**[The Hidden Good – Parshat Emor](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/the-hidden-good-parshat-emor)**

וַיֹּ֤אמֶר יְי אֶל־מֹשֶׁ֔ה אֱמֹ֥ר אֶל־הַכֹּהֲנִ֖ים בְּנֵ֣י אַהֲרֹ֑ן וְאָמַרְתָּ֣ אֲלֵהֶ֔ם לְנֶ֥פֶשׁ לֹֽא־יִטַּמָּ֖א בְּעַמָּֽיו׃             
כִּ֚י אִם־לִשְׁאֵר֔וֹ הַקָּרֹ֖ב אֵלָ֑יו  
   
*The Divine said to Moses, ‘speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and tell them that they should not make themselves spiritually impure for a (dead) person among their people, except for close relatives…’*(Leviticus 21:1-2)  
   
In the plain meaning, this is talking about the purity laws for the *kohanim* (priests), that they shouldn’t touch a corpse and become ritually defiled, except for when close relatives die.  
   
On a deeper level, there is a practical and universal message: on one hand, it is beneficial to be know what makes us*tamei,* that is, spiritually “dead” inside, and avoid those things. Is it too much news and social media? Is it dealing with particularly difficult people? Is it your job, or certain kinds of entertainment, or some addictive substance?  
   
To be on the spiritual path means we have to take responsibility for what experiences we take in, just as those on a path of physical health must take responsibility for what food they take in. This is *lo yitama – don’t defile yourself!*  
   
At the same time, we also need to sometimes do the opposite, because if we try to avoid*tumah* completely, we can never grow spiritually in our ability to stay free and at peace in the midst of disturbance. Furthermore, on a deeper level, *the avoidance itself can become a kind of tumah.* Guarding ourselves from disturbances is necessary, but it also can become a neurotic attempt to control our experience; life happens and we must meet it, not avoid it.  
   
This is *ki im lish’eiro karov eilav – except for a close relative.* The key is the word *karov,*close. In general, we should do what we can to live in a spiritually conducive environment. But when disturbance comes along, we need to know how to be *karov –*how to come close, meaning *be present* – with whatever has arisen. In the state of Presence, the disturbance merely comes and goes, we deal with whatever we need to deal with, and we strengthen our connection with inner spaciousness and peace through the practice.  
   
Some of the masters of the past were particularly good at this.  
   
There’s a story that Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev was visiting Rabbi Shmelke of Nikolsburg. They had both been students of the great Maggid of Mezritch, but Rabbi Shmelke was older, and Levi Yitzhak considered him to be his teacher as well. On the first morning, Levi Yitzhak came down from the guest room with his *tefillin* and *tallis* on, ready to go to *daven,* when he stopped in the kitchen and starting conversing with the cooks. (Rabbi Shmelke was apparently quite well off and had his own cooks.) He asked them what they were making, and questioned them about their methods as if he were concerned that food wouldn’t be good enough.  
   
When some disciples came by on their way to *shul* and overheard all this, they frowned in disapproval. At the synagogue, Levi Yitzhak didn’t pray, but spent all his time talking loudly in the back of the sanctuary to a man who was considered to be annoying and unlearned. Eventually, one of the *hasidim* couldn’t take it anymore. “You must be quiet in here!” Levi Yitzhak simply went on talking loudly and disturbing everyone.  
   
Later, when all the *hasidim* gathered for lunch, Rabbi Shmelke treated Levi Yitzhak with the utmost honors, giving him food to eat from his own bowl. Later, the *hasidim* asked their *rebbe* about this strange man who talked so obnoxiously about such mundane things. Why did the *rebbe* honor him so?  
   
Rabbi Shmelke replied, “In the Talmud, the rabbi known as Rab (Abba Areka) is praised for never engaging in worldly speech. How could it be that this is what he was praised for? Does this mean that the other rabbis *did* engage in worldly speech? Rather, it means that when he engaged in worldly speech, he did so with such *kavanah* that Divine blessings flowed into this world with every word. Other rabbis could accomplish this for a short time, but eventually their worldly speech would drag them down.  
   
