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The Normal Jew

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered April 28, 1962)

In an important essay published not too long ago, Dr. Samuel Belkin, President of the Yeshiva University, presented a creative insight into the understanding of the commandments of the Torah. There is a great literature on taamei ha-mitzvot, the reasons for the commandments. What Dr. Belkin has proposed is a fundamental distinction between the "Reason" for a mitzvah and the "Purpose" of the commandment. The reason is historical, it is something about which man may speculate and conjecture; but ultimately it is known with certainty only to G-d Himself. Actually, the reason for legislating a mitzvah does not make too much difference; it is of little consequence to man. What is of importance, however, is the Purpose of the mitzvah. Here man must always ask himself: what is it the Torah wants me to accomplish as a result of performing this mitzvah? The Reason for a mitzvah remains the same through all eternity, although it may always remain unknown to man. The Purpose may change from generation to generation, from culture to culture, from society to society. While the Reason is divine, the Purpose is human--and, therefore while all of us observe the same mitzvot in the same manner, each observance may mean something subtly different for each individual person. Hence, while it may be fruitless to inquire into the Reason for a mitzvah, it is most worthwhile to investigate the Purpose of the Mitzvot.

It is in this spirit that we may ask a fundamental question about the teachings of this morning's Sidra. And that is, what is the purpose of the institution of Kehunah, the hereditary Priesthood, for modern Jews living in a free and democratic society? Centuries ago, in the days of the Temple, the Kohen was a most important functionary in the religious life of the country. It was he who officiated at the sacrificial rites in the Temple. He was supported by an elaborate system of tithes, and so forth. Today, the

Kohanim, descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses, are distinguished from the other Jews by only a few laws, such as: they are honored with the reading of the first portion of the Torah, they may not defile themselves by contact with the dead, they are limited in their choice of a mate by certain marital regulations, and, they officiate at the blessing of the congregation on the holidays. Now, in what manner can this residual Kehuna said to be relevant to our lives and times? Once again, we do not ask for the reason, we do not demand that the Torah justify its claim upon us. We shall observe whether our limited intellectual faculties fully understand or not. But what specific purposes, what special nuances of meaningfulness, lie within this biblical legislation?

There are many answers. Those that we shall mention this morning come especially from the Commentary on the Prayer Book (Olat R'iyah) by the late Chief Rabbi of the Holy Land, Rabbi Kook, of Blessed Memory.

At the very beginning, we must understand that Kehunah in Jewish life was never meant as a ministry of magic. The Kohen never waved a wand or performed miracles. Rather, as we discover from a reading of the Bible, the priesthood, with all its hierarchical and hereditary features, was intimately connected with the concept of teaching, especially Torah. Thus, Ezekiel in this morning's Haftorah defines the function of the Kohen as v'et ami yoru bein kodesh le'chol, "and they shall teach My people to distinguish between the sacred and the profane." Malachi proclaimed siftei kohen yishmeru daat, torah yevakshu mi-pihu, "and the lips of the priest shall keep knowledge, they shall seek Torah from his mouth." In assigning Kehunah to the tribe of Levi, Moses declared, yoru mishpatekha le'yaakov ve'toratkha le'yisrael, "they shall teach Thy laws to Jacob and Thy Torah to Israel." Kehunah, therefore, is a ministry of horaah, of teaching, of

education and edification.

An important aspect of our daily morning service thereby becomes more significant. At the very beginning of the service, one of the first things we recite is the birkhot ha-torah, the blessings over the study of Torah. After we thank G-d for giving us a Torah, we immediately proceed to perform the mitzvah: we study Torah. And what passage of the Bible is it that we choose to recite as part of the study of Torah? -the birkhot kohanim, the blessing that is recited by the priests, “the Lord bless thee and keep thee...”

Why, of all the sublime passages in the Torah, do we choose the Priestly Blessing as the one over which to thank G-d for Torah? Obviously it must be because of the fact that the priests themselves are teachers of Torah or, indirectly, by their very presence in our midst they remind us and challenge us to study the Torah of the Lord.

The great medieval Spanish Rabbi, Abudraham, observed that the Priestly Blessing consists of three verses. The first verse, yevarekhekha ha-Shem ve'yishmerekha, “the Lord bless thee and keep thee,” contains three Hebrew words. The second verse contains five words, and the third-seven words. Abudraham remarks that the birkhot kohanim is thus equivalent to the Reading of the Torah, for on weekdays we have three Aliyot, on holidays five Aliyot, and on Saturdays a minimum of seven.

