

## EMOR: SELECTED SHORTS

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ויקרא כ"א:א

(א) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֱלֹהֵי־מֹשֶׁה אֶמַר אֶל־הַכֹּהֲנִים בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם לִגְפָשׁ לֹא־יִטְמָא בְּעַמִּי:

### Leviticus 21:1

*The LORD said to Moses: Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: None shall defile himself for any [dead] person among his kin. We note the three-time repetition of the root אמר in this verse. Elsewhere, Rashi offers a fascinating comment on synonyms for "speech" אין דְּבִיבּוּר בְּכֹל מְקוֹם: דיבור (dibbur) and אמירה (amira) and אמירה בְּכֹל מְקוֹם אֵלּא לְשׁוֹן תְּחִנוּנִים – wherever the word dibbur is used, it suggests "hard talk" and wherever the word amira is used it suggests "plaintive talk." Accordingly, here the tone is more plaintive. Why? Because the subject of death and mourning and is complicated. To this day kohanim restrict their attendance at funerals and burials because of their status. A sensitive subject requires sensitive communication.*

ויקרא כ"א:ה

(ה) לֹא־יִקְרַח [יקרחו] קְרָחָה בְּרֹאשׁוֹ וּפָאָת זָקָנָם לֹא יַגְלַחוּ וּבְבָשָׂרָם לֹא יִשְׂרְטוּ שְׂרָטָה:

### Leviticus 21:5

*(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. Hair scholar Susan Niditch says: "Hair plays an integral role in the way human beings represent themselves. It is related to natural and cultural identity, to personal and group anxieties, and to private and public aspirations, aesthetics and passages. Shaved, clipped or long and loose, wildly free or carefully shaped, tied, or tamed, hair may be a sign of youth or age, womanly charm or manly vigor, an indicator of uncleanness or madness of one's place in society, or one's removal from the social realm, and this list only begins to suggest the possibilities of meaning." Gashing? Our hunch is that any kind of bodily disfigurement implied either diminution of bodily wholeness and vigor, or was a distortion of creation. As we see in this chapter, one's physical presence in the holy sanctuary depends on an idealized physique.*

ויקרא כ"א:י"ז

(יז) דָּבַר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר אִישׁ מִזִּרְעֶךָ לְדֹרֹתָם אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בּוֹ מוֹם לֹא יִקְרַב לְהַקְרִיב לָהֶם אֲלֵקָיו:

### Leviticus 21:17

(17) *Speak to Aaron and say: No man of your offspring throughout the ages who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the food of his God.*

Here we have *dibbur* and following the comment above, this is much harsher language and implies harder boundaries. Body "defects" is an example of where biblical and modern sensibilities clash. We cannot imagine disqualifying religious leaders (or anyone in leadership for that matter) on the basis of physical disability, deformity or impairment. Think of FDR or Bob Dole or John McCain all of whom suffered various degrees of paralysis. The one-eyed Moshe Dayan would have been disqualified as a kohen. The Torah presents a physical ideal as a prerequisite for leadership. We no longer share that ideal. We would rather have a leader of character, skill, and moral comportment who is not defined by physical perfection.

ויקרא כ"ב:ל"ב

(לב) וְלֹא תַחֲלִלוּ אֶת־שֵׁם קְדוֹשִׁי וְנִקְדַּשְׁתִּי בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי ה' מְקַדְּשָׁם:

### Leviticus 22:32

*(32) You shall not profane My holy name, that I may be sanctified in the midst of the Israelite people—I the LORD who sanctify you. This is the primary text for the concepts of kiddush and hillul hashem – desecrating and sanctifying God's name. While these terms apply to a wide range of circumstances, today they typically apply to ethical and moral actions, or the opposite, done publicly or privately by Jews. Aaron Feuerstein who kept paying his employees despite a catastrophic factory fire – kiddush hashem. Bernie Madoff – hillul hashem.*

ויקרא כ"ג:ד'

(ד') אֵלֶּה מוֹעֲדֵי ה' מִקְרָאֵי קְדוֹשׁ אֲשֶׁר־תִּקְרְאוּ אֹתָם בְּמוֹעֲדָם:

### Leviticus 23:4

*(4) These are the set times of the LORD, the sacred occasions, which you shall celebrate each at its appointed time. The calendar is an instrument of identity. In this iteration of the sacred calendar, the reasons for the holidays are sparse. They focus rather, on holiness. The holy caste of the holy people administers the holy zone at the defining holy moments of the year which fit into the seasonal structure of the land. The meanings of all holidays evolve over time. In America's*

civic calendar, Thanksgiving, Independence and Memorial Days were all rooted in previous historical eras and celebrated with a different communal narrative. As America has evolved, so have the meaning and narrative structures around these holidays. Likewise, the holiday calendar of ancient Israel was rooted in its agricultural life but took on extra layers of meaning as Israel's historical narrative became more deeply embedded in its national consciousness.

