

## **Parsha Emor**

### **Leviticus Chapters 21-24**

Emor, alef-mem-raish, the Hebrew root word for “say” comes in many forms. Perhaps the most common phrase in the Torah is “vayomer Adonay el Moshe”, which means “and God said 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. After all, they watched their Egyptian neighbors suffer under the Ten Plagues and many watched Pharaoh’s charioteers drown in the Sea of Reeds. They recently learned about all the different kinds of sacrifices from our previous parsha, 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.

I suspect the average person could count though I don’t know what numbers looked like. I also suspect that some of them could write but I am not sure what that language was called or what the letters looked like. Sadly, they most likely could not read. Hence the best way they communicated was by talking to each other in some common language.

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 means to speak. Actually, emor means to say and dabair means to speak, and the Bible uses them interchangeably.

But what is different about Chapter 23 is what Moses says. He teaches them about Judaism. 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 interviews with any Israelites asking for their opinions about their newly found heritage. 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 14<sup>th</sup> day of Nisan (defined in the Bible as the 1<sup>st</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Passover and continuing until day 50. Again, the omer of grain would refer to a barley and wheat harvest, though 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 33<sup>rd</sup> day of the Omer, also known as Lag B'Omer, (Lag is 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 19<sup>th</sup>.
4. Verses 15-22 discuss Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, the 50<sup>th</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup>.
5. Verses 24-25 discuss Rosh Hashanah, which begins on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the seventh month (Tishrei). We move the Jewish calendar ahead one year at this time and celebrate by blowing the shofar. Rosh Hashanah Day 1 is Sept. 26<sup>th</sup>, later this year because we had an extra month of Adar.
6. Verses 26-32 describe Yom Kippur, which begins on the evening of the 9<sup>th</sup> day of Tishrei and concludes after a day of fasting on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Tishrei. Kol Nidre is Oct. 4<sup>th</sup> and Yom Kippur is Oct. 5<sup>th</sup>.
7. And finally, verses 33-43 describe Sukkot, the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles, which begins on the evening of the 14<sup>th</sup> of Tishrei. Sukkot is celebrated for 8 days, with the 7<sup>th</sup> day being a mini-Yom Kippur known as Hoshanah Rabbah, and the 8<sup>th</sup> day being Shemini Atzeret. However, the 8<sup>th</sup> 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 starts Oct. 18<sup>th</sup>.

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. Since Moses’s teachings in Chapter 23 describe the Jewish Holidays that the Priests and the Levites are responsible for maintaining, this section links the Haftorah and Torah together.

So what meaning does one get from Parsha Emor? A Presbyterian friend of mine asked me what it means to be the Chosen People? Here is the answer. If we agree to believe in this one unseen, unknowable God, we alone get to participate in a unique civilization. To the modern Jew, one should reflect on how we are different from other peoples, from other civilizations. While the Torah has yet to give us a multitude of other unique customs, it is establishing what makes a Jew a Jew. Every following parsha will build on this theme.