

Parsha Emor **Leviticus Chapters 21-24**

I am feeling really lucky this week. As you know, I am a member of the North Dare Ministers Association, and late last year, Judaism 102 was the subject of our monthly meeting. By the way, if anyone wants my handout on Judaism 101 and/or Judaism 102, send me an email. Judaism 102 was a handout of the Jewish Holidays in 2019, and I was able to note where many of these holidays came from. And they came from Emor, our parsha of the month.

Emor, the Hebrew word for “speak” comes in many forms. Perhaps the most common phrase in the Torah is “vayomer Adonay el Moshe”, which means “and God spoke to Moses”. In fact, the parsha begins with those words, and then follows with “emor”. So what is so special about this parsha that it is called “emor”?

Well, it’s not in chapters 21 and 22, because in these 2 chapters, Moses is speaking to Aaron and his sons, the priests, concerning rules and regulations for the priests and the holy sanctuary that they maintain. They also receive additional instructions about sacrifices.

But chapter 23 is different. Except for receiving the Ten Commandments and having them read to the people, the Children of Israel are sort of in the dark about “things”. I suspect they know they have a destiny in the Promised Land and they know something about this unseen God who has made a covenant with them. They recently learned about all the different kinds of sacrifices, and they have probably heard about some of the other do’s and don’ts. They have learned how to build the portable tabernacle and how to make priestly garments, and most of the men still remember how to make bricks out of straw, but according to bimbam.com, they really don’t know much about Judaism.

Since these events happened a very long time ago, Moses did not have such modern conveniences as a cell phones or the ability to send text messages, communicate via Twitter, expect people to read his daily blog or put out a YouTube video. While there was obviously some form of writing, most Hebrews probably could not read. So in Chapter 23, Moses resorts to something he has done a few times before, he speaks to entire Israelite community. It would be nice if the word used in the Torah at this time was again “emor”, but it isn’t. It’s “dabair”, which also means to speak. Actually, emor means to say and dabair means to speak, so we’ll use them interchangeably.

But what is different about Chapter 23 is what Moses says. He explains that Judaism has some special holidays that the Children of Israel never celebrated in Egypt because these holidays never existed, and not even during the times of their Patriarchs and Matriarchs. I’m not sure if telling the people about their new heritage was “cool” as bimbam.com says, but I suspect that learning about a whole new set of customs that made them special as a community must have been at least interesting if not exciting. Of course the Torah does not include interview any Israelites and as for their opinions. So here is what Chapter 23 enumerates:

1. Verse 3 recalls Shabbat as the seventh day of the week, a holy convocation of solemn rest in which no manner of work is done.
2. Verses 5-8 creates Passover which begins on the evening of the 14th day of Nisan (defined in the Bible as the 1st month) and is referred to as the feast of unleavened bread; both day 1 and 8 are mini-Shabbats where no servile work is to be done, but cooking is permitted. We know the Israelites baked unleavened bread when they left Egypt, but they were not celebrating Passover, and I am not sure when the first Passover was celebrated.
3. Verses 9-14 discuss the omer of grain brought to the Temple starting on the 2nd day of Passover and continuing until day 50. Again, the omer of grain would refer to a barley

and wheat harvest, and obviously the Israelites were not in a position to be harvesting anything in the Sinai. After the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE, these 50 days were observed as a period of mourning. There were no celebrations, parties, weddings, dancing, etc. However, on the 33rd day of the Omer, also known as Lag B'Omer, (Lamed = 30 + Gimel = 3) a break is taken. Weddings are held, young children have their hair cut, and picnics are taken in the forest. This year Lag B'Omer falls on May 23rd.

4. Verses 15-22 discuss Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, the 50th day after Passover, and which celebrates the first barley harvest. Verse 22 cautions that when reaping the harvest, one must not reap the corner of the field, nor reap any gleanings (leftovers), for they shall be left for the poor and the stranger. This is a repetition of the same rule listed in Leviticus Chapter 19, verse 7. Modern Jews consider Shavuot to be the time when Moses revealed the second set of the Ten Commandments to the Israelites. Shavuot begins on June 8th.
5. Verses 24-25 discuss Rosh Hashanah, which begins on the 1st day of the seventh month (Tishrei). We move the Jewish calendar ahead one year at this time and celebrate by blowing the shofar.
6. Verses 26-32 describe Yom Kippur, which begins on the evening of the 9th day of Tishrei and concludes after a day of fasting on the 10th of Tishrei. This October the JCOB will celebrate its 11th Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur service.
7. And finally, verses 33-43 describe Sukkot, the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles, which begins on the evening of the 14th of Tishrei. Sukkot is celebrated for 8 days, with the 7th day being a mini-Yom Kippur known as Hoshanah Rabbah, and the 8th day being Shemini Atzeret. However, the 8th day is better known as Simchat Torah, because at that service, the Torah reading ends with the last verse in Deuteronomy and begins with the first verse in Genesis. It is a very festive celebration.

And what of Chapter 24? It too is unique. Within the first 9 verses is found the requirement that the priests make sure there is an eternal lamp lit in the Sanctuary. Then verses 10-16 call upon anyone, Israelite or stranger within the camp, who blasphemes the name of the Lord to be put to death by stoning. In verses 17-21 we learn about the concept of fair compensation thru the words of life for life, breach for breach, eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. A person who kills an animal must pay for a replacement, but a person who kills another person must be put to death. And finally there is famous verse 22 that says that "ye shall have one manner of law, as well for the stranger, as for the homeborn. Strangers and Israelites were subject to the same rules, regulations and freedoms.

The Haftorah comes from the Book of Ezekiel and discusses that when the Second Temple is built, the High Priests shall come from the Family of Zadok. Ezekiel was himself a priest, and King Solomon had appointed Zadok to be the High Priest. In the Haftorah, Ezekiel describes the duties of the priests, their garments, and their rules and regulations, thus linking the Haftorah and Torah together.

So what meaning does one get from Parsha Emor? To the modern Jew, one should reflect on how we are different from other peoples, from other civilizations. The Torah has yet to give us unique customs, but it is establishing what makes a Jew a Jew. Every following parsha will build on this theme.