

# We Must Care for Others at Our Own Expense

*Parashat Emor*



## Parashat Emor

In Parashat Emor, we read and learn about the laws of the priests and God's requirement for the priests to preserve holiness. After the portion discusses the priestly requirements, we move on to learn about the biblical cycle of the feasts of Israel. We begin with the Sabbath and continue onto the high holidays of Passover, Shavuot (Pentecost), Yom Kippur, and Sukkot.

### The Jewish Understanding of Time

The Jewish perception of time is not viewed as a straight line on a graph that goes from point A in history and moves in a horizontal line to point B. The Jewish understanding of time is more like a circle or cycle of life, which revolves around the week and the Sabbath, over and over.

Our cycle focuses on the holidays and feasts of God that occur annually. Every year we return to the weekly Torah portions. This cycle of life is a spiral that never closes, rather it continues to progress and develop.

The main emphasis of thinking about time as cyclical in nature is the passing of information to children, the continuation of a culture, faith, and

the way of living to the next generation, so that they may continue on the path leading to life and God.

In all of these feasts, which we observe every week or every year, our children are supposed to be at the center of the event. The goal is for them to carry on the path that our ancestors started, so that they can continue to grow and improve our walk of faith.

They will learn from us, add on to it, and improve it, and future generations will continue to build on this ideology.

When faith in Yeshua the Messiah and God's Word are at the center of the family, we personally can grow and develop as well as our society. On the other hand, disbelief and distance from God's Word can break the family unit and destroy our society.

## **Our Obligation to Care for Others**

God's Word requires that we build and improve our community. We are obligated to care for those around us, especially the poor and those that are different from us. God's Word requires from us to build a just and supportive society.

Let us examine the following interesting commandment, which appears in our weekly Torah portion:

*“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the Lord your God.” - Leviticus 23:22 [NIV]*

Right away we might think to ourselves: If the poor want bread, let them go to work, let them pray - what does it have to do with me? I am a decent person who works hard to make a living. Why should I give off the sweat of my brow to others, to people I don't even know?

Although our time is precious and it belongs to us, we do not live in a bubble. Rather, we live in society amongst other people, and we need to contribute some of our precious time to improving our community.

The Torah says that people must help one another - even at our own expense.

## What is True Religion?

God commands us not to reap all the way to the edges of the field, but rather to leave grain and fruit for the poor to come and pick. He unequally divided money and assets amongst us, and likewise commands us to let the needy come into our fields and pick our fruit.

Let's read this important teaching of Yeshua the Messiah:

*“... When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” – Luke 14:12-14 [NIV]*

There are very similar words in the epistle of James:

*“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” – James 1:27 [NIV]*

What is the true religion that God desires for us? I believe it is to take care of the poor and needy.

## The Price of Loss of Self-Control

Towards the end of our parasha we encounter a peculiar story that is difficult to understand. However, I see it as very important and relevant for us today:

*“Now the son of an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father went out among the Israelites, and a fight broke out in the camp between him and an Israelite. The son of the Israelite woman blasphemed the Name with a curse; so they brought him to Moses. (His mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri the*

*Danite.) They put him in custody until the will of the Lord should be made clear to them.” - Leviticus 24:10-12 [NIV]*

The unfortunate ending:

*“Then the Lord said to Moses: ‘Take the blasphemer outside the camp. All those who heard him are to lay their hands on his head, and the entire assembly is to stone him.’” - Leviticus 24:13,14 [NIV]*

There are many commentaries on this matter, and I find it to be of importance as this story raises many questions. The Torah bothered to tell us of this account, but we do not understand the context of the story, the lesson, nor the reasons that led to this difficult incident.

One commentator noted the use of the phrase “went out” - from where did he go out? Perhaps he went out of his mind.

It seems to me that this man went out of his framework and lost any sense of his conduct. A person who is in the midst of a bitter quarrel often loses his temper and any control he has over himself.

Today, temporary insanity is a claim that can be made in court, and sometimes it is even deemed as an acceptable excuse by the judge.

## **Have You Lost Control in Anger?**

The Torah commands that a blasphemer be stoned to death. Loss of temper or temporary insanity are unacceptable.

This is because the Torah requires man to restrain his urges, he must take care that he does not reach a state of loss of all reason, and therefore receiving the punishment of death.