Rav Kook, however goes beyond a mere arithmetical equivalence and finds a deep significance in this relationship of birkhot kohanim to birkhot ha-torah, of priesthood to the teaching of Torah. Kehunah, after all, is not an anachronism. It indicates to us that there are amongst us Jews a family, descended from Aaron, who possess (as Rav Kook calls it) a *segulah kelalit ha-baah bi-yerushah*, a general talent or predisposition that is bequeathed by heredity. From the very earliest days of the history of our people until 1962, the Kehunah has come down from father to son; a whole family, throughout all these many centuries, has been distinguished by a mandate from the Almighty that its sons be the Ministers of G-d in the midst of Israel, that they be charged with the function of horaah, of teaching the Children of Israel, so that “they shall seek Torah from his mouth.” Now the very presence amongst us of this family who are marked by this characteristic, reminds us that all of us Jews, non-Kohanim as well as Kohanim, possess a more general and precious *segulah kelalit ha-baah bi-yerushah*, a heritage of a inclination for--the study of Torah. G-d not only gave us

a Torah from above, but implanted within us a readiness to love it and a willingness to obey and follow it. There is in every Jew, by virtue of his being a Jew, this element of spirituality. Every Jew wears the Crown of Torah, even as the descendants of Aaron wear the Crown of Priesthood.

This does not mean that every Jew is born a full-fledged lover of Torah, a mature spiritual personality. By no means. Rather, it means that he has within him the potential for these lofty ends, that if he exerts himself he can attain them, for they are part and parcel of the national cultural heritage of our people.

Here too Rav Kook offers a comment of great insight. When the Kohanim bless the congregation, they accompany their verbal blessing with *nesiat kapayim*, the raising of their hands with fingers extended. To Rav Kook this is a profound symbol. It is a pointing to the future, an aspiration for transcendence, a reaching out for what is beyond, a stretching of the self to greater heights. Rav Kook reminds us that the rights and the privileges of the Kohen to bless his fellow-Israelites derive not from his own actual religious excellence, for not every Kohen who blesses the congregation is necessarily a holy man. Rather, it derives from the charge placed upon him to be holy. Because the Kohen is expected by the Torah to attain a greater measure of sanctity, because he was given the hereditary injunction to reach higher than others, because he was endowed with the predisposition for a great spiritual gestalt, therefore the mitzvah of blessing the congregation devolves upon the Kohen. The prerogative of blessing derives not from the actuality, but from the potentiality of the Kohen; not from his religious character at the present, but from that which he could attain were he to strive for it with sufficient effort and exertion. That is why the Kohen raises his hand in the *nesiat kapayim*: he is pointing to the future, to the realization of the potential within him. His extended arms are a bridge, which he is bidden to cross, from promise to fulfillment, from small beginnings to great achievements, from what he is to what he can and ought to be.

And this is true of all Jews with regard to Torah. At the foot of Sinai, when we were given the Torah, we were designated to *mamlekhet Kohanim*--a kingdom in which all citizens are priests. We are Kohanim of Torah to all of mankind. Hence, we are different from others not because of what we are, but because of what we can and ought to be. Religious life in Judaism is not a matter only of being holy, but of becoming holier. The hands of the Kohen

raised in benediction are for every Jew the symbol of the study of Torah- constant progress, unceasing intellectual ferment, never-ending spiritual development. The Kohen in our midst teaches us something about our own character and what we ought to do with it. He tells us, as Yehuda Halevi taught in the Kuzari, that Israel is caught up in the inyan Elohi, marked with the indelible traces of the encounter with G-d. He reminds us, as the great founder of the Habad School of Hasidism taught in his Tanya, that every Jew is born with a nefesh ha-Elohit, with a Divine soul, which contains within it an ahavah tiv'it or ahavah mesuteret, a natural love for G-d and Torah which is hidden and unaroused. Just as a descendant of Aaron is naturally a Kohen, a status from which he cannot resign at will, so is every Jew by nature a homo religiosus, a spiritual creature. Whether he knows it or not--indeed, whether he wants it or not--every Jew has a religious potential within him, the seed of spirituality, the embryo of Kedushah. But from the Kohen he must learn that blessing can come only when, as the extended fingers symbolize, he is willing to actualize his potential, make the seed grow, develop his embryonic talent, express his hidden, natural resources of Torah.

