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Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

The Torah portion Emor begins in a peculiar way. The Torah which is usually so precise in its language repeats the word Omer three times and G-d said to Moses say to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and you should say to them. The word say is mentioned three times. The Rabbis explain that this means that the priests were to say things not only to their children but also to themselves. They had to mean what they said to their children. Most children do not rebel against their parents. They rebel to their parents. They do what their parents really mean, not what their parents say. A parent who is continuously smoking and tells his children don't smoke will only insure that his children will smoke. The parents who tells his children he wants them to be Jewish and then mocks everything Jewish will cause his children to leave Judaism. A few weeks ago a person came to see me. He told me that all these years he had to work on Shabbos. He always hoped for the day that he would not have to work on Shabbos so he could come to Shul. He now no longer works on Shabbos but he told me, "You know, Rabbi, now I don't want to come to Shul. I would rather go bowling or to the movies." All these years he had been saying one thing but he meant another. Of course, there are people who are sincere. Children can tell right away when you are sincere. Everyone of us makes compromises in life and we are all very good at rationalizing. Children see these compromises and they go and strive to achieve what the parents really mean. A few weeks ago another person came to my office complaining about his child. He was marrying out of his faith and thinking of changing his faith. This person could not understand why. He was very prominent in the community. However, when we began to talk I could immediately tell why. This man had recently returned from Israel. He made some comment how he was surprised that the walls of the building were straight and not crooked like he thought Jewish buildings would be. He obviously was not happy being Jewish and his child picked it up. Parents think, too, they can make one time efforts and secure the

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Jewishness of their children. They cannot. It takes repetitive effort, lighting candles every Shabbos, having a Jewish home. You should never have to tell your children about their Jewishness. They should just know. If you have to tell your children that you do not want them to marry out of the faith then something is wrong. Studies have been made about why Jewish homes produce so many people who love books and culture and are good students. They found that Jewish parents really do not push the children to get good grades by constantly preaching at them. However, in many Jewish homes there are books and music. The father reads, the mother reads and then the children pick it up automatically. In other homes parents scold and yell but they, themselves, do not read so the children do not either. At the end of this Torah portion we learn about a man who reviled G-d. We do not know his name but we know his mother's name. His mother by her actions made him the way he was. Now, of course, there are children who rebel against their parents as well as those who rebel to their parents but in 90% of the cases the children are rebelling to their parents. In this week's Torah portion we learn how we are to count the Omer. The question is asked why don't we make Shehechyanu when we begin to count Omer? After all, it's a Mitzvah and we are happy to perform it. Some people say that the reason is because you never say Shehechyanu when you have pain. At a Bris we don't say Shehechyanu. For a new baby girl we do. A Shochet when he slaughters the animal does not say Shehechyanu because he gives pain. Since part of the Omer had to do with the Temple some people say we do not say Shehechyanu because we are remembering the pain of our loss. However, others discount this reason saying we say Shehechyanu for other Mitzvahs which remind us of the Temple. The reason I like best is the one which says the reason we do not make Shehechyanu is because we do not know if we can finish the Mitzvah. Sefira requires that we count for 49 days. We do not know if we are going to be able to finish. That's

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why we don't say Shehechyanu. When raising a child it's the repetitive acts repeated over and over again which impress him. To tell a child never, never, never is not very impressive and does not get results. This reminds me of a story of a boss who overheard his clerk tell a customer, "We have not had any for awhile and I don't know when we will get some". The boss pulled the clerk aside and said, "Never, never say we don't have anything. Say it's on order. Now what did she want?" The clerk looked at him and said, "She asked about rain". We should not have to worry about scolding our children. We should really worry instead about meaning what we say.

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In the Torah portion, Émor, we learn how the Koheneem, our priests, were not only given special duties and responsibilities, but they were also given special restrictions. The fact that they had special duties and responsibilities should not go to their head. Special privileges always bring special responsibilities. Holiness demands a higher level of purity. In this Torah portion we also learn about how we were to take pure olive oil for the light. This is then followed by a description of the showbread which was placed in the Temple opposite the menorah in the holy part of the Temple. It seems strange that we learn about the oil for the menorah here since that was discussed earlier. What purpose could it serve to discuss them again here with the showbread? They come immediately after the section which deals with all the Jewish holidays. If we look a little further in the Sedra perhaps we have an answer to our question. It says the son of an Israelite woman and an Egyptian man got into an argument with another Jew. He cursed them using G-d's name. It seems very strange that it says here a son of an Israelite woman. According to Jewish law the children of any Jewish woman are Jewish. There is no need to mention this fact. However, we can see from this whether a family remains Jewish or not is dependent upon the woman. She abdicated her responsibility. She raised him as an Egyptian. In order to have the holiness of Jewish life we must have the Jewish home. If a man decides to lead a Jewish life, but his wife does not it does no good. That's why the Rabbis teach us that G-d first went to the women and asked them if they would take the Torah before he asked the men, because He knew that if the women would not accept Judaism the men could not sustain it. If there is no kosher in the home, no Shabbos and holidays in the home, no Taras Mishbocha Jewish life could not exist no matter how often the husband went to Shul. That's what we are learning here. It is the light that the woman kindles on Friday night, it is the challah of Shabbos, it is the desire by the woman that the husband only engage in a honest profession even if it does not bring in much money which insures the future of Judaism. The menorah and the showbread were in the holy part of the Temple. The ordinary Jew could not enter into the holy part of the Temple. He or she could only come up to the altar. In order to see the menorah and the showbread they had to strain. What's in a person's home nobody really