“It’s the same with Levi Yitzhak and myself. What I can do for a short time, he can do all day long; with his seemingly mundane conversations, he is bringing heaven down to earth.”  
   
Generally speaking, it is better not to blabber on loudly in synagogue; that is obviously the right and good way to behave. But we also need to know how to leave the box of the obvious good in order to access the *hidden good.*  
   
The word for spiritual impurity, *tamei,* hints at this hidden good. *Tamei* begins with the letter *tet,* which also begins the word *tov,* “good.” The letter *tet* is shaped in such a way that it points into itself: ט – thus symbolizing the “good” that is hidden within. We access this hidden goodness within things we ordinarily think are not good by becoming *karov,*bringing our awareness into close connection with whatever messiness we are dealing with: *Don’t become tamei, except for with close relatives…*  
   
This is our paradoxical task: to guard ourselves against things that drag us down spiritually, but also to transform those things into vehicles for the spirit. How do you know when to take which approach? The key is Presence; life itself conveys to us which path to take *if we are listening…*

***More on Parshat Emor...***

[**The Passenger – Parshat Emor**  
​](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/the-passenger-parshat-emor)  
Just before the plane was about to shut its doors and prepare for takeoff, a frazzled woman boarded my flight back to Tucson from the Bay. She made her way past the many occupied seats and indicated she wanted to sit next to me, so I stood up to let her in.  
   
As she proceeded to squeeze herself and her three big bulky bags into the seat, I told her I would be happy to put some of her stuff in the overhead bin. She said no thanks, she preferred to hold them all. She then proceeded to furiously text on her phone. Soon, a flight attendant came by and told her she had to put her bags either all the way under the seat in front of her, or put them up in the overhead bin. The woman said, “No, I prefer to keep them here.”  
   
“I’m sorry,” said the flight attendant, “it’s for your safety.”  
   
“Well my cousin is a pilot and I know this is safe, so I’m just going to keep them here, thank you!” she responded angrily, not looking up from her ferocious texting.  
   
“I’m sorry ma’am, it’s the rules. I’m just doing my job.”  
   
“Well if you want to put them up, go ahead. I’m not moving.”  
   
The flight attendant politely asked me to turn my legs to the side as she pulled up my armrest, reached in, pulled out her bags and put them up in the overhead. I was very impressed with that flight attendant. Not only did she remain polite, but I think she was genuinely not angry at all; just a little amused.  
   
When we landed in Tucson, the woman said to me that she wasn’t paying attention when the flight attendent put her bags up, and asked if I knew where they were. I said that I didn’t. She said, “I should make that lady get them down for me.” Then, a nice woman in front of us reached up and retrieved the bags for her.  
   
I thought that was interesting… just moments before, I was wondering if I should look for her bags and get them down for her or not. On one hand, I thought I shouldn’t, because she would take that as a validation of her absurd behavior, and she would see me as being “on her side.”  
   
On the other hand, I know that indiscriminate *gemilut hasadim* – acts of kindness – can be transformative, and might spontaneously increase her self awareness. But the decision was no longer mine to make, as the kind woman in front of us reached up and pulled down the bags for her.  
   
We’ve all probably witnessed extreme unconsciousness in others from time to time, and it can be baffling. How can a person be so clueless? And yet, each at our own level, the powers of unconscious reactivity can take temporarily take hold of us if we’re not careful to regularly “replenish our awareness,” in a sense.  
   
When the woman had first sat down next to me, before the bag incident, she had muttered, “What f%&ed up day.” She also smelled somewhat of alcohol. It’s true – a few things going wrong can greatly diminish our self- awareness, and we might even seek solace in alcohol or something else that diminishes awareness even more. We are prone to spiral, one negative thing leading to another.  
   
Here in Arizona, there are many swimming pools, and anyone who takes care of a pool knows that you have to regularly put more water into it, because the water evaporates over time, especially when it’s hot.  
   