So that the hereditary Kehunah certainly does have a relevant purpose for our lives. It teaches us that Judaism was not superimposed upon Jews. Rather, it is natural and preexistent in the Jewish soul. Torah may have been given from Heaven, but the receptivity for it already existed in the Jewish heart. All that the Jew needs do in order to achieve blessing for himself and for all mankind is to arouse and express the spirituality which lies dormant within him.

It is for that reason that we loyal Jews ought to accept with great skepticism and with a sense of humor the predictions of many of our secular and non-observant

Beyond Time

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

This week's parsha begins with various laws that pertain to the kohanim who serve in the mishkan, and continues with laws regarding sacrifices brought there, laws of sanctifying God's name, laws of Shabbos and the festivals, and a few other miscellaneous laws. There does not appear to be a pattern of continuity to these seemingly disparate laws. However, I believe that, if we take note of the laws mentioned at the end of

co-religionists who periodically produce from amongst themselves modern nevi'ei sheker, false prophets, who proclaim the end of classical, traditional Judaism in Jewish life. For us it is unthinkable to imagine Jews without Judaism. Even if Torah should be forgotten for a century, it must return to its former eminence amongst Jews, for there is, in us, as Rav Kook called it, a segulah kelalit ha-baah bi-yerushah, a hereditary predisposition for the spirituality of Torah; or, as the author of Tanya called it, ahavat tiv'it, a natural love hidden in the divine soul in every Jew; or, as Halevi termed it, the inyan Elohi. When we see before our eyes a Kohen, a direct descendant of Aaron, the first High Priest, when we behold the physical continuity of ancient Israel and its survival into modern times, then we are seized with a great optimism and hope for the survival and ultimate triumph of the spiritual character of Israel into the future.

This is an exhilarating thought, for it encourages us never to despair of any single Jew. Within every Jewish bosom, every Jewish heart, there lies this latent love, this silent passion, this unconscious aspiration. Our sacred duty is--to bring it out into the open, to activate it and actualize it to make this love conscious, so that all Israel will return to G-d, and bring them all of mankind.

In the words of David, va-esa kapai el mitzvotekha asher ahavti v'asicha be'chukekha. "I shall raise my hands unto Thy commandments which I love, and I shall dwell upon Thy laws." When we shall accept the symbol of the Priestly Blessing, the raising of the hands and the pointing to the future, the transition from potential to real, when we shall take that love for the Mitzvot and actualize it by raising our hands, then we, and all Israel, will dwell upon the laws of G-d and become, once again, a glorious people of Torah.

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the previous parsha, that of Kedoshim, and understand their link to the laws that precede and follow them, we can discover a framework within which the continuity of the various laws in Emor can be understood.

Parshas Kedoshim contains many mitzvos which are fundamental components of Torah, to the extent that the midrash says that the parsha is actually a restatement of the mitzvos in the Ten Commandments, or Decalogue.

According to some counts, the parsha contains seventy mitzvos. Following the midrash, they are all either part of the Decalogue or mitzvos that are connected to it. Being that the mitzvos in that parsha are of such an essential character, we would expect it to end in a kind of climax, with an all-encompassing mitzvoh, similar to the way in which it begins, with the mitzvoh of “you shall be holy.” Actually, however, we find such a climax in the penultimate verse of the parsha, in which we read, “You shall be holy for me for I, God, am Holy ; and I have separated you from among the peoples to be Mine” (Vayikra 20:26). It would be fitting for the parsha to end with this verse. However, it continues with one final verse, which states the punishment for anyone who practices the forms of necromancy known as Ov and Yidoni. These are forms of divination which people resorted to in order to find out what would happen in the future. The necromancer would speak to the dead by means of a certain kind of bone from a corpse. Such practices, the Torah tells us in this posuk, are punished through ‘sekillah,’ which is commonly translated as ‘stoning,’ although it really entails pushing the guilty off a two story platform and then rolling a stone onto his body. What is so distinctive about this prohibition that it should serve as the end of parshas Kedoshim?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch points out that, actually, Ov and Yidoni are mentioned three times in parshas Kedoshim ; once in mention of the prohibition (Vayikra 19:31), once in mention of the punishment of kareis, or excision (20:6), and, finally, at the end of the parsha, in mention of the punishment of sekillah, when done willfully, after being warned by two witnesses (20:27, and see Rashi there.). Thus, the practice of Ov and Yidoni does seem to be a central fulcrum around which parshas Kedoshim revolves. Perhaps the idea is that consulting or practicing Ov and Yidoni constitutes the relinquishing of one’s capacity of free-will to an irrational power, thus negating the very basis of a life based on Torah. On another level, the resort to Ov and Yidoni reflects an undue attachment to the physical and the time-bound, attempting to consult with the spirits of the dead, as King Shaul did when he went to the witch of Ein-Dor to conjure up the spirit of the prophet Shmuel. This emphasis on the physical is also a negation of the spiritual, and is in opposition to our charge to be holy, as stated in the beginning of the parsha as well as in its second last verse, as we have seen. With this in mind, we can now turn to parshas Emor, and understand the theme that connects its seemingly disparate parts.