knows, but it is what really goes on in the home which really matters. It is not the show. Today many women are not interested in the home. They are interested in imitating men. Women, the Rabbis tell us, are in many ways superior to men because they are much braver than men. Every time they bring forth life they endanger themselves. Men, on the other hand, do not endanger themselves when they help produce life and, therefore, develop all sorts of macho attitudes to prove that they are brave but the products of a man's bravery are not life but death and, inevitably, lead to war. Today, too, young women are urged to adopt a macho attitude; love 'em and leave 'em, sex and violence, etc. They are imitating an imitation. We in Judaism never believed that a woman just had to stay home and could not work. Of course she could work, but it is the value system we are talking about. Without the light and the warmth and the challah of the home there could be no holiness. Judaism cannot survive. This, today before Mother's Day, on this day when a young couple are about to enter marriage it is good to think about these things because marriage is out of fashion as motherhood is, but without these values Judaism cannot survive.

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In the Torah portion, Emor, we have stated the commandment "to take pure olive oil beaten for the light to cause the lamp to burn continually". The question can be asked, why do we have to have this commandment here? We have already had this commandment stated before. Why was it necessary for the Torah to repeat it here since it was mentioned in Exodus before? Rashi deals with this problem and says that before they were just talking about it, but here was the actual commandment, a not too satisfactory explanation. Rambam said that they had run out of oil and that this was mentioned again so that they should donate more oil. Again, this is not too satisfactory an explanation. Others say that the reason why the commandment to light the menorah with pure olive oil is mentioned here not because of itself, but because we mention afterwards about the showbread. In the holy part of the Tabernacle there was a menorah on the south and the showbread, which stood for the material prosperity of the Jewish people, on the north. This explanation makes sense because all the paragraphs in this Torah portion begin with "and G-d spoke to Moshe saying" except the one which begins with the showbread. It is subsumed under the phrase "and G-d spoke to Moshe saying" which is mentioned regarding the menorah. In Judaism we need both light and material things. We need learning and education and we also need a material base. They must go hand in hand. They must both be sacrificed. There are many people today who are willing to give to a Synagogue, but they are not willing to enjoy its spiritual light, attending its classes, etc., and there are others who just want a spiritual experience and they are not interested at all in institutions or materially helping the Synagogue to survive. Both these elements are needed. Intellect which is divorced from the real world can even be dangerous. There is an individual in Jerusalem who has seven PhD's but if we would listen to him we would have civil war in Israel. Intellectual acumen is not always the mark of greatness. Torah must always be combined with Dekecheretz, with a worldly occupation. Unfortunately, in our day we Jews have bought middle class values and unless you are either a doctor or a lawyer or an accountant you are a nothing. We do not believe that. We believe that the important thing is that a person should be a moral person no matter what his educational level. The highest Mitzvah in Judaism

is to sanctify G-d's name. That's what they say about Abraham when they say that he was a lover of G-d. How was he a lover of G-d? How is this possible? The Rabbis say that he was a lover of G-d because when people would see him and what he did they would say, "There goes a good man who has a good G-d". He would bring people closer to G-d. He would make G-d beloved to them. The greatest sin in Judaism is a Chelel Hashem, to desecrate G-d's name. This happens when people say, "Look at the Jew, look how bad he is, look how bad his G-d is". G-d does not ask us to be a lawyer or doctor. G-d asks us to be a good human being. Unfortunately, today many occupations are looked down upon. In fact, what will probably do traditional Judaism in is that there is nobody who wants their children to be butchers or Shoftim. How can we keep kosher without them? The Torah tells us that any occupation combined with Torah is worthy and right. It also tells us not to be overly clever. Our tradition knows about this. Many times very bright people can be very stupid. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said that everybody can be smart. All you have to do is concentrate. The trick, of course, is not everybody can concentrate. That is a gift that is given to a human being. Many times very brilliant people concentrate so much on one thing that they forget about everything else. That, of course, leads to distortions. We must always see the whole picture even when we are concentrating on one thing. Our tradition recognizes this and that is why we have all the stories of Chelm, really Aggie jokes. There comes a certain point where cleverness becomes stupidity. Unless we know how to combine the menorah with the showbread we can end up with stupidity and even inhumanity. I am reminded of the story of the Houstonian, the fellow from Dallas, and the Aggie who went to the desert. The Houstonian took a bag of water because he might get thirsty. The man from Dallas took a box of crackers because he might get hungry. The Texas Aggie brought a car door. He did it because if it got hot he could roll the window down. This, of course, indicates that when you take things out of context you end up with stupidity. The light of the menorah must always be tied to the world.

