



Parshat Emor
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Parashat Emor begins with the law of *tum'at kohanim*, which forbids the members of the priestly tribe from coming in contact with a human corpse. As we would expect, the Torah allows *kohanim* to become *tamei* for the purpose of burying family members. It is entirely consistent with the fundamental Torah values of family commitment and affording respect to the deceased that it requires even the *kohanim* to tend to the burial of their loved ones despite their lofty priestly status, which otherwise demands avoiding sources of *tum'a* (ritual impurity).

Surprisingly, however, no such exception is made with regard to the *kohen gadol*, the high priest, who must adhere to the strict priestly code even in the face of personal tragedy:

But the *kohen* who is greater than his brethren, upon whose head the anointing oil was poured...he shall not let his hair grow nor rend his garments [as an expression of mourning]. He shall not come upon any dead person; he may not become impure through [contact with] his [deceased] father or mother. He shall not leave the Temple and not desecrate the Temple of his God...
(21:10-12)

Even upon the death of an immediate family member, the *kohen gadol* must remain in the Temple and refrain from attending the funeral or observing any mourning practices.

It would appear that the strict code of the *kohen gadol* – which of course applies only to him – is intended to establish a model of the mindset that should characterize even the ordinary members of the nation. The *kohen gadol's* privileged status as God's chief attendant in the *Mikdash* renders him immune to the sorrow and grief that people normally experience upon suffering a personal loss. By remaining in the Temple serving God, the *kohen gadol* demonstrates that the joy and privilege of *avodat Hashem* (serving the Almighty) overshadows even the harshest tragedy, such that he can remain focused and undeterred in his role even in times of personal hardship.

This principle is indeed applicable to all Jews. The Torah certainly allows and even requires all Jews except the *kohen gadol* to observe a mourning period upon the death of family members, but at the same time it demands that one never lose sight of the unparalleled privilege he has to serve God. While recognizing the importance of grieving for lost loved ones, the Torah bids us to follow the *kohen gadol's* example with respect to life's difficulties and challenges. The great privilege we have of living our lives in God's service should put all hardships in perspective, and allow us to confront them with strength, fortitude and resolve.

Maimonides expresses this notion amidst his discussion of the Book of Iyov. Initially, Iyov responds to his suffering by denying Providence altogether, and Maimonides contends that Iyov reached this erroneous conclusion as a result of his flawed understanding of God:

But he [Iyov] is represented to hold this view only so long as he was without wisdom, and knew God only by tradition, in the same manner as religious people generally know Him. As soon as he had acquired a true knowledge of God, he confessed that there is undoubtedly true felicity in the knowledge of God; it is attained by all who acquire that knowledge, and no earthly trouble can disturb it. (*Guide for the Perplexed*, 3:23)

A person who achieves perfect knowledge of God, Maimonides writes, obtains such "felicity" that "no earthly trouble can disturb it"; he is unaffected by even the harshest trials and tribulations, even such as those that Iyov endured. The joy and exhilaration experienced by this knowledge enables a person to simply disregard even the bitterest torment and suffering.

Of course, very few people have ever reached this ideal condition. Maimonides himself, in a famous letter, describes the anguish and sorrow he experienced upon learning of the tragic death of his brother. Nevertheless, all can learn from this model of the *kohen gadol* to recognize the privilege we are granted to serve the Almighty, which should overshadow the many minor challenges and difficulties we confront each day.