

Leap years bring many interesting developments, from American election campaigns to special conditions in the Jewish calendar. A case in point is *Yom haAtzma-ut*, Israel Independence Day. Most years, the anniversary of Israel's independence occurs during a week when we read Torah passages like *Tazria & Metzora*, detailing ancient laws and remedies for dreaded diseases like leprosy. Not the most welcome text for a national celebration. This year, however, because of the added month that makes a Jewish leap year, Israel Independence Day will fall on the week of *Emor*. That juxtaposition can give us food for thought.

*Emor* covers chapters 21-24 of the Book of Leviticus, and highlights the responsibilities of *kohanim*, the descendants of Aaron, literally "priests." Being one of them, I find this section pretty interesting – and not less so because I read it at my own Bar Mitzvah. It starts with the *kohen's* limits as concerns ritual contamination, which involves mourning customs, marital regulations, and basic areas of personal conduct. He must keep fit to officiate in ceremonies, from offering sacrifices in the ancient Tabernacle to asking Divine blessing on his people as we still do today. When we had a High Priest, the stringencies were exaggerated for him.

At the end of the *Sedrah Emor* we find restrictions on who is allowed to bring an animal to the *kohen* to be sacrificed, and what qualifies an animal to be offered. The same rules apply to anyone offering a sacrifice, whether a citizen or an alien. This policy also applies to basic criminal justice. The famous "eye for an eye" standard appears here, and only later was interpreted economically instead of physically. Either way, however, the Israelite and the stranger faced the identical punishment.

In between, we read the ritual chronology of the entire Jewish year. Here is Passover, celebrating freedom; then, counting the *omer* – the 49 days of offerings – leading to Shavuot, the festival of first fruits; the New Year, with its Shofar sound; Yom Kippur, with its solemn fast; and finally the joy of Succot, when the harvest was complete. (Purim and Hanukkah are not included here, of course, because they commemorate events that took place after Torah times.) Here too, Aaron is instructed to kindle the Eternal Light, still burning in every Jewish house of worship and in many Jewish hearts.

And what do all these rules and teachings have to do with the *kohanim*? Everything. Not only are special ceremonies associated with each of them that involve the *kohen*, but in the *haftarah* – the prophetic reading that accompanies *Emor* – Ezekiel adds another responsibility: “They shall teach my people.” The *kohen* was not to be only a functionary, but he was to show his congregants the difference between sacred and common, between clean and contaminated. He was to help others fulfill their religious identities.

Did he have a choice? Could he quit?

Not a chance. The *kohen* was born to his duty. And perhaps that fact makes this reading particularly appropriate for Yom haAtzmaut.

Like the *kohen*, Israel cannot quit. Her destiny calls her to a leading role in world Jewish life. Even though still defiled by enemies, the Temple Mount remains the most sacred spot in the Jewish world. Despite controversy and opposition, the Israeli Chief Rabbinate remains a global source of Torah rulings. And notwithstanding its mistakes, Israel’s government must take responsibility for the survival of the 5.5 million Jews who live there – and for the pride and honor of another 8 million who live elsewhere.

While guarding himself from other contamination, the *kohen* must bury his seven closest kin. While guarding their country from the threat of present terrorism, the IDF soldier and the Zaka volunteer must bury the victims of yesterday’s suicide bombing.

The *kohen*, at least by Ezekiel’s requirements, must interpret the law and must do so equally for all, even though some litigants reject the law. Similarly the state of Israel must apply the same justice to settlers and to peaceniks, to Druze loyalists and to Arab traitors. Never mind how other countries treat different kinds of individuals, Israel still has “one law for the stranger and the native, equal.”

Is the State of Israel then the world’s *kohen*? Certainly it is not treated like other countries. Should it be held to higher standards than its enemies – higher in fact than any other country on earth? Apparently the Christian world expects Israel to “turn the other cheek” – a dictum from their scriptures that they themselves never follow. And the

Moslem world only wants Israel to self-destruct – without awarding her the “martyr” status it awards its own suicidal thugs.

Neither self destruction nor defenseless endurance fits the role of *kohen*. What Ezekiel prompts us to project is something totally different. It is the hope that despite everything, *lamrot hakol*, we will still witness the fulfillment of Israel’s promise. That as the world’s *kohen* Israel will teach Torah to the human race. And, hopefully in our time, from Zion shall still go forth the Law, and the word of the L-rd from Jerusalem.

That can happen best – perhaps only – in a receptive world. *Emor* – the name of the reading for this Independence Day – simply means “say.” What we say can mean something only when someone else listens. And the stronger the voice, the more attention it gets. In other words, nothing succeeds like success. Israel already succeeds in many areas – science, technology, agriculture, archeology, medicine , to name a few of its secular achievements. And Israeli Torah learning is respected worldwide. Israel’s voice should be strong.

But it is not. Perhaps we who share Israel’s heritage should be listening to some voices out in the world. Perhaps the real message this year, as in this Torah reading, is not FROM the *kohanim* but TO them. Let’s listen to those voices.

What are they saying? What is the world’s *emor* to the state of Israel this year?

Maybe they are saying: “You are special, so BE special. You live in the Holy Land? Don’t contaminate it. You gave us the Torah? Keep it yourselves. You want our respect? Respect yourselves.”

Another voice worth listening to sounds from the pages of *Emor*: “Rejoice before the L-rd your G-d,” to which the *Kli Yokor* commentary says: “Their joy before G-d can happen only when they are together as one!” Together as one. Are you listening?

What about it? Will our 5.5 million Israelis and the other 8 million of us in the world listen?

If and when we do, Yom haAtzma-ut will gain a new meaning.