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The Torah portion Emor begins by telling us about the duties and the responsibilities of the Kohanim. The Kohanim have had responsibilities in addition to added privileges. In today's day and age the idea seems to be that if you have certain talents you are free from certain moral restraints. A person who had certain talents is excused certain foibles. A good athlete is judged much more leniently by his teachers and many times by the authorities when he gets into certain squabbles. An artist or writer will be excused certain moral lapses because he has certain talents. An ordinary person would be judged much harsher and no excuses will be made for his conduct. On the other hand, a person of talent will be treated lightly and get away with things ordinary people are not allowed to do. This runs completely counter to the Jewish view that a person with talent is judged stricter, not easier. A talent is a great gift. A person who is able to play the piano, a person who is a great author, a great painter, was given that gift. He did not do anything to deserve it. The only thing he can take credit for is perhaps developing it, and even then it is not all up to him. If a person had been born 1500 years ago with the greatest talent ever for playing the violin it would have done him no good because violins were not invented then. If today someone would be born with the greatest talent to man starships it would do him no good since starships have not been invented yet, or if a person was born in a poverty stricken village in India he would not be able to develop his talents. Most of the time it is thank to parents that a person is able to develop his talents. That's what the Rabbis teach us when they tell us a person should be modest. It means that just because you have talents does not mean that you should demand special privileges. You were born with great talent. You did not deserve it and, therefore, you should develop it. You are not, though, deserving of any special privileges because you do. That's why modesty in Judaism is not saying after you do something good, "Oh, it is nothing" or "It is really not good." All you are supposed to say is, "Thank you," but because you have done good things does not mean you deserve special privileges. The nobility in Europe used to demand special privileges, but what did they do to deserve them? They were just born to certain people. This is exactly what this Torah

portion is telling the Kohanim. Remember the reason that you are a Kohen, not because you are a great man or because you deserve special privileges. You are a Kohen only because your father was a Kohen and your grandfather was a Kohen and your great-grandfather was a Kohen. It was a gift. Do not get high and mighty and treat other people poorly. That's why it says in the first verse here "Emor El Hakonim Ben Aron" "Say to the Kohanim, the sons of Aaron." Why are you Kohanim? Just because you are sons of Aaron. You do not deserve special consideration. You are not exempt from leading decent and moral lives. The only reason you are Kohanim is because you are sons of Aaron. This is actually the same reason why almost all you here today are Jews. Most of you are Jews today because you are born Jews. It is true that Judaism accepts converts, and we learn that G-d loves the converts best because they chose HIM willingly, but we make it hard for converts. We do not make it easy for them to become Jews. Most of you here today are Jews because you are born Jews. Unfortunately, many Jews look at their Jewishness as a handicap, not as a wonderful opportunity to live a more meaningful and good life. Their Judaism is a great opportunity. That's why in this Torah portion we learn all about the Jewish holidays and we learn about such wonderful concepts as, "One law there should be for you and the stranger." Judaism has much to offer you. You can make it a wonderful part of your life, but you must learn it and acquire it. Just by being a Jew alone without learning about Judaism will not bring you deeper meaning in life. You may be a Jew because you were born a Jew, but you will not be a Jew whose life is enriched because you are a Jew unless you know our heritage. A Kohen is only a Kohen because he is a descendant of the sons of Aaron, but unless he knew how to perform the duties in the Temple he could not serve there either. Great gifts given at birth do not mean you deserve consideration. However, if we do not develop these gifts we will not be able to enjoy them either. Being Jewish is one of the greatest gifts that can be given to a person. It reminds me of the story of a man who once came to a Rabbi and said, "Rabbi, I want to become a Kohen." The Rabbi said, "What? You cannot become a Kohen." The man said, "I have \$50,000 I want to give to the Shul

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if I can become a Kohen." The Rabbi, being of a liberal persuasion, decided to make a little ceremony and make the man a Kohen. After he completed the ceremony he looked at the fellow and said, "Now, please tell me, why did you want to become a Kohen?" The man answered, "Well, up to now I was too poor and did not have the money. Now I have \$50,000 and want to become a Kohen." The Rabbi was still puzzled and looked at the man and said, "I know now you have the money, but why did you want to become a Kohen?" The man said, "Well, it's like this. My father was a Kohen, my grandfather was a Kohen, my great-grandfather was a Kohen and I wanted to become a Kohen, too." You do not have to pay thousands of dollars to acquire your Jewish heritage. All you have to do is study and that great gift can be yours.

