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# *The Aura of Torah*

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*A Kabbalistic-Hasidic Commentary  
to the Weekly Readings*

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## [90] Always Be Prepared

*“And you shall be holy. . . .”*

*Leviticus 20:7*

### CONTEXT

Leviticus 20 continues the theme of the Holiness Code, emphasizing family relationships. Contained within the chapter (at verses 7–8 and 26) are two reminders of the object of this legislation: holiness.

Menachem Mendel of Rymanov was a disciple of Elimelech of Lyzhansk, before becoming a popular rebbe in his own right.

I heard [the following] from our revered master Rabbi Menachem Mendel: “Holiness” is a term denoting preparation, as it is written: “Make yourselves holy today and tomorrow” (Exodus 19:10). You should always be ready and prepared for holiness to dwell [upon you], like a wife who prepares herself in ritual cleanliness for her husband, lest he suddenly come home. Then he will find her in a state of ritual cleanliness. Understand well!

Menachem Mendel of Rymanov (d. 1815), *Yalkut Menachem* [Menachem’s anthology] (Jerusalem, 1998), p. 170

### NOTES

**“Make yourselves holy today.”** This command is given to the people in preparation for receiving the Ten Commandments.

**Like a wife who prepares herself.** Traditionally, sexual relations are prohibited when a woman is menstruating and for a week afterward. Then, a visit to the *mikveh*, or “ritual bath,” would render her ritually clean once again. If her husband is away at this point, she should prepare herself anyway, in case he should arrive unexpectedly.

### COMMENT

Holiness is a goal, but the goal cannot be achieved without preparation. And we can get intimations of the goal when we least expect them. Therefore, the Rymanover tells us we must be prepared, as if we were anticipating the arrival of our partner—for God, the Author of Holiness, is our partner in the work of creation. We must work together to make creation holy.

## ’Emor

## [91] Priests in Thought

*“Then the Eternal said to Moses: ‘Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron and say to them: ‘He shall not become ritually unclean for a dead person among his people except for his nearest relatives. . . .’”*

*Leviticus 21:1–2*

### CONTEXT

Leviticus 21 continues the theme of holiness, but narrows the focus from the People of Israel to the priests, who are subject to greater restrictions because of the greater degree of holiness required for their priestly tasks. Specifically, a priest was not meant to be in close proximity to a corpse, apart from those of first-degree relatives.

Ze’ev Wolf of Zhitomir was a prominent disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch.

At first sight, we have to explain precisely that it would have been fitting if it had said “they shall not become ritually unclean,” since [the text] speaks of the totality of Aaron’s sons. It begins with the plural, but continues with the singular. “Speak to the priests” is [in] the plural, “the sons of Aaron” is also [in] the plural, “and say to them”—it all refers to the totality of the priests. But it continues by using the singular: “He shall not become ritually unclean for a dead person among his people.”

. . . For us, the totality of the People of Israel, the essence of our holiness and the cleanliness of our souls depend solely on the internal aspects of [each] individual’s thoughts. In whatever direction you turn your thoughts, to that extent does divinity dwell within and [to that extent] do you become a vehicle for the side of holiness, etc.

Following on from this principle, the [true] teaching of how human beings should serve [God] is by purifying their thoughts, and

in particular, their senses, for the service of their Creator. Then they would be fit to be named and called by the name of “priests,” a title [signifying] those who perform holy service.

Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir (d. 1800), *Or HaMe'ir* [The illuminating light] (Warsaw, 1883), pt. 3, p. 59

#### NOTE

**We, the totality of the People of Israel.** The focus has now shifted from the priests to the People of Israel, “a kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6), and, like the Torah text itself, from the communal to the individual.

#### COMMENT

Every individual Jew has a direct responsibility for the spiritual growth of the Jewish people. All the more reason to take your own spirituality seriously. And to do so is to be a true priest, regardless of whether or not you are a descendant of the *Kohanim* or you officiate in a priestly (or rabbinic) capacity. We can all become morally “unclean” by contact with those who are “dead” to morality and spirituality. We can all become a “kingdom of priests” when we each take up our role of performing holy service to the best of our abilities.

