

Continuing last week's theme of holiness, the death of Aaron's two eldest sons once again looms large, this time with a long series of stipulations for priests and offerings. "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." (21:1) This verb doubling, while not that unusual, harkens back to this tragic event. In a long discussion about the responsibility of adults to ensure that minors do not transgress the laws of *kashrut*, Talmud Tractate Yevamot 114a concludes, "... 'speak' and 'say' comes to warn adults concerning minors. Does this mean that adults must tell children: Do not become impure? No, an adult should not render children impure by direct action." In other words, Aaron was ultimately responsible for his sons' fatal error. Consequently, Aaron neither speaks nor does he participate in removing the bodies of his sons. Since death is the most severe form of contamination, priests are only permitted to interact with the corpses of those closest to them, i.e., parents, children, brother, unmarried sister, and wife (unless she has become unfit for him). However, the words among his people ensure that an abandoned corpse receives a proper burial. This *met mitzvah* (law of the corpse) is considered to be the highest *mitzvah* of all, releasing priests from avoiding corpse impurity if they should come across a dead person who is not "among his people," i.e., with no one available for burial. Although verse 11 (And he [the High Priest] shall not come upon any dead bodies; he shall not defile himself for his father or his mother") seems to contradict this, Tractate Nazir 48 discusses it at length and concludes that it actually underscores the exception for *met mitzvah*. Once again we see that compassion is overrules strict adherence to law. Nonetheless, because the priests functioned as the link between HaShem and the people, they and their families were held to the highest possible standards. Every aspect of their lives, from their interactions with others to their clothing and appearance, was strictly controlled in order to make them as perfect as a human can be. These high standards were also applied to the offerings and to how, when, and where they were eaten. Nothing but the very best sufficed, and only those men who were completely without moral as well as physical blemish were allowed to serve. Today we are justifiably horrified that blindness, lameness, a broken bone, cataracts, and physical deformities that even include long eyebrows are enough to disqualify people from service to HaShem. But in the minds of our ancestors, who equated infirmity with sin, a blemished priest would be as much an affront to HaShem as a blemished offering, because it could imply that HaShem's work is not completely perfect. But how can we apply these standards today? Rabbinic Judaism recognized that ancient laws needed to be reinterpreted for the times and the conditions. *Halacha*, which comes from a root meaning to walk, or go, outlines principles for a lifestyle based on moral excellence, not physical perfection. We must strive to be the best we can be without setting unrealistic goals for ourselves, which means recognizing our potential as well as our limitations and acting within those parameters. This is how we uphold the directive in last week's parashah "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." Instead of sacrifices, we set aside "sacred time" for Shabbat, for Yom Kippur, and for the three Pilgrimage Festivals of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. In addition, we are instructed to strictly observe the seven-week Omer counting period from the second day of Pesach to Shavuot – the time between the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest. This was so important that cutting the daily sheaf of barley for the Omer offering overrode the prohibition of cutting on Shabbat. Barley, the first grain to ripen, was particularly valuable. It was forbidden to reap from any newly grown crop of the five species of grain (barley, wheat, oats, rye, and spelt) before the harvesting of the Omer. The sheaves were cut with great ceremony, especially on Shabbat, and offered with fervent prayer for a successful wheat crop. The Talmud emphasizes that barley was food for livestock, while wheat was the grain for humans. However, because our survival is linked to the survival of our animals, the barley crop was extremely important. It is noteworthy that at the end of the Omer discussion, the Torah instructs us to refrain from harvesting to the edges of our fields and to leave what remains of the gleanings for the poor and the stranger – once again ending with "I am the Lord, your God." (23:22) Yes, our holiness is always manifested in our actions. We still count the Omer, but now many of us do so using the symbolism of the seven lower *Sefirot*, the emanations, or attributes of divine creative energy that operate between the world of HaShem and our world. Each of the seven weeks and each of its seven days is defined by a *sefirah*. We are now in the 4th week of the Omer, the week of *netzach*. This is the attribute of ambition, endurance and determination, something our ancestors so often lacked as they transitioned from slavery to freedom. *Netzach* also means eternity and victory, and is further defined by accountability and reliability, the essential qualities of good teachers and leaders. Indeed, this *sefirah* is associated with Moses Rabbeinu, Moses our Teacher. Good leaders teach by example. As we know, not even Moses was able to do this consistently, but his long life exemplifies perseverance in extreme situations. This too, is what it means to be holy – to imitate HaShem's holiness with our best human efforts. As Talmud Tractate Pirkei Avot 2:6 teaches, "It is not your responsibility to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."

Shabbat shalom!