The Midrash Tanchuma tells us that the punishment for consulting Ov and Yidoni is followed by the mitzvos addressed to the kohanim to teach us that if someone wants to know about the future, he should go to the kohein in the mishkan, rather than to a necromancer. The kohein gadol is able to consult the “Urim ve-Tumim,” contained in the high priest’s breastplate, and satisfy the questioner’s curiosity. Rabbi Henschel Leibowitz, in his Chidushei HaLev, notes that the midrash recognized an inherent need of people to know about the future, and, so, it provided a means of dealing with this need. The idea is to go to the mishkan and follow the procedure appropriate there. I believe that there is a wider message here, beyond the specific process of actually consulting the stones on the breastplate. The idea, I believe, is that a visit to the mishkan, which is permeated with an atmosphere of spirituality and holiness, will enable a person to put things in a broader perspective and not become attached to the physical, as one does when he practices Ov and Yidoni and consults with the dead. The midrash, in fact, mentions the incident of Shaul and the witch of Ein Dor in this regard as an example of how we should not act. Seen in this context, the laws of kohanim that follow reflect this kind of perspective.

Parshas Emor begins with the laws instructing the kohanim on how they should react when a death that occurs among the nation. A regular kohein, the Torah tells us, cannot tend to a dead person, because that will render him tamei - impure - and unfit to perform his duties in the mishkan. However, if one of the seven family members for whom he must mourn dies, or if someone unrelated to him dies and does not have a sufficient number of people to bury him (‘meis mitzvoh’) he is charged to make himself impure by tending to the deceased. A high priest, however, cannot even defile himself for a deceased relative. He can only defile his purity for the burial of a meis mitzvoh. The idea here, as explained in the Talmud, is that the kohein serves ‘before God,’ which implies being in a joyous state, a state of simcha, and confronting death would seem to negate such a state. The high priest, however, needs to transcend this state of death and concentrate on serving God at all times. Rabbi Nisson Alpert explains that the high priest represents the collective of the Jewish people, and he cannot interrupt his service for them to deal with his individual calamity. The fact that he does defile his sanctity for a meis mitzvoh, notes Rabbi Alpert, is an indication that the meis mitzvoh is really a communal matter.

Rabbi Alpert’s comments take on more significance

when we take note of the words of the Ba'al HaTurim to Shemos 19:6, on the words which God told Moshe to relate to the nation at Mt. Sinai before the Torah was given, "And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Based on a number of midrashim, as noted by the commentators, the Ba'al HaTurim writes that, originally, all of the Jewish people were destined to be high priests, but the sin of the golden calf prevented that from happening. However, in the future, they will all be high priests. This being so, just as a high priest transcends the physical and temporal limitations and does not defile himself for a deceased relative, so too, the ultimate goal of the nation should be to transcend the vagaries of time, to see beyond the immediate reality, and focus on the spiritual underpinnings of existence. I believe that the other mitzvos in parshas Emor reflect this idea, as well. For example, one of these mitzvos is the requirement to wait until an animal is eight days old before bringing it as a sacrifice. The Maharal of Prague taught that the number seven signifies the natural order of the universe and the number eight signifies the meta-natural. Here too, then, we see the concept of transcending time in connection with holiness. Although the format of Netvort does not permit a study of the entire parsha in this light, I would like to focus on two other sections of the parsha, one in the middle and one in the end, that bring out this point, as well.

