

YOU ARE SO SPECIAL!

PARSHAS EMOR

Between 1880 and 1942 there was a mass immigration of Jews to America. The Jews came to escape violent pogroms, poverty, and persecution. Life in America was very difficult for them. The immigrant parents often struggled with economic hardship and the challenges of keeping Shabbos. Most jobs at that time required working on Shabbos. Employees who did not work on Shabbos were fired. Often, they would have to look for another job every week to support their families. It was very challenging. Unfortunately, the mantra that many of these Jews said to their families was, "Es iz shver tzu zein a Yid", "It is hard to be a Jew". They constantly conveyed their struggles to their children. Thus, they created an impression that Torah observance is a burdensome life to avoid. Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l remarked that the constant repetition of this mantra created a negative attitude towards Judaism. That attitude caused massive assimilation and loss of Torah observance in America. Rav Moshe zt"l said that Jews must fulfill the mitzvos with joy and highlight the privilege of Jewish identity rather than the burden.

Hashem told Moshe, "...Emor el haKohanim, bnei Aharon, v'amarta aleihem l'nefesh lo yeetama b'amav', "tell the kohanim" "and say to them" (Vayikra 21:1). The Torah then lists the relatives for whom a kohain is permitted to become impure

in conjunction with their deaths. The question is that the two phrases in the first pasuk, "tell" and then "say" seem to be repetitive. What is that teaching us? The Talmud (Yevamos 114A) explains that the second phrase, "and say to them" is adding a special directive for the older kohanim. The older kohanim were instructed to warn the younger kohanim, below the age of bar mitzvah, to maintain their holiness and not become impure.

The Talmud quotes two other psukim that likewise teach that an adult should be heedful that young children not sin. Regarding eating insects, the pasuk (Vayikra 11:42) says, "You shall not eat, תאכלום, them [insects], for they are a detestable thing". The Sages explain this as תאכלום, do not feed them to others. The pasuk is teaching us that not only is it prohibited for adults to eat insects, but they also may not feed them to minors. The third pasuk (Vayikra 17:12) says, "Every soul among you shall not eat blood". The

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Talmud says that this pasuk also warns adults concerning minors.

Rabbi Yissocher Frand (Torah.org) quotes Rav Chaim Dov Keller zt"l, former Rosh Yeshiva in Telshe Chicago. Rabbi Keller zt"l wonders why the Torah felt it necessary to make a special

prohibition forbidding young kohanim from becoming impure, in addition to the mitzvah taught elsewhere that children should not be fed non-kosher food. Rabbi Keller zt"l suggests a beautiful idea. He says that the Torah is teaching us that when we educate our children, not only should we teach them what they can't do. We should also teach them why they can't do those things. It is not only important for us to teach them that you can't eat something because it is not kosher and it is bad for your neshama. It is also important to instill within our young children that they are holy; They are very special as they have within them a very holy neshama whose holiness must be maintained.

This is a very important lesson to teach our children, especially nowadays when we live in a society which is largely amoral and has very few restrictions. Not only should our children be careful lest they commit very serious sins. They also must be taught that they are different and are holier than the rest of the nations

of the world. Hashem calls us a holy nation, "mamleches kohanim v'goy kadosh" (Shmos 19:6). We are "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The Jewish People are holy, are responsible for serving Hashem, and are meant to be a positive influence on the world. The standards are higher for a prince than for a regular person. Accordingly, we Jews are held to higher standards than others. We are considered Hashem's children. "Banim Atem LaHashem Elokeichem", "You are sons to Hashem..." (Devarim 14:1). There is an unbreakable, loving bond between the Jewish people and Hashem, like that of a parent and child. Hashem's love is unconditional as a parent's love is to a child. Hashem also tells us, "if you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then you shall be my own treasure from among all peoples for all the earth is mine" (Shmos 19:5). When we follow the Torah and the mitzvos we will be considered Hashem's treasured people. **Sforno** says that even though all mankind is important to Hashem, the Jewish People will be treasured above and beyond. In a similar vein, the first words of the pasuk (Vayikra 21:1) are "אֵל מֹשֶׁה ד' וַיֹּאמֶר ד'", "And Hashem spoke to Moshe". Why doesn't the Torah use the more common phrase, "וַיְדַבֵּר ד' אֵל מֹשֶׁה"? Our Sages tell us that the latter is a harder type of speech, the former is a much softer type of speech. Since the Torah is giving the kohanim a list of restrictions such as what they

can eat, whom they can marry and, for which people they can become impure for burial purposes, we would think that the Torah would have used the harder type of speech. Yet, the Torah employed the much softer expression. Why?

Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l (sefer Darash Moshe) says a beautiful thought. The role of the kohanim was to be the spiritual mentors of the Jewish people (Devarim 33:10). For a person to be an effective leader and teacher and an effective role model, he cannot feel that he has a difficult life that is full of restrictions. **To be able to give over a heritage to someone, one must feel privileged, rather than burdened.** If the kohain would feel that all the requirements that the Torah put on him are a burden rather than a privilege, then he would not be the spiritual leader that we want him to be. That is why the Torah says, "Vayomer". Even though it may seem hard, the kohanim must accept it as a privilege and feel as if it is easy! **Rav Moshe zt"l** adds that this role of spiritual mentor is not restricted to the Tribe of Levi. Any person who devotes his life to teaching Torah, despite the challenges, should not feel as if he is burdened. Rather he should feel privileged! Then he will be capable of transmitting our beautiful heritage to others.

All Jews need to feel blessed and fortunate to be Jews. Then we can be a link in a chain to pass down our rich heritage properly to our descendants and all other Jews.

Hashem raised us to the level of His beloved children! There is a special love between Hashem and us! Hashem gave us the gift of the Torah and designated us to be a moral compass and a light to the rest of the world. We are so privileged! We have such a beautiful heritage! Let's never forget that!

(based on Rabbi Yissocher Frand from Torah.org)

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Rabbi Yaakov Finestone is the director of JEP Queens. For almost 50 years JEP Queens has been in the forefront of kiruv. JEP has changed the lives of thousands of Jewish children enrolled in public schools and kiruv schools. Many are shomrei Torah and mitzvos today because of JEP.

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