Kohanim Ve'Goy Kadosh"*, a "*Kingdom of Priests and a holy Nation"* (Exodus 19:6).

And the great question facing them was what to do with this endless supply stretching ahead of them into the future; could a people that had been focused solely on the challenge of the moment, become a nation looking towards and building the future?

Indeed, this very same challenge faced the Jewish people three thousand years later after the Holocaust and after the Israeli war of Independence. After years of living in the camps, and struggling to survive, could this people become a nation, building a future, which would make a lasting contribution to the entire world?

Indeed, it is no accident that this portion follows the completion and dedication of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) (which we read about a few weeks ago in the portion of Shemini, and which was alluded to again last week in *Acharei Mot*). The Jews, still struggling with the challenge of building their own future and making their own decisions, wanted nothing more than for someone to tell them what to do. Indeed, after centuries of idolatry which gave them just that, the idea that G-d wanted them to be *partners* in building this world (one of Judaism's central themes), must have terrified them, and may well have been at the root of their struggle with Hashem's direct communication with them at Sinai. They wanted to hear the rest of the Ten Commandments from Moshe, because Moshe could tell them what to do, and life could remain as simple as it had always been.

And then Moshe disappeared up on the mountain, so they built themselves a golden calf. Now the golden calf could tell them what to do. And then, when that proved to be a disaster, G-d tells them to build a *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). Indeed, they throw themselves into the building and the donating to such an extent, that Moshe finally has to tell them to stop (Shemot (Exodus) 36:3-7), because again they have become so immersed in the moment, they have lost sight of the goal. And now, with the completion of the Mishkan, they are, perhaps, again faced with the challenge of what to do.

Perhaps that is why this portion begins with the Kohanim, the Priests: Because the concept of the Priesthood is really meant to be a model for the Jewish people. The Kohanim are our educators, who lead by example, and their lives are wrapped up in the service of a higher purpose, the challenge of bringing G-d into the world and into our lives.

Too often, we have difficulty finding the balance between the present, and the future. Sometimes, we get so wrapped up in the moment, in the car accident, the spilled milk, or the news on CNN, we lose sight of what life is really all about, and how meaningful it can be when we are imbued with a sense of purpose, and a connection to something higher than the dividends on the stocks, or getting the kids to school in the carpool. Yet, at the same time, sometimes we become so enthralled and excited with the grand mission and the purpose, we may lose touch with the need to sanctify every given moment.

And that is what Shabbat is all about: On the one hand, we become so involved with our week, filled with work, we lose sight of where all that work is supposed to take us. Shabbat teaches us to step off the bus and take stock of where we are headed and why we are doing all that we spend so much time doing. At the same time, sometimes, we become so caught up in the objective, determined to achieve whatever goals we may have set for ourselves, be they noble or otherwise, we lose track of the beauty of every given moment.

I still remember vividly the day I learned the power of this idea from a visiting student.

One day at Isralight in Jerusalem's Old City, I had just begun teaching a class when an odd looking fellow whom I had never seen before and was not part of the program walked in and sat down. It is a statistical fact that the last seat open is always the one next to the teacher (probably as a result of some deeply rooted trauma most people experience in kindergarten...) so he sat down right next to me.

Isralight prides itself on being an institution open to all, but when you teach in the Old City, you develop a sixth sense that alerts you to the occasional characters that may wander in on their spiritual journeys (we once had a fellow who came into class and was convinced he was King David!). I had the sense that something was a little 'off' with this fellow, a fact that was confirmed when he began staring at my coffee cup. And I don't mean he was looking at it, I mean he was staring at it, bringing his face to about six inches from my half-filled mug sitting on the table.

Not wanting to embarrass him, but neither wishing to lose the audience's attention, I took a few steps to my left away from this fellow, hoping it would draw people's attention away from him. A moment later, this proved to be futile, as he actually picked up my coffee mug to further his analysis of both it and its contents. Now, this is not a common thing to do. The average person would not walk into a lecture and pick up the lecturer's half-filled coffee mug, and as I was debating whether to ignore it, he took it one step further an actually took a sip of my coffee!

At this point, there was no point in trying to continue my thought, as no one was paying attention; they were too busy watching 'Mr. Coffee-mug'. So, wanting to make light of it without embarrassing him, I told him he was more than welcome to the coffee and there was plenty more in the back! By this time I was wondering whether he was a bit mad, especially as one of his eyes had an oddly glazed look to it.

