FUCHSBERG JERUSALEM CENTER STUDY PRAY EXPLORE

Parashah:	Emor
Read On:	May 17, 2025 | 19 Iyyar 5785
Torah:	Leviticus 21:1–24:23
Triennial:	Leviticus 23:23–24:23
Haftorah:	Ezekiel 44:15–31

TORAH SPARKS

GOING IN

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt

Dvar Parashah

He went out.

That's how the story begins: the son of an Israelite woman and an Egyptian man, caught between spaces, caught between names, goes out. Where he had belonged is unclear; what he has lost is everything. His lineage is already a rift. His speech—a curse hurled into the camp—rends the fabric further.

The story of the blasphemer erupts at the heart of Leviticus, a book otherwise quiet with law: instructions for offerings, purity, time, and covenantal living. It tears a hole through the carefully woven sanctity of the *Mishkan* and the community that surrounds it. And it reminds us: holiness is not a given. Holiness is a flame that must be tended—or it will consume.

The blasphemer's sin is not merely an act of anger. It is a collapse of sacred speech. The divine Name, the source and sustaining breath of Israel's covenant, is torn loose by his lips. In doing so, he repeats the earliest human fall—the corruption of language, the failure of faithful speech—and he repeats the wandering of Cain, who "went out from before God" after breaking the bond of brotherhood with words of evasion and silence. The blasphemer's speech is a second exile: from community, from sanctity, from life.

But he is not the first figure in Leviticus to fall at the border between human passion and divine holiness. Nadav and Avihu, sons of Aaron, bear that burden too. At the very inauguration of the *Mishkan*—the recreation of Eden at the heart of Israel's camp—they offer strange fire, a ritual not commanded, a yearning not bounded by instruction. Fire comes forth and devours them. They die not because they hated God, but because they loved wrongly: too recklessly, too imaginatively, too soon.

Both Nadav and Avihu, and the blasphemer, bring offerings of a kind. Nadav and Avihu offer fire. The blasphemer offers speech. In both cases, the offering is malformed. It does not move along the channels God provided. It tears at the structure rather than ascending through it.

And in both cases, death follows—not because human longing is wrong, but because longing unleashed without covenantal anchoring tears at the world instead of lifting it. Holiness welcomes passion; it demands that passion be bound to faithfulness, timing, and reverence.

In a world after Eden, after Sinai, after *Mishkan*, human beings are no longer sovereign over holiness—but neither are we silenced. The gate to God stands guarded by covenant, but it is still open. To connect is not to conquer. It is to enter covenant. It is not the cleverest who ascend to God, nor the fiercest, nor the angriest. It is the faithful: those who dare to carry fire and word as commanded, who dare to reach—but in trust, not in pride.

The *Mishkan* was built to be a structured Eden, a guarded sanctuary where proximity to God was possible again after the long exile from the Garden. Its design ritualizes space: outer courtyard, inner sanctum, Holy of Holies. Its rituals choreograph the dangerous dance of human approach: when to draw near, when to step back, when to offer, when to speak.

But holiness does not reside only in places and objects. It resides in words. God created the world with speech; Israel sustains our covenant with speech—the prayers, the vows, the blessings, the careful uttering of the divine Name. If the *Mishkan* is ritualized space, sacred speech is ritualized time: a daily weaving of language that keeps the world stitched to its source. To blaspheme is not only to insult; it is to tear the veil, to break the cord.

And here Leviticus unveils its radical claim: holiness is not the province of priests alone. "You shall be holy," we are told, "for I, the Lord your God, am holy." The democratization of holiness does not mean that everyone may do as they please with the sacred. It means that everyone must carry the sacred flame in trembling daring: not fearing our own gifts, but binding them to God's pattern.

Nadav and Avihu's failure is a priestly one: a misuse of ritual proximity. The blasphemer's failure is a national one: a misuse of speech, the daily medium of every Israelite life. Both deaths mark critical warnings. Holiness cannot be seized. It must be guarded. It must be lived.

In a world where holiness is democratized, the boundaries between sacred and profane become thinner, and more fragile. Every mouth becomes a potential altar or a battlefield. Every breath becomes a coal upon the altar. Every heart becomes a veil waiting to be drawn aside—or torn apart.

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He went out. It is one of the loneliest lines in Leviticus. He went out—because he reached with anger instead of faith. He went out—and through his exile, we are reminded: every word is a fire waiting to ascend—or to consume.

Holiness is democratized, which means responsibility is, too.

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DAVID AND THE BREAD OF THE FACE

Jonathan Lipnick

Exploring the Parashah

*In this video series, we will explore an often neglected aspect of the parashah: geography. Each week we will focus on a physical location mentioned in the parashah and examine its historical significance. Of course not every parashah contains a narrative situated in a place; for these weeks we will select a word from the parashah that relates to the material culture of ancient Israel.

