

SIDRA OF THE WEEK : אָמוֹר

1. Whereas the previous Sidra is comprised of the commandments of HaShem through which the entire Jewish Nation is to “be holy,” this week’s Sidra starts with the special laws of holiness which pertain to the Kohannim, that select group of people from out of the special Tribe of Levi whom HaShem has commanded shall represent the Jewish People in His Mikdash. It is the Kohannim (assisted by the Levi'im) who are to be the spiritual guides and Torah teachers of the Nation. As such, they especially are to ensure that the teachings of the Torah are preserved faithfully amongst themselves and passed on to the younger generation of Kohannim so that the Torah shall not be lost from the Jewish People. (For this reason, this section is singularly introduced with a warning to the adult Kohannim to teach these laws to their young, for if the children and successors of the Nation’s Torah-teachers are untrained and uneducated, what hope can there be for the Nation as a whole?)

2. The dual function of the Kohannim means that just as they serve before HaShem as the representatives of the Nation, they also transmit the teachings of HaShem to His People, and thus are seen as the representatives of HaShem before the People. It is for this reason that HaShem, our Living G–d, wishes that His Kohannim especially should be seen to be involved as much as possible with the life of the Nation and its healthy and happy development, and not with death and the numbing feelings of helplessness and despair that death brings. Therefore the Kohannim are not allowed to be near the dead and dying, for death tends to arouse in its beholder feelings and thoughts that are the negation of life and its purpose. If its tragedy and sadness are emphasized more than the Torah considers is proper, if one’s thoughts are allowed to dwell too much on the inevitable end of a life on this world, one can become overwhelmed and led away from the true path of the Torah which teaches of the sanctity of life with its great opportunities for spiritual achievement as outlined in the living Torah. Any such inordinate preoccupation with death, teaches the Torah, can lead to a morbid view of life which is the antithesis of HaShem’s exhortation to Man to enjoy life and utilize its blessings to serve HaShem in a positive frame of mind. Living one’s life in accordance with the Will of HaShem leads one to holiness and sanctity; too much attention to death can bring questions and doubts that lead to despair and spiritual uncleanness — death is Tum’oh.

3. The living Torah of HaShem is not like the antique and modern heathenism, those “scarecrow religions,” which associates religion and religious matters with death and thoughts of death. To the heathen, his god is a god of death and not of life; death and dying are the manifestations of the imagined power of his god. The heathen sees his god as a killer, not a lifegiver: his god sends death — and its forerunners, illness and wretchedness — so that men should fear him and his death-dealing power and see Man’s own impotence. Graves and tombstones therefore surround the places which the heathen dedicates as his temples, and the foremost place of the heathen god’s priest is

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with the dead and at the bed of the dying. It is there, where the celebration of life is fading and the despondency of death is manifest, that the field for the heathen's religion is most fruitful and the heathen priest is in business.

4. Not so with the Kohen, because not so is the Torah's teaching. HaShem is the Source of all Life, and through His Torah He has bestowed the blessings of life upon His People, raising them to high free-will and vibrant, spiritual vitality, not the crushing power of death. Not so much how one is to die, but — infinitely more important — how one is to live, is the message of the Torah of Life: "Guard My statutes, and My laws shall you observe, which, if a man shall do them, he will live by them: I am HaShem" — "He will live by them" — "and not die by them," as our Chachommim, of blessed memory, extrapolate. To live — so as to conquer death: the death of thralldom, the death of being enslaved by one's physical urges and moral weaknesses — the Torah teaches us to live our lives so that we overcome death in life. The living Torah of HaShem teaches Man how to live every moment of a positive life, that it shall be elevating and ennobling; to live a life of working and achieving — and enjoying all the pleasures of G-d-given life — to sanctify one's whole being to the service of HaShem: only in this way can Man's soul find harmony and fulfilment. This is the message of the Torah, brought to HaShem's Nation by those whom He has appointed for this task, the Kohanim.
5. When, therefore, the people are summoned to come to busy themselves in acts of lovingkindness with the empty body of a soul that has come to the end of its journey on earth, and in respectful decorum return the body to the earth from which it came, the Kohanim have to remain at a distance. By standing away, the Kohanim demonstrate that they are representatives of life, and thus teach that thoughts of death are never to overpower Man's vitality and determination to live his life in accordance with the Will of HaShem Who gives life, and renews life.
6. Only where the personal and human feelings of the Kohen are permitted to take precedence over his calling (and he is temporarily disqualified from his Kohen-duties) that is, where he has suffered bereavement in the loss of his nearest relatives (wife, child, parent, brother or maiden sister) or, exceptionally, where the forsaken state of a corpse makes the Kohen a brother or father to the forsaken one (מת מצוה) only then is his Kehunnah to retire behind the duties of family and humanity, and his involvement with the burial is not only permitted but is indeed a duty. But otherwise, Kohanim have to keep away from the dead.
7. How sad, incidentally, that the modern-day substitute of the Torah's Kohen, the Rabbi, is so often called upon to officiate at the house of death and mourning so prominently: instead of the Nation's Torah-teachers ("Rabbi" means "teacher") emulating the Kohen of old, they are forced to be like the pagan priest and clergyman who hovers round the deathbed.
8. As the Torah-teacher of the Nation, the Kohen's personal and home life must be an example to all. Therefore, besides those marriages that offend against the laws of the Torah, the Kohen is forbidden to marry those who, generally speaking, tend to make the