The lesson from such a commentary is simple, we must maintain patience and coolheadedness in every situation.

When a person drinks alcohol excessively, he loses control of himself. Further, by law he is forbidden to drive because he does not know what he is doing and can cause great damage and even death when he tries to operate a vehicle, this law is both logical and understandable.

We, as intelligent people, know when a person reaches a particularly high anger threshold. He loses control over both his words and his actions. In addition, he is capable of causing damage to a person or property.

The lesson here is that we have the responsibility and obligation not to reach that point of anger where we lose control.

If we are not careful to watch ourselves, and if we end up hurting others, our punishment is well-deserved. For instance, if you drove under the influence of alcohol and hit a pedestrian - you should be punished.

Have you lost control in anger, physically hurt your neighbor, and took the Lord's name in vain? Then you also deserve punishment.

## **Responsibility Goes Beyond the Individual, to the Community**

In my opinion, there's another message in this story, about the degree of responsibility the individual has towards himself and those around him, and the degree of responsibility of society towards the individual.

There is room to examine the circumstances that led a person to commit a grave act. It is worthwhile for us to observe and see the factors and constraints that occurred before the incident, and not only to see the person who sinned.

The text in our portion did not explain all the details of this particular act. We were not told when this happened and for what reason the son of the Israelite and Egyptian came out of his tent and walked around the camp. What's more, we do not know what the quarrel was about.

In contrast, the Torah bothers to note that the blasphemer was the son of an Egyptian man. This detail is apparently marginal; why was the family attribution of the blasphemer mentioned?

There are those who will point out the attribution of the blasphemer, who is an Egyptian son, who perhaps was contemptuous of the Torah and of God; therefore, he blasphemed in public.

However, I disagree with this statement. When a person from a particular group of people commits a grave act, according to our example, blaspheming

the name of God, the reaction is to shun him, to say that the Torah and the people of Israel renounce the son of an Egyptian who cursed God. He's not one of us, he's the son of an Egyptian.

In addition, they will add that the sin began with a mother who married an Egyptian, and the result was a disaster.

## **An Irresponsible Interpretation**

In such a response there is a fair amount of irresponsibility and I do not think that's the message. This was probably a case of discrimination. There are many ways in which for individuals to discriminate: ethnicity, race (as in the case before us), gender, political or religious outlook.

This account shows a hint of discrimination. The mentioning of the origin of the blasphemer comes to convey to us the severity of the act, and at the same time this matter places a great deal of responsibility on the environment and society.

The son of an Egyptian man felt alienation and total helplessness. He denied his identity, he felt that he had no place and no inheritance, no rights, and so therefore he reacted as he did.

From this story, we can learn a few things. First, we must be careful and take note to accept others with fair treatment and sensitivity. I learned from this week's parasha that I have tremendous power in my hands; I can break, ruin, and lose my neighbor.

If I have the power to break and destroy, do I also possess the power to build and strengthen? The answer must be yes, but which is easier?

Of course it takes less effort to destroy than to build up. Destroying does not take a lot of thought, but building, and doing so correctly, takes a little wisdom and a lot of exertion.

This incident teaches us an important lesson. Often there will be a minority which will be hurt by the law or by racism from the majority. However, the minority must find ways to change the law and regulate justice.

This is also the reason for the Torah's repeated emphasis on the need for proper and even special treatment for the stranger, because our natural tendency is to behave the opposite.

Precisely because of this predilection, the Torah repeatedly emphasizes that we must overcome the evil impulse (yetzer hara) and behave properly towards the stranger and those that are different from us, since they fall under the category of the defenseless.

They belong to the status of the weak in society, the different, the stranger, and they are usually mentioned in the Torah alongside widows and orphans.

## **In Conclusion**

If we fail to accept the weak or the poor, we will find ourselves as a people, movement, and as a community, discriminating against people and pushing them out. Those people, out of their unhappiness and helplessness, are liable to leave the ways of the Torah in anger.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize the degree of responsibility on the individual towards himself, to control his emotions and his impulses.

In addition, I would like to accentuate the degree of responsibility of society towards the individual, and towards the poor and needy.

We ought to strive towards being fair, understanding, helpful, and even though it is at our expense, we should leave the edges of our field, as God commanded, for others to take from.

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