In the midst of the section of the Moadim, the annual holidays of the year, mentioned in parshas Emor, the Torah presents us with the mitzvah of Sefiras HaOmer, counting forty-nine days from the bringing of the Omer meal offering on Pesach until the bringing of the meal offering of the Shte Halechem on Shavuot. There is a requirement to count these days both in terms of days and in terms of weeks. In regard to the weeks, the Torah says (Vayikra 23:13) "... seven weeks, they shall be complete (temimos)." The midrash, commenting on this verse, says that the weeks are considered complete only when we do the will of God. Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin, in his *LaTorah U'LaMoadim*, explains that everything in our physical world is fleeting, and doesn't last forever. This is true of people, of things, and of the world itself. Still, he

says, things do exist in this world for some amount of time. The one exception is time itself. As King Shlomo writes in Mishlei (23:5), one lays his eyes on the moment and it is gone. Man, however, has the capacity, through involvement in the study of Torah and the performance of mitzvos, to eternalize the moment. This, he says, is the message of this particular mitzvah, of counting the Omer. Rabbi Zevin notes that many sources view this mitzvah in a wider sense, as referring to a man's lifetime, the seven weeks denoting the seventy years of one's life. By taking control of this time and using it properly, then, we can transcend its limitations and give it eternal meaning.

At the end of the parsha, we read of the mekalel, the man who cursed God. Rashi, citing the midrash, writes that what led this person to curse God was a look at the mitzvah of Lechem HaPonim, or showbread, which immediately precedes the section of the curser in our parsha. The kohanim were to prepare, each week, twelve loaves of bread to be placed on the table in the mishkan. The bread was baked on Friday, placed on the table in the mishkan, and eaten, on a regular week, nine days later. This man, hearing of the details of the mitzvah, scoffed and asked if it is the practice of a king to eat stale, cold, nine day-old bread. Surely, he argued, a king should eat warm, fresh bread. This statement generated a fight, and the man ended up cursing God. Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, in his commentary *Oznayim LeTorah*, pointed out that, had the man waited nine days, he would have seen that the show bread was as warm and fresh on the day it was eaten as it was on the day it was baked. His inability to see beyond what was in front of him, to transcend time, led him to curse God and incur the death penalty. Thus the parsha ends as it started, teaching us that in order to fulfill our task as a nation of priests and a holy nation, we need to transcend time, to view things from a wider, spiritual perspective, as reflected by the kohanim as they performed their service in the mishkan.

The Outsider

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from a shiur given in the Gruss Kollel on May 11, 2017)

Parshas Emor ends in an unfortunate incident where a son of a mixed marriage between an Egyptian man and a Jewish woman fought with other Jews, cursed Hashem, and was hence executed. And the story seems to flow. There is a person who did an aveira. Moshe is informed, inquires of Hashem, and ultimately announces his sentence. He starts with: Hashem said to take him out and give him skila. And speak to Bnei Yisroel and tell them that anyone who curses his G-d will suffer the consequences. And if he explicitly pronounces the name of Hashem—he should surely die, etc. And then, the narrative strangely interrupts with the halachos of damages bein adam le-chaveiro before shifting back to the Mekalel: If anyone kills a human being, etc., if anyone kills an animal, etc., if anyone maims his fellow citizen, etc., ayin tachas ayin, shen tachas shen, etc. The question is, for what reason does the Torah bring here half of Baba Kama, Sanhedrin, and all the halachos of people who injure each other?

Ibn Ezra and others suggest that two things happened in the story, not just one. The first thing that happened was the Mekalel cursing Hashem, unfortunately. He was chayv skila. And the other story that happened is—va-yinatzu be-machane ben ha-Yisroelis ve-ish ha-Yisroeli. There was a fight. This fellow, whose father was Egyptian, fought with another Jew, both of whose parents were Jewish. Therefore, Hashem told Moshe that: A—There are halachos of blasphemy, including the chiyuv misa. And B—There are halachos of what to do when people fight.

That's a solid pshat explanation. But on a deeper level, you could say that there is something more going on here. You have to ask yourself—What would make someone go and curse Hashem? You can understand someone who has tayva to indulge or to steal. But what would make someone go and curse Hashem?? It does not help me. It does not give me anything. It does not grant me any pleasure. What leads people to do aveiros like that? The answer is clear—va-yinatzu be-machane ben ha-Yisroelis ve-ish ha-Yisroeli. There was a fight. What was this fight about? There was one guy who was a real Jew—the in-crowd, the chevra. He was genuinely Jewish. And he fought with a marginal Jew—someone who was a product of intermarriage, who was not quite sure what his commitment was and where