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home less than harmonious. (In the case of the Kohen Ga'dol, who represents Kehunnah in its highest state, these laws are even more stringent.) The Jewish people for their part are to accord respect and honour to the Kohanim, for through the holiness of the Kohen and the Torah-knowledge that he imparts, the whole Nation is elevated and brought closer to HaShem Who is holy.

9. In much the same way as Kehunnah is centred on Man's life and vitality in the service of HaShem and is kept away from all forms of death and paganism which are Tum'oh, so too is the Kohen personally to be one who is visibly endowed with the vitality of life and physical completeness. (This applies also to the animals brought as Korbannos.) The Mishkan of HaShem — together with the Kohen who there represents the people before HaShem and brings His teachings to them — is dedicated to life in its completeness, in its freshness and in its strength, lived in accordance with the Will of HaShem. In the Mikdash of HaShem, therefore, Kohanim who are afflicted with physical blemishes cannot officiate, for the Mikdash of HaShem is not to be seen as a hospice for the lame and crippled or the broken and the sick, for this would be contradictory to the theme of the Mikdash, which is the dedication of life in all its vitality to the service of HaShem. To be sure, a Kohen who is blemished is still entitled to all the privileges of Kehunnah, and it goes without saying that any disadvantaged person is treated with care and compassion at all times, for so does the Torah command. But the Mikdash and its Kohanim must serve as an illustration to the people, that they likewise dedicate themselves to serve HaShem in full health and completeness, and not only as a sad last resort, in illness and despair, to turn to Him. When we thus live our lives in full accord with HaShem's wishes and we dedicate ourselves completely to fulfilling all of His Torah, then indeed all the physical and social ills which oppress the rest of Mankind will not come upon us, "for I am HaShem your Healer."
10. The Sidra then continues with the special duties of the Kohanim, with the stipulation that they are not to participate in the Korbannos when Tommay, and the warning that any non-Kohen is forbidden to eat the Terumoh which the Torah commands is to be given to the Kohen (unless that person is a member of his household). Various other laws of Korbannos are given, including a partial list of the blemishes that disqualify an animal from being brought as a Korbon and the law that forbids us to mutilate any animal in our possession (whether a Korbon or not). Even when slaughtering animals for food, indeed, especially when slaughtering an animal for food, the Torah exhorts us to remember our humanity and our responsibility towards the animal world, not so much for the animal's sake as for our own. Through these laws, the Torah ensures that despite our slaughtering animals as permitted, we do not become brutalized and unfeeling. (It is noteworthy that the qualified slaughterer, the Shochet, has traditionally been entrusted also with the sacred calling of Torah-teacher of our young children, for kindness and compassion are necessary qualities of the Shochet no less than his proficiency of the laws of Shechitah and his fear of G-d Who has commanded them. In stark contrast, one can hardly imagine anyone so crazy as to entrust his children to the tender mercies of the non-Jewish killer of the abattoir.)

