BS”D

A deep faith in G-d causes us to live our lives with hope, joy, and inspiration.

***Parshas Emor***

The Cohanim: A Special Holiness

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Let’s look at the first sentence in our Parsha of Emor and go through what several commentaries have to say about it.

“And G-d said to Moshe, say to the Cohanim, sons of Aaron; say to them, ‘Do not defile yourself (become *tamei*) to a dead body of your people.’” (Bamidbar 21:1)

The most obvious question in this passage is its repetitiveness: “Say to the Cohanim… say to them.” Why are two “sayings” needed?

Rashi says it is to tell the adult Cohanim to enforce these laws upon the child-Cohanim. This means that while an adult is not responsible if a child violates a commandment, he is not allowed to facilitate the child’s violation. Thus, for example, an adult is not obligated to stop a child-Cohen from entering a cemetery (which is forbidden for an adult Cohen), but he may not bring the child into the cemetery.

The Ibn Ezra explains that the Cohanim are supposed to be the teachers of Torah. So the first “Say to the Cohanim” refers to telling them the previous portion that deals with all of Israel being holy. As the teachers of Israel, they must pay special attention to these laws. The second “Say to them” refers to the additional laws of holiness described in this Torah portion which only the Cohanim are obligated to observe.

The Seforno offers a similar interpretation: It is the task of the Cohanim to separate between the pure and the impure, the kosher animals and the non-kosher ones. That is what the first “Say to the Cohanim” refers to. The second “Say to them” refers to additional laws of purity, i.e., not coming in contact with the dead and additional levels of holiness, i.e., extra restrictions as to whom they may marry.

The Ramban says that the double “Say to them” is simply for emphasis and is used when a particularly strict law is being taught. He gives another interpretation that the first “Say” is to gather the Cohanim in a group, then “Say to them” is the actual speaking to them.

The Baal HaTurim sees the first “Say to the Cohanim” as referring specifically to the prohibition of necromancy (*ov v’yidoni*) at the end of the previous portion. It is forbidden for any Jew to consult with the dead, but the Cohen can’t even come into contact with the dead.

Perhaps this explains the prohibition of contact with the dead. In pagan religions, one of the functions of the priest was to communicate with the dead. The Torah wanted to remove our “priests,” the Cohanim, far, far away from those practices. The Cohen’s task included the teaching of the living Torah and not the communion with the dead.

There is a profound teaching in the Mei HaShiloach by the Ishbitzer Rebbe explaining the prohibition of the Cohen to come in contact with the dead. (I am not translating his words here; I’m using my own words, but the underlying teaching is based on the Mei HaShiloach.)

There are various ways of viewing Divine Providence in our daily affairs.

One approach sees most events as happening in a pre-ordained, natural way. If an earthquake, for example, kills many people, their deaths were not caused by G-d. Natural causes brought about the earthquake, and whoever was there suffers the consequences whether they were righteous people or wicked. The same is true for most events in the world governed by the laws of nature. Now, it is possible if a person is very righteous that G-d will save him from the consequences of nature. G-d may implant a thought in that person’s head, for example, to leave the city before the day of the earthquake, thus saving the righteous man from death. But this is a special act of G-d’s mercy that doesn’t necessarily happen to every righteous person.

This approach mitigates the ancient question of why the righteous suffer and the evil prosper. The suffering or prosperity are not G-d’s doing. They are the inevitable consequence of nature (or as the medieval philosophers called it: *mazel*. (Only in the next spiritual world, *olam habah*, will the accounts be settled. The righteous will prosper there and the wicked will suffer.) (See Drashos HaRan, number eight, for an elaboration of this view.)

Before continuing with the other view, I would like to add that in my opinion, this approach does not totally resolve the question of suffering. We can ask, if G-d is all-powerful, why did He set up the world in such a way? Why did He allow suffering because it is natural? Surely, G-d might have created the world with a fairer system.

The other view held by most traditional Jewish thinkers and especially championed by the Baal shem Tov is that there is Divine Providence in all events that occur to us. G-d, of course, allows the world to function in a natural way, but at the same time He looks after every single individual. Anything that happens is part of G-d’s plan; anything that happens has meaning and is not random.

With this approach, a person feels closer to G-d. He senses the Divine presence in every aspect of his or her life. He knows that G-d hears his prayers, cares for him, and loves him. And he experiences life as G-d’s will.

The drawback to this approach is the question of suffering. If G-d cares about each individual and guides his daily life, how is it that the righteous suffer?

There are many partial answers to this question, but those answers are not always satisfying. At the end, one must live with questions. G-d is good, kind, loving, and caring. Yet we don’t understand certain things. We are willing to accept a good G-d who allows suffering that we cannot explain. We are not G-d, and we cannot understand His ways.

(By the way, this is how I understand the theology of Job. Job and his friends expect G-d to be good to good people. When bad things happen to good people, Job’s friends say it must be that that person is really bad. Job passionately disagrees. At the end, G-d agrees with Job but does not provide an answer that man can understand. G-d’s ways are beyond man’s.)

Now we get to the Mei HaShiloach’s interpretation: The Cohen is a servant of G-d. He knows G-d in his life. He knows that G-d is good and loving. So when he sees suffering as in death, he is appalled. Therefore, the Torah tells him, “Do not defile yourself to the dead.” Do not let the suffering you see make you angry at G-d. Know that G-d is good even when you don’t and cannot understand Him. Don’t let death, i.e., suffering, pollute your belief in a G-d of goodness.

We have two ways to live a religious life. We can see G-d as a distant, dim figure that we don’t encounter in daily life. We can try to inoculate ourselves from being upset at the world by blaming everything on man or on nature and leaving G-d as an amorphous, vague figure in the background.

Or we can affirm G-d’s presence in the world and in our lives. That affirmation will inspire us to walk in His ways and be G-dly people. As the sages said, “Just as He is compassionate, you should be compassionate.”

But if we live life that way, we are open to being deeply hurt or angry when we perceive suffering and hold G-d responsible.

We must not fall into that trap. We must not “defile ourselves with death.” A deep faith in G-d allows us to accept that we don’t always have the answers. And a deep faith in G-d causes us to live our lives with hope, joy, and inspiration. Not to ask why is there suffering, but to do as much as we can to alleviate it. To respond to the unknowable with faith and with goodness.