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## [92] Keeping Festivals Holy

*“These are the appointed festivals of the Eternal that you shall proclaim [as] holy convocations. These are My appointed festivals.”*

*Leviticus 23:2*

#### CONTEXT

With Leviticus 23, the Torah turns to a consideration of the laws of the sacrifices to be offered on the Sabbath and other festivals.

The kabbalist, halachic scholar, and communal rabbi Yishayah Horowitz has embedded this comment in his discourse on the moral teachings found in *parashat 'Emor*.

This is to say that you should sanctify the appointed festivals by rejoicing in them for the sake of the Eternal, and by having meals that

are like Isaac’s savory dishes, [intended] to awaken [your] spiritual powers to attachment to God and to bring about the flourishing of [God’s] holy Torah. Then they are “holy convocations” [and] God says: “These are My appointed festivals.”

However, those who celebrate holidays and are glad and rejoice in order to fill their bellies, “[all their tables are full of] filthy vomit, with no place [left clean]” [Isaiah 28:8]—of them it is said: “Your appointed festivals does My soul hate” (Isaiah 1:14). . . . This is the reason why work is prohibited on the appointed festivals, so that you should not be troubled with your own work and so forget attachment to God. For the appointed festivals are sacred, and on them you may increase attachment to God. Then they [really will be] “the appointed festivals of the Eternal.”

Yishayah HaLevi Horowitz (ca. 1570–1626), *Shnei Luchot HaBrit* [The two tablets of the covenant (Deuteronomy 9:9,11)] (Jerusalem: 1975), v. 2, p. 61d

#### NOTE

**Isaac’s savory dishes.** See Genesis 27:4, part of Isaac’s request to his elder son, Esau: “then prepare a dish for me such as I like.” Horowitz implies that Isaac’s desire for venison was for spiritual, not material, sustenance.

#### COMMENT

What is the purpose of the festivals? Rabbi Horowitz is asking—in specific: Why are they called “holy convocations”? Nowadays, we might be tempted to emphasize the historical or moral purpose behind each of the festivals of the Jewish year, but Horowitz stresses their spiritual aspect. The holy days are not just occasions for good food and drink and social contact. They are opportunities to commune with God. The eating and drinking we may do on these occasions must be seen in that light, and not as an end in themselves.

You might say that this teaching applies to all eating and drinking, and I do not think that Horowitz would have disagreed. But in many households the quality of food and drink is higher on festivals, and the quantity greater, than on ordinary weekdays or even on *Shabbat*; and thus the temptation to focus entirely on the sensual aspects, to the exclusion of the spiritual, is so much greater. Horowitz reminds us of where our priorities should lie. If we keep his teaching in mind, the festivals

will indeed be “holy convocations”—opportunities to reconnect with the spiritual in our lives.

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## [93] It Will Come Back on You

*“If anyone harms another of their people, whatever they do shall be done to them.”*

*Leviticus 24:19*

### CONTEXT

Leviticus 24 opens with rules for preparing and using the oil for the menorah as well as the twelve loaves of bread to be offered in the Tabernacle. From verse 10 on, it concerns the tragic case of the man with an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father who blasphemed against God and was put to death. Verses 17–20 reaffirm some of the basic rules of Israelite civil and criminal law.

Yisra’el of Modzhitz was famous for his melodies as well as his brief, but pithy, teachings.

The meaning is [that] those who harm another of their people by disgracing colleagues or putting them to shame put themselves to shame. As they have done, so is it to be done to them. This follows the verse: “for those who honor Me I will honor” (1 Samuel 2[:30]). It is also a sign that this blemish is in them [too]. It may be found here, but exists there. This follows the teaching: “Do not taunt your colleague with a blemish that is within you.”

Yisra’el ben Shmuel of Modzhitz (1849–1921), *Divrei Yisra’el* [Israel’s words] (Tel Aviv, 1984), pt. 3, p. 123

### NOTE

“Do not taunt your colleague.” A quotation from Talmud, *Bava Metzia* 59b.

### COMMENT

Encouraged by Western mores, we tend to believe that we are autonomous individuals. Of course, in many respects we are, but social responsibility

is an essential element in civilized living. We inevitably interact with others in groups and singly all the time, whether in person or through social media. Most of us know that putting others to shame or submitting them to ridicule is wrong, because it hurts them. The rebbe of Modzhitz says it hurts us too! We are embedded in the social fabric; what happens to others happens to us. What we do to others rebounds on us.