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11. Through the careful observance of these laws, which is the practical fulfilment of dedicating our lives to HaShem with which the Sidra started, we will indeed live our lives in a way that sanctifies the Name of HaShem. Thereby we fulfil our destiny as the People of HaShem whom He brought out of Egypt — for this purpose.
12. The Sidra continues with the laws of the Yommim Tovim: their dates, the Mitzvos special to each one, and their Korbannos. But at the head of them all stands the weekly Shabbos, for the Shabbos is sanctified by HaShem, and the Jewish people are sanctified by properly observing the Shabbos and they in turn do then sanctify the Yommim Tovim. The first Yom Tov is Pessach, commemorating our Redemption from Egypt, with its Mitzvah of eating Matzoh, and, on the second day, the bringing of the Omer (a sheaf of the new crop of barley from which is brought a Korban Minchah). With the Mitzvah of Counting the Seven Weeks making the connexion with the Yom Tov of Shovuos, the Torah exhorts us to be mindful of the reason for our Redemption from Egypt, for it was on Pessach that we became an independent people but it was at Shovuos-time that we received the Torah and in effect received our Constitution as the People of HaShem. On Shovuos, there are special Korbannos, including the Korban of the Two Loaves, too. These Two Loaves correspond to the two Tablets of Testimony and this Korban is a symbol of the Nation's material substance consecrated to a life lived in accordance with the Torah of HaShem.
13. The Yom Tov of Rosh HaShannah is given over to personal reflection and introspection, a chance for each individual to consider his own spiritual progress. (Rosh HaShannah is not one of the National Pilgrimage Festivals — it is to be primarily a time for private self-assessment.) The Mitzvah of hearing the Shofar on Rosh HaShannah helps a person to arouse himself to betterment, for the sound of the Shofar also awakens people to the fact that Rosh HaShannah is the Day of Judgement. Rosh HaShannah leads to the solemn Yom Tov of Yom Kippur ten days later, when, by command of HaShem, we abstain from all food and drink and physical pleasure (the better to feel the spiritual character of this great and holy day) and thus, in humble spirit and contrition, we approach HaShem on this Day of Atonement and, fully and sincerely repentant, we beseech Him to forgive us our misdeeds.
14. Confident in the all-forgiving, merciful power of HaShem to obliterate our sins when we return to Him, we are then ready to rejoice in serene happiness on the soon-following Yom Tov of Sukkos. This Yom Tov commemorates how when HaShem took us out from Egypt and we journeyed for forty years in the Wilderness on our way to Eretz Yisroel, He made us dwell in booths ("Sukkos") under His protection. It is on Sukkos that the Torah commands us to take the Four Species (Esrog, Lulav, myrtle and willow) and, with these representatives of the whole plant kingdom of HaShem's world, rejoice in His Presence in gratefulness for all the bounty that He bestows upon us. And the day following the Yom Tov of Sukkos is the Yom Tov of Sheminni Atzeres (with Simchas Torah) when, as it were, HaShem rejoices with us, His faithful People.
15. Immediately after this list of Yommim Tovim with their special Mitzvos and Korbannos, the Torah commands the Mitzvah of the Lighting of the Menorah in the Mishkan and the

Mitzvah of the Showbread arranged on the Table in the Mishkan. At first glance, these two Mitzvos seem to be out of place here. But in fact by their being placed here after the laws of the other Yommim Tovim, the Torah teaches us a fundamental lesson, as follows: Although the Yommim Tovim are splendid opportunities for us to come closer to HaShem, each one with its own Mitzvos and its own particular emphasis, we are not to be misled into thinking that it is only on these special days that we are to be near to HaShem and that outside of these special occasions our lives may be without any spiritual content or purpose. Not so, says the Torah. The Menorah, the symbol of the Light of the Torah burning continuously in the Mishkan, in the midst of the People, calls upon us to let its light illuminate our lives and activities at all times, every day of the year. And the Table with its twelve loaves (corresponding to the Twelve Tribes of Israel) representing the material wealth and physical substance of the People displayed, continuously, before the Divine Presence, declares that not only on the holy occasions of the year but at all times all our enterprises and undertakings are to be worthy of the Divine Presence. The Yommim Tovim are only the highlights of a regular, spiritual and sanctified all-year-round experience.

