

Parashat Emor

May 12, 2012 -- Hazzan Neil Schwartz

We are in the middle of the *Holiness Code*, a set of ritual and social-justice laws which regulate everything from sacrifices and holidays to proper sexual relationships and care for the weaker members of society.

In last week's *Parashat K'doshim*, the entire Israelite nation was told that they are to be holy by their actions and relationships with each other. This week in *Parashat Emor* we concentrate on the special rules for the priests.

In both cases, one definition of the Hebrew word "*Kadosh*" is "separate". We see this when the Holy *Shabbat* is separated from the secular weekdays by the *Havdalah* ceremony on Saturday night. The Hebrew word for wedding is "*Kiddushin*", which can mean setting each other as a couple, separate from other potential partners. Even one of the Hebrew words for prostitute, "*Kadeisha*", implies a person set aside from normal social interactions.

So, why the extra layer of stringency in the rules for Priestly conduct? One way of looking at this is to say: "As the Jewish People are to be a moral exemplar to the rest of the world, their religious leaders are to be a moral exemplar to the Jewish People."

Unlike the Egyptian priests, and later the Church in Europe, the Jewish priests were not allowed to hold land. The tribe of Levi was not given land when the Israelite tribes entered Canaan after the Exodus from Egypt. Instead portions of the animal and grain sacrifices at the Temple were used to feed the priests and their families.

However, that did **not** mean the priests were *entitled* to these portions. Rather, they *earned* them through their service to the community, and these portions were gifts on the part of those who brought the sacrifices.

We saw in the Gaza War how Israel *holds itself* to a high standard of attempting to wage defensive war in a moral manner, and that the *world holds Israel* to a much higher standard than any other country. This seems to be a logical outgrowth of the morality demanded by the Torah and the Prophets, setting an example for the rest of the world.

What about the extra stringencies imposed upon the priests that we find in today's Torah Portion? I think that there are two aspects of this. One applies to anyone in a leadership position, and the other applies specifically to clergy.

Leaders in many fields are usually held to a higher standard of ethics, in politics and business, in education and even entertainment. That seems to "come with the territory" of being a public figure. As citizens, we want our chosen leaders to be good examples for the rest of us. When they fail to do so, we let them know about it through ridicule and even punishment.

However, clergy seem to be in a special category of moral expectations. In Judaism, clergy are **not** intermediaries between the Jewish People and God. In fact, where there are lay people who know Jewish laws and rituals, few ceremonies in our entire life-cycle require a clergyperson.

What clergy **do** carry is the knowledge of Jewish laws and rituals that are not easily accessible to the average congregant. We serve as facilitators and teachers, and in some communities a Rabbi will occasionally be asked to rule on various aspects of Jewish religious law.

We also serve as representatives of the Jewish community to the rest of the *outside* community, and we serve as religious examples *within* the Jewish community. These last two might be the *real* reason why religious leaders are held to a higher standard of morality, both in Ancient Israel and now.

When I came here I said that I would try to be a Mentsch, and that I also knew there would be mistakes and hurt feelings along the way because I am just a real person, and people make mistakes. So, this message of today's *Parasha Emor* really hits home. I constantly ask myself: "Did I do the best I could at the time in that situation? How can I do better next time?"

We can see from the juxtaposition of *Parashat K'doshim* chanted last week and *Parashat Emor* chanted today that these are not just questions for me to ask myself because I chose to become a clergyperson. We are ALL a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation", and therefore we ALL have responsibilities to uphold very high standards of morality.

Each week we conclude services with a quote from the end of Psalm 29: "May God grant us the gifts of Strength and Peace." May we all use that God-given Strength to act according to the morals and ethics demanded by our Torah and Prophets, in order to help bring Peace into the world.

Shabbat Shalom.