his loyalties lie. He was less of a Jew. And what happened? Someone representing the real Jews fought with him and excluded him. He tried to put him down, denigrated him. And now we understand. What happens when someone feels belittled by the other Jews? They lash out. They say—you know what? If that's what you are like; if that's how you will treat me—then to heck with you and with your G-d as well. Why do people hate religion? Why would someone curse the Torah and curse Hashem? Because of how the representatives of religion and Hashem treated them. That's what leads to this aveira. And maybe Hashem is trying to give us a little mussar here. On the one hand, Hashem is not a bleeding-heart liberal. The fact that this fellow had a tough life and a tough situation doesn't justify his aveira, even though people did not treat him nicely and made him feel bad. He is still chayav misa. We all have bechirah chafshis. We are all adults. We are responsible for ourselves. Even in a difficult situation, you should still not commit crimes. But on the other hand, Hashem says—if I just told you how terrible it is, you would have all pat yourselves on the back and say—Yes. We all knew this guy was no good anyway. Ugh. Glad to be rid of him. Hashem tells them—No! It was wrong for him to curse Me, and there are no excuses for behavior like that. But maybe Hashem is also hinting that it was wrong to get into a fight. Maybe, he was right. Maybe, you were right. Maybe there was a din mamonos that had to be resolved, but it could have been done more nicely. It didn't have to come to a fight. Just like blasphemy is an aveira, fighting is also an aveira. And maybe if you did not start a fight, he would not have come to blasphemy. And that's why Hashem adds, "mishpat echad yihiye lochem. Ka-ger, ka-ezrach yihiye." Hashem emphasized that when it comes to all these halachos of fighting, a ger and ezrach are the same. It doesn't matter if you are a meyuchas Jew or if you are a marginal Jew. It doesn't matter if you just showed up yesterday. Everyone is the same in Hashem's eyes, and everyone should get along with each other properly. And if they have done that, then we wouldn't have had these problems in the first place. And therefore, we should all be very careful with ourselves. All of us who represent the real Jewish people, frumkeit, Torah, and Hashem, have to be very careful about how we

treat other people—especially how we treat other people who are not sure what their identity is and where they

belong. This way, we can be mekadesh shem shomayim and not come to another chilul Hashem.

From the Omer to Kohelet?

Rabbi Jonathan Ziring

Speak to the Israelite people and say to them ... you shall bring the first sheaf of your harvest to the priest.” (Vayikra 23:10, JPS translation) A midrash pairs this seemingly straightforward commandment of bringing the first sheaves as a sacrifice, the Korban haOmer, with a depressing theological rumination from Kohelet: “What real value is there for a man in all the gains he makes beneath the sun?” (Kohelet 1:3 JPS, Vayikra Rabbah 28, Kohelet Rabbah 1) What is the message of this midrash?

The key may be in several other teachings included later in the midrash, highlighted by several commentators.

Realize that G-d does the work

Rabbi Shemuel Ashkenazi (Yifei Toar *ibid.*) contends that the impetus for the midrash is the Torah’s seemingly superfluous emphasis on harvesting the grains. Presumably, to sacrifice the grains, one needs to harvest them, so why mention it? The novelty, he claims, is that it is almost as if all human beings need to do is harvest. G-d does most of the hard work. Thus, returning to Kohelet, it is as if there is no value to the human input. The omer comes to acknowledge this. He takes his cue from comments of Rabbi Yannai later in the midrash: “The way of the world is that a person takes one litra of meat from the market, and how much effort he puts in, how much pain he endures until it is cooked. [However, regarding grain], people sleep in their beds and G-d makes the wind blow, raises the clouds, makes the plants grow, fertilizes the fruit, and [people] only give Him a payment of an omer.”

Accept G-d voluntarily

Drawing on that later part of the midrash, Rabbi Yehuda ben Bezalel Loew (Maharal) adds another dimension. (Gur Aryeh to Shemot 20:22) Powerful kings can force their subjects to accept their authority. However, though G-d is all-powerful, He takes a different approach. He takes care of us, hoping that we will internalize what we owe Him, and choose to accept Him. While we are also obligated to do so, taking a broader perspective on Divine aid makes it as if we choose freely, as we would be willing

to choose this even if there were no command. It is this attitude the Torah encourages when it warns us to not be bitter when we perform mitzvot, even ones that require monetary investment, such as tzedakah. (Devarim 15:10) Understanding that so much of what we produce is due to G-d should engender generous dispositions.

