

## Innovative Intimacy

Parshat Emor opens with G-d prohibiting the Kohanim (priests) from coming into contact with the dead, except for their immediate family members.

Vayikra 21:1

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֲמֹר אֶל־הַכֹּהֲנִים בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם לֹנֶפֶשׁ לֹא־יִטְמָא בְּעַמִּי:

And the Lord said to Moses: Speak to the kohanim, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: Let none [of you] defile himself for a dead person among his people

This is a practice that we see in our communities to this very day. Kohanim are careful to avoid contracting ritual impurity from dead bodies. This guides our mourning practices and the structure of our cemeteries.

R'Yeevi (Yaakov Yosef of Ostrog, one of the earliest followers of the Baal Shem Tov and leaders of nascent Hasidism) has an innovative reflection on this passuk and how it is applicable irrespective of priestly status. He begins by relaying the story of R'Zeira.

Massechet Brachot (28a)

רבי זעירא כּי הוּא חָלִישׁ מְגִירְסִיָּה הוּא אָזִיל וַיִּתֵּיב אֶפְתָּחָא דְּבֵי רַבִּי נָתַן בַּר טוֹבִי. אָמַר: כּי חָלִפִי רַבָּנָן אֲזַיְקוּם  
מִקְמִיָּהוּ וְאִקְבֵּל אֲגָרָא

When Rabbi Zeira grew weak and could no longer study Torah, he would go and sit in the doorway of Rabbi Natan bar Tovi's study hall. He said to himself: When the entering and exiting Sages pass, I will rise before them and be rewarded for the mitzva of honoring Torah scholars.

R'Zeira did this because we are obligated to study Torah day and night (Joshua 1:8), this is how we achieve closeness and intimacy with the Divine. However he was no longer able to achieve this closeness in the same way as he had become ill. Therefore he sought to fulfil a mitzvah from last week's parsha "rise before the whitened head (of the elders and the wise)" (Vayikra 19.32).

From this account of R'Zeira's choices R'Yeevi does a great re-reading of our passuk.

"Speak to the Kohanim, the sons of Aaron" - these are all who serve Hashem. We are all called Kohanim when we are acting in the service of the Divine.

"Do not defile yourself for a Nefesh" - Nefesh can mean rest - as we know from kiddush when we say "שבת וינפש" - on the seventh day he rested. Do not defile yourself with idleness. You may feel that you want to rest from Divine service since you are unable to study Torah.

However you are still “among your people” - when we cannot perform our usual mitzvot, we must serve Hashem through service to other people.

This brilliant re-reading of the passuk can be summarised as such: when you find yourself unable to connect to G-d in the ways in which you were accustomed, do not give up - now is your chance to serve the Divine within each person. R'Yeevi is speaking to us all and he is imploring us to be creative in our Avodat Hashem.

May we all be blessed to have a week of sacred closeness with the divine within each other.