16. *From another perspective, the two Mitzvos of the Lights and the Table, can be seen to have been placed here by HaShem after the Yommim Tovim as a prediction that there are to be, much later, two semi-Yommim Tovim instituted by our Chachommim, of blessed memory. The one, to commemorate the events of Chanukah, is celebrated by lighting the Menorah in every Jewish home that is a Mikdash in miniature, as it were. And the other is Purim which, besides the Mitzvah of the Reading of the Megillah, is celebrated by feasting and enjoying food and drink at the festive Table of every Jewish family throughout the world.*
17. The Sidra continues with the account of the sad episode of the blasphemy by the son of Shlomis the daughter of Divri. In direct contrast to the organization and functioning of the Jewish People which is based solely upon the laws and statutes of the Torah and upon the fear and reverence of HaShem, this man, in a deliberate show of anger, uttered the Ineffable Name of HaShem and cursed, scoffing at the laws of His Torah. Such a thing had never happened before and enquiry had to be made from HaShem as to what form the punishment was to take. The answer was immediately forthcoming: a person who thus strikes at the very roots of the Laws that are the foundation and essence of the Jewish People and its *raison d'être*, a person who blasphemes the Name of the G-d of Israel and vilifies His Torah, thereby forfeits his right to live on G-d's earth, and this very earth itself rises up, as it were, to strike him down. (His death is by stoning.)
18. The list of selected laws that follow HaShem's verdict upon the blasphemer emphasizes that it is respect for the Torah — which must be rooted in the reverence and fear of HaShem — that is the basis of the functioning of society in general but especially of the Jewish Nation. No man-made system of law can be truly unbiased. For man-made law is influenced by the conditions and culture and traditions that influence each society and the aims of the laws enacted by each society will be to maintain that culture and those traditions. Thus every system of man-made law will be just and righteous primarily (but

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not necessarily exclusively) to the society that drafted this legislation. For instance, a communist society will see its communist law as correct and righteous and will view capitalist law as wrong and unjust, permitting as it undoubtedly does, the exploitation of the underclasses. Conversely, the capitalist will see his law system as just and righteous as it permits free enterprise and the realization of man's growth through the individual's endeavours, unlike communist law which, says the capitalist, stifles the individual and is over-protective. The cannibal will have laws or conventions which could never be considered as good or just by the non-cannibal in exactly the same way that the non-cannibal will have laws which the cannibal considers wrong. ("Why kill so many people in your wars if you're not even going to eat them? What a criminal waste!") The only law system that is truly just and righteous is that which comes from outside of the human race itself and is the work of the Supreme and Merciful Judge of All, that is, it is from HaShem Himself, the Creator of Mankind and his world and the Only One Who knows what is truly best for His creatures. Respect for that law system is grounded in respect for the Divine Originator of that Law and that is why blasphemy is such a grave offence. For if there is no respect for the Lawgiver, there will be no respect for the law and this will lead to the ruin of society. For society functions only when there is confidence and security and trust and fairness and these are all safeguarded only by the force of law and justice. Where there is no just law, there is unhappiness and corruption and the ruin of humanity. By listing these few seemingly unconnected and diverse and contrasting laws here, the Torah teaches how the foundations of its system of law and justice, of right and wrong, is from HaShem. It is HaShem Who decrees the system of values that places the human being higher than the animal and it is in HaShem Himself that human dignity has its roots. It is HaShem Who has decreed that killing an animal calls for monetary compensation but that unlawfully killing a human being is a capital crime. It is HaShem Who decrees that the life of a human being is not the same as the life of an animal, whatever the social standing of the human being and whatever the value of the animal. For man is made in the Divine Image and has a Divine soul within him whereas the animal has not. On the other hand, maiming a human being without taking his life is not a capital crime and is indeed comparable to any other damage. Where human life itself has not been taken, damage of man and his beast is punished on the identical basis of monetary compensation, and this, too, HaShem has decreed. Its Divine origin is the basis of the righteous Law that is the Torah and the very foundation of the happy functioning of society in general but especially of the Jewish Nation, the People of G-d, whose purpose is to bring the benefits of true law and justice to all and share with all Mankind the blessings that result from obedience to HaShem's Law.

For the explanation of the Haftorah of Sidra אָמֹר please go to HAFTORAHS.