Learn generosity

Returning to the verse in Kohelet, one could suggest that it is our conviction that we are fully responsible for what we produce that makes it so hard for us to part with it. Understanding that our effort is just a small part of what makes us successful, and we could have just as easily been unlucky and the ones in need, makes it easier for us to share, as depressing and Kohelet-worthy as that sentiment may be. [See Michael Sandel’s recently published *Tyranny of Merit*, where he outlines how in different ways, thinkers as diverse as Frederick Hayek and John Rawls incorporated the belief that success requires a measure of luck in their theories of justice and equity, and suggests a version of his own.]

Maharal (Or Chadash 6:11) notes that the description of the midrash is particularly fitting in the natural context – G-d makes it rain, makes the wind blow, etc. Thus, the omer is brought from barley, a low-level grain, highlighting that in material issues, most of our success comes from G-d. While he does not connect it directly, this may relate to other midrashim. A midrash says that while “beneath the sun”, human activity is worthless, Torah and mitzvot that are heavenly, “above the sun”, do have value. Following this logic, it is in the moral and religious choices where we can take credit, as that is where we are responsible, and luck or Divine providence are not. Those are the realms where what we do is truly ours, and thus most meaningful. Therefore, the small offering of grain acts to remind us of who is responsible for the success of our different endeavors.

own benefit and for your own good.

“Similarly, counting the Omer is for our own benefit, and for our own good. It is an opportunity to grow in an area of our choice. One should utilize this period between Pesach and the holiday of the giving of the Torah to improve oneself spiritually. It is as though we ourselves are climbing the mountain, trying to reach the peak before forty-nine days are up, so that we are prepared to receive the Torah on Shavuot... It is up to us to make our sefirah meaningful and truly make Sefiras Ha’Omer count!”

A Soft-Spoken Kohen

Rabbi Ari Zucker

Sometimes the most profound insights are found in the most nuanced details. Rav Moshe Feinstein mines the opening line of our parsha to find a critical lesson in the language that applied to Kohanim of the past, and to educators of today.

Emor opens like many of our parshiot: with Hashem tasking Moshe to teach. But here the text diverges from the usual “*Vayidaber*” that we so often see to a less common “*Vayomer* and *emor*”. Berachot 11a explains that *daber* implies a harsher instruction, while *emor* suggests a calmer, softer approach. But the subsequent laws detail the essentials for a Kohen to maintain holy status; breaking the following precepts disqualifies his descendants from serving in the Temple! Would this not be the precise moment for a harsh *dibur*, and not the softer *emor*?!

Rav Moshe Feinstein explains that the primary role of the Kohen was actually not Temple service. For a few weeks a year he would serve, but the rest of his time was spent outside of Jerusalem, among the rest of the nation, teaching and inspiring. As a walking representation of holiness and connection, the Kohen’s primary role (and foremost reason for respect) was the time and energy invested in teaching the people.

Anyone familiar with education knows the effort necessary to teach well. Whether the students are young and rowdy, mature and opinionated, or experienced and skeptical, every teacher encounters the challenge of teaching and the potential for frustration. Ultimately, the manner in which a teacher communicates Torah is most important. No matter the severity of the subject, a Kohen always has to teach in a soft, calm, manner—using *emor*, not *dibur*. So important was the style of teaching that

(Shalom Rav, v.2, p.117-118).

To give meaning to these weeks of Sefiras Ha’Omer, and to bask in the joy of the mo’adim, we must ensure that every day counts. R’ Zvi Hirsch Broide of Kelm (1865-1913) used to say: “It is not time that passes by man, but rather it is man that passes through time” (Great Jewish Wisdom, p.133).

Let us learn these lessons well, as we value and cherish each day, for the past is no longer here, the future is not yet, and the present passes in the blink of an eye.

Hashem models that kind of education in His instruction to Moshe, and Moshe to the Kohanim, at the start of our parsha.

Rav Moshe adds that if this emphasis on soft-spoken education existed for Kohanim, it applies no less for our teachers today. Without a Temple, our Kohanim are no longer the de facto teachers of the people. Instead we are taught by those who make themselves into Kohanim—those who dedicate themselves to Torah. “Emor to Kohanim”, speak softly to the modern-day Kohanim, our rabbis, rebbetzins, teachers, and morahs, and they will inspire the nation just like the Kohanim of the past.