Suddenly he appeared to come out of whatever space or thought he had been in, and realized everyone was looking at him. At which point, apologizing, he explained:

"I am sorry; I was trying to see if this is what I thought it was. You see, I was born blind, and three days ago, I underwent experimental laser surgery, which restored sight in one of my eyes. So I decided to take some time to travel through the country and see all the places I've been, but never really seen. Naturally, I wanted to come and see the Kotel (Western Wall), and as I was on my way back up I noticed this group heading into this building and decided to follow my eye and see where it could take me. And looking at this mug, I realized this must be a coffee mug. Don't get me wrong, I'm not crazy, I know what a coffee mug is, but I've never actually seen one...."

Here I had thought he was mad when in reality, he was the sanest person in the room. Needless to say, he taught us all more in that one moment than most of us learn in a year.

And this too, is the essence of *Shabbat*: can I learn to live in every moment, and appreciate its beauty and its power and the gifts that exist alongside its challenges.

And this of course, is why Pesach here is called '*Shabbat*', and the counting of the *Omer* is begun on the day after *'Shabbat'*, because the *Omer* is all about appreciating each day of each week as we move from Pesach and the Exodus from Egypt, towards Shavuot and the giving of the Torah. On the one hand, we count each day, to appreciate its gifts amidst all the little and sometimes very large challenges that may come our way, while never losing sight of the goal, represented by Shavuot, when we receive the Torah and with it our mission and purpose as a people.

And this is at the heart of all of the festivals, which are also all about appreciating each moment of each season, and each stage in our journey as a people, while never losing sight of the fact that each season and step in the journey is also part of a larger reality, with a starting point of embarkation, and a destination.

Perhaps this is also why the Talmud extrapolates the idea of *Malchuyot*, or G-d's Kingship, from the verse containing the mitzvah of setting aside a corner of the field for the poor. We get so wrapped up in harvesting our field; we actually start to think it's our field. But in truth nothing in this world is really ours; we can't take it with us. In fact, the only things we really have in this world are the things we give to others. So, as a prelude to Rosh Hashanah, Hashem gives us the opportunity to share what we have been given with others, which may well be the reason it was given to us in the first place. And again, we are challenged to both live in the moment, and get the field harvested, because G-d isn't going to do it for us, while recognizing that the value of the harvest really depends on how aware we are of why we are really harvesting it.

And this too, is the meaning of the *Ner Tamid*, the light which constantly burns: we need to be willing to light the flame, and be in the moment, while recognizing that everything is about what the light is really for in the first place.

This is also at the root of the beginning and the end of the portion: the defilement by contact with death on the one hand, and the blasphemer on the other.

Death is the ultimate reminder that we are all here today and gone tomorrow. It tends to suggest to us that we are merely physical beings, and that we should live only for the here and now, and so the Kohen especially, whose mission is to remind the Jewish people that there always has to be a higher purpose, avoids contact with death wherever possible.

(Interestingly, he is allowed to come into contact with the dead body of a close relative, perhaps because when the relationship is so deep, it is clear, even in the moment of death, that there was and is much more to the person than the physical reality....)

And as for the person who curses G-d's name, in the midst of an argument, perhaps he represents the danger of being so wrapped up in the moment, and consumed by his anger, that for him G-d, (and with Him all sense of a higher purpose) becomes dead. (Indeed,

the Talmud compares a person consumed by anger to a person who worships idols, for this very reason.) And while there is certainly much more to consider on this topic, it is worth noting that the Torah takes this question so seriously precisely because the loss of an objective purpose (which can only stem from a relationship to an objective source, i.e. G-d), would mean an undermining and loss of everything the Jewish people, and indeed the world was created for in the first place. Without faith, or *Emunah*, there is no future; there is only the present.

Sixty-six years ago, as a people, we made a decision to build a future and not get stuck in the moment. If there ever was a people with the right to curse G-d, and become consumed by the anger of the moment, or to escape the challenges of the future, it was the Jewish people of 1945.

Yet, driven by the passion of a three thousand year journey, we accepted a partnership with G-d in building a homeland, against seemingly insurmountable and often undeniably cruel and unfair odds. And in the midst of it all, we did not sink into the temptations of the moment and the challenges of fighting a war and moving on in a post-Holocaust world; we built a land based on the principles of being a *"Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation."*

Sixty-six years later, we still have a long way to go, as a nation, and as a people. There are no words that can give strength to a David Hatuel. It is hard for us to imagine the challenge of this one man's struggle to get beyond the present and move forward into an uncertain future. But somehow, perhaps the knowledge that without words, we as a people continue to embrace the future amidst all the struggles of the present, will give strength and hope to us all.

Shabbat Shalom,

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