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THE RELATIONSHIP FORGED BY MARRIAGE: THE TEST CASE OF A PRIEST BUYING HIS WIFE

Rabbi Joshua Kulp

Midrash and the Parashah

Parashat Emor, the beginning of Leviticus 21, opens by stating that priests may not become defiled by taking care of the dead. There are several exceptions to this rule. Verses 1b-3 list them as follows:

לְנֶפֶשׁ לֹא־יִטַּמָּא בְּעַמָּיו׃
כִּי אִם־לִשְׁאֵרוֹ הַקָּרֹב אֵלָיו לְאִמּוֹ וּלְאָבִיו וְלִבְנוֹ וּלְבִתּוֹ וּלְאָחִיו׃
וְלַאֲחֹתוֹ הַבְּתוּלָה הַקְּרוֹבָה אֵלָיו אֲשֶׁר לֹא־הָיְתָה לְאִישׁ לָהּ יִטַּמָּא׃
לֹא יִטַּמָּא בַּעַל בְּעַמָּיו לְהֵחַלּוֹ׃

> For no dead person among his kin shall he be defiled, except for his own **flesh** that is close to him, for his mother, for his father and for his son and for his daughter and for his brother, and for his virgin sister who is close to him, as she has not become a man's, for her he may be defiled. He shall not defile himself as a husband among his kin.

For the most part, these instructions are clear. A husband cannot be defiled except for a "flesh" relative, one to whom he is related by blood–mother, father, son, daughter, and brother. He may defile himself while burying his unmarried (virgin) sister, but once she is married he may not defile himself for her because she is part of another family, at least in the patriarchy anticipated by this verse. The last verse has been difficult to interpret since antiquity. It is understood by some traditional commentaries such as the Rashbam (12th century France) as prohibiting a husband from being defiled for his wife. This interpretation accords with the fact that the wife is not mentioned in verse 2.

However, this leaves us with the question as to who would bury a married woman? When the verse states that a priest may bury his unmarried sister, it seems to imply that a married sister would be buried by her husband. But if her husband is also a priest, then who will bury her?

The tannaitic midrash on Leviticus, known as the Sifra (or sometimes Torat Kohanim), immediately addresses this question.

[ד] "כי אם לשארו הקרוב אליו" – אין "שארו" אלא אשתו שנאמר "שאר אביך הוא".
"הקרוב" – לא את הארוסה. "אליו" – לא את הגרושה.

> "Except for his own flesh (*she'ero*) that is close to him"--"His own flesh (she'ero)" refers to his wife, as it says, "She is your father's relative (she'er)" (Leviticus 18:12) "close"--but not one who is betrothed. "To him"--but not a divorcee.

Taken altogether, the Sifra teaches that a priest may defile himself for his wife, but only one that is married and not merely betrothed, and not if he has already divorced her. But how does the Sifra accomplish this? What allows the Sifra to read into the verse that a priest can defile himself for his wife, at least when they are married.

I want to begin with support for the Sifra's halakhah that can be found elsewhere in the Torah. First of all, the verses themselves recognize that through marriage a person becomes part of a new family--it is for this reason that a priest cannot defile himself for his married sister. Second, the rabbis know from narratives in the Torah that husbands bury their wives–this is something that Abraham explicitly does for Sarah and that Jacob seems to do for Rachel as well.

But halakhic midrashim are always based on words within the verse being interpreted, frequently connecting them with other cases in the Bible that use the same verse. And in our case, the textual proof cited is more problematic. The Torah allows a priest to become defiled for a relative whose relationship is defined as "*she'er*" which is usually translated as flesh. As proof that a husband may defile himself for his wife, the midrash cites Leviticus 18:12, which also uses the word "*she'er*." We would expect this verse to use the word to describe a relationship formed by marriage. But it does not. Leviticus 18:12 prohibits a man from having relations with his wife's **sister** for she is "his father's flesh (*she'er*)." How can a verse that uses the word "*she'er*" to mean the relationship between a brother and sister be proof that a wife is one's flesh! The Sifra is extremely problematic and scholars have debated its meaning.

The 19th century German scholar R. David Tzvi Hoffman suggested that our midrash is actually referring to either Leviticus 18:8, which prohibits a man from having relations with his father's wife, or 18:15-16 which prohibit a man from having relations with his son's wife or his brother's wife (in all cases, even after they are no longer married). Both of these prohibitions demonstrate that the Torah considers marriage to forge a "flesh" relationship. This is already stated in Genesis 2:24, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and they will be one flesh." However, neither of these verses from Leviticus 18 uses the word "flesh (she'er)" the verse that is expounded upon in this midrash. Our midrash could not cite these verses because they do not use the correct word, but it did seem to want to refer to Leviticus 18 in which the relationship formed at marriage is considered to have the same power as a blood relationship.

In sum, our midrash is influenced by other portions in the Torah, where marriage is understood as forming a "flesh" relationship between the two partners and yet the midrash

still feels it necessary to find a word in the verse that alludes to this meaning, even though there is no other example in the Torah in which the word "*she'er*" refers to a relationship formed by marriage. The rabbis forcefully use a difficult wordplay to read the local verse such that it does not clash with what emerges from other verses in the Torah.