ויקרא כ"ג:י"ז  
(יז) ממושבתיכם תביאו | לחם תנופה שתיים שגגי עשרונים  
סלת תהינה חמץ תאפינה בכורים לה:

### Leviticus 23:17

(17) You shall bring from your settlements two loaves of bread as an elevation offering; each shall be made of two-tenths of a measure of choice flour, baked after leavening, as first fruits to the LORD. This is from the *bikkurim* festival which we call Shavuot. No reference is made here to the receiving of the Torah. Why not? The association of Shavuot with Matan Torah is a rabbinic embellishment because after the destruction of the Temple and the ensuing exile, Shavuot would have been impossible to observe in the absence of both a place of pilgrimage and the gifts to bring. The layering of the theme of revelation reinvigorated the meaning of this holiday. Today, Shavuot is the least observed of all the major festivals, yet it has been experiencing a renaissance over the last decades as more and more Jews find creative ways of engaging with Torah. Shavuot has become a celebration of Torah study, Torah teachers and Torah students. Interestingly, Shavuot also hints to the historical experience of Israel in the desert and the food that sustained them: manna. The baked bread brought to the sanctuary symbolizes the manna.

ויקרא כ"ג:כ"ד  
(כד) דבר אל־בני ישראל לאמר בחודש השביעי באחד לחודש  
יהיה לכם שבתון זכרון תרועה מקרא־קדש:

### Leviticus 23:24

(24) 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 Emor's description of Rosh Hashanah. But nowhere is that term used, nor does it appear anywhere in the Bible. Today, we understand the shofar blasts as a summons to repentance or as an act heralding God is King. But there may be another story

going on here. There is a suggestion that the original meaning of the first of Tishri is that it recalls Sinai, the only place where the shofar was sounded in convocation. Indeed, the tendency that we have to assemble as one community for Rosh Hashanah, and the solemnity of the shofar service arises from a deep and powerful memory, the memory of the "Great Sounding" imprinted in our collective consciousness.

ויקרא כ"ג:מ"ג  
(מג) למען ידעו דרתיכם כי בספות הושבתיל את־בני ישראל  
בהוציא אותם מארץ מצרים אני ה' אלקיכם:

### Leviticus 23:43

(43) in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the LORD your God. This is the only holiday listed here that has a short explanation. Perhaps this underscores how important Sukkot was in the history of biblical Israel. Sukkot was the great feast, the great pilgrimage, and was characterized by massive Temple ceremonies, processions and pageantries. It entered Israel's consciousness as a world festival, with symbols to evoke universal themes. Passover, on the other hand, was an extremely particularized festival, a re-enactment of the central moment of the people's formation. Today we have inverted the two. Jews universalize Passover, diluting it of its particularity, and particularize Sukkot, missing an opportunity to share its symbolism and meaning with the world.

ויקרא כ"ד:י"ד  
(יד) הוצא את־המקלל אל־מחויץ למחנה וסמכו כל־השומעים  
את־ידיהם על־ראשו ורגמו אתו כל־העדה:

### Leviticus 24:14

(14) Take the blasphemer outside the camp; and let all who were within hearing lay their hands upon his head, and let the whole community stone him. We have noticed different kinds of "hand placement" in Leviticus, mostly concerning ordinary sacrifices where it designates ownership, and when Aaron "places" the sins of Israel on the scapegoat. Here, "the placement has 'legal' significance. The witnesses are designating the blasphemer as guilty of the crime and worthy of death. By it, the witnesses symbolically confirm their testimony to the community and also acknowledge their responsibility in the death of the criminal." (David Wright) The witnesses are take part in sentencing the perpetrator. Someone had to do it! Shabbat Shalom!