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In the Torah portion Emor we learn about the privileges and the duties of the Kohaneem. The Kohaneem, because they were given special privileges, had special responsibilities thrust upon them. They could not own land, they were limited in who they could marry, etc. In Judaism we do not believe that the more talent you have the more free you should be from social and religious norms. Today there is a tendency in our culture to forgive anybody anything if they have talent. Writers and musicians and athletes are not held accountable to the same moral standards as everyone else. They are excused because they have talent.

This flies in the face of Judaism's attitude, which says that the more talent you have the higher standards you are held to. We do not believe that just because a person has talent he should be free from the moral standards of the community. In fact, he should be held more accountable. After all, the gift of talent that he was given was not earned. G-d gave it to him. He gave it to him to share with others, to help others with it. It is not his personal property. We do not believe that being modest means that when someone says that you have done a good thing, that you should say, "Oh, no, it's not good." That's lying. If a person did a good thing he should say it is a good thing, but he should not demand special privileges because he did a good thing. If someone compliments you for doing a good thing you should just say, "Thank you."

Talented people today demand special privileges because of their talent. This is wrong. In fact, Moshe Rabbeinu was not allowed to go into the land of Israel because of a minor sin he committed. He was held to a higher standard. This is what we mean when we talk about the Chosen People. We Jewish people were chosen for service,

not special privileges. We are to live by higher standards than everyone else. We are like the ambassadors of G-d in the world. If one of the ambassadors of the United States would do something wrong overseas, it would make all the papers, but if an ordinary tourist did something wrong no one would say anything. We Jews are held accountable to a higher standard not only by G-d but also by the other nations of the world as well.

The Haphtorah we read today comes from the Book of Yechezkel. The rabbis wanted to, at first, exclude the Book of Yechezkel from the Tanach. They wanted to keep it out of the canon. The reasons were because many of the restrictions that Yechezkel sets out for the Kohaneem are stricter than those recorded in our Torah portion. For example, according to the Torah, a priest can marry a widow but not according to Yechezkel. Also, he restricted the priesthood to a particular family, something which the Torah did not do.

Why, though, should the rabbis have been upset even initially by the statements in Yechezkel? After all, he was adding more restrictions to the priesthood, not less, and we just said that the higher the responsibility the higher the standard. This is true, but only up to a certain extent. More is not always better. We all know that if a doctor would tell us to take four pills a day and we decide to take eight pills because we want to get well faster, this would have a deleterious effect on us, not a good effect. I had a friend who decided that if he broke one toothpick today, two toothpicks tomorrow, by the end of the month he could break a telephone pole. We know that this is false.

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More is not always better. In fact, it almost never is. Some people feel that if they can cut expenses and cut expenses then things will be more profitable, but if you cut too much you are just going to destroy the business. It is like the old Yiddish story of the man who was going to train his horse to get along without eating. "You know," he said "I almost had the horse trained, but he died just before I had him completely trained."

Parents make a bad mistake by not defining clearly what they want from their kids. Telling children to just go and have a good time can be a bad statement. Even in the religious sphere, more is not always better. That's why the rabbis, at first, wanted to ban Ezekiel from the Tanach. Every cook knows that if a recipe calls for two teaspoons of baking soda, you do not put in five. If you do you destroy the whole recipe. In our day and age we are obsessed with the idea that more is always better, that if one Chevrolet made you happy, then certainly a Cadillac or Mercedes Benz will make you happier, if living in a six room house made you happy then living in a ten room house will make you even happier. This is not so. Samuel Gompers, a good Jewish boy who founded the AFL-CIO, coined a phrase when asked what did the workers of America want. He said, "More."

More is not always better. A parent who spends all his time making money and none of it with his family is not doing them a favor. In the Torah portion Emor we learn about the Kohaneem and then immediately after we learn about the holidays. The Kohaneem are holy, and the holidays are what allow us to be holy. It allows us to set aside for family and others, to set aside time to be caring individuals. We want to be holy people, people who live meaningful lives. We