That’s what happens to our awareness, especially when our experience “heats up” with emotion-triggering mishaps. But even without anything overtly disturbing, our consciousness tends to sink down unless we are deliberate in “refilling our pool” so to speak. That, of course, is the whole point of meditation and prayer – to “fill up” with consciousness and awaken our spiritual potential.  
   
But sometimes, having a daily practice is not enough, because if our consciousness has sunk to a low enough level, our practice will be *from*that low level, and then we will only be mechanically going through the motions. In those cases, we have to somehow *wake ourselves up first* to even begin. There’s a hint of this in the *parshah:*  
   
דַּבֵּ֨ר אֶֽל־אַהֲרֹ֜ן וְאֶל־בָּנָ֗יו וְיִנָּֽזְרוּ֙ מִקָּדְשֵׁ֣י בְנֵֽי־יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל וְלֹ֥א יְחַלְּל֖וּ אֶת־שֵׁ֣ם קָדְשִׁ֑י אֲשֶׁ֨ר הֵ֧ם מַקְדִּשִׁ֛ים לִ֖י אֲנִ֥י יְהוָֽה  
*Tell Aaron and his sons that they should withdraw from the sacred offerings that the children of Israel sanctify to Me and not desecrate My Holy Name – I am Hashem.*  
   
The word for “withdraw” – *vayinazru –*comes from a root which means to “abstain” or “renounce” on one hand, but also to “sanctify” or “consecrate,” on the other. (An example of this is the *Nazir*who both renounces wine and also becomes consecrated to the Divine.) The traditional understanding of this verse is that it speaks of priests who become ritually impure – *tamei –* and so must excuse themselves from dealing with the offerings that people bring, until they become pure – *tahor –* again.  
   
The word for “desecrate” – *y’khal’lu –*comes from the root which means “to empty.” The *shem kodshi –*the “My Holy Name” is the four-letter name which the kabbalists associate with the human body, based on the notion that we are *b’tzelem Elohim –*the “image of the Divine.” Thus, to “desecrate the Holy Name” means to “empty” our Presence from our bodies, and become disconnected from the wisdom and benevolence that arises from that body-Presence.  
   
When that happens, when we sink to such a low level of awareness. disconnected from our bodies and the present moment, holy prayers and Divine Names become temporarily useless; the “Name” becomes “empty,” and formal prayer and meditation are not enough to pull ourselves up.  
   
רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן אוֹמֵר, הֱוֵי זָהִיר בִּקְרִיאַת שְׁמַע וּבַתְּפִלָּה. וּכְשֶׁאַתָּה מִתְפַּלֵּל, אַל תַּעַשׂ תְּפִלָּתְךָ קֶבַע, אֶלָּא רַחֲמִים וְתַחֲנוּנִים לִפְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם  
   
*Rabbi Shimon said, “Be meticulous in the chanting of the Sh’ma and in prayer. And when you pray, don’t make your prayer rigid and fixed; rather, compassion and supplication before The Place…”*  
   
Rabbi Shimon gives advice for this. On one hand, he acknowledges the importance of having a regular, formal practice: *Be meticulous in the chanting of the Sh’ma and in prayer.*On the other hand, if all you have is a formal practice, that won’t work: *Don’t make your prayer rigid and fixed; rather, compassion and supplication before The Place…*  
   
In other words, when we have sunk to a low level, we can’t mechanically elevate ourselves; we need humility. We need to acknowledge how low we’ve sunk, and acknowledge that we may have acted from that low level. We have to admit: *I’ve*been that rude woman on the airplane, but I want to be the flight attendant – I want to “attend” to the elevation of myself and others. *Oh Ribono Shel Olam, help me out of this low place. Help me fulfill potential and my purpose!*  
   
That’s the *rakhamim v’takhanunim –*“compassion and supplication before *HaMakom.”*  
   
It’s interesting that the Divine is here called *HaMakom – The Place,*hinting that the point is not theology, it’s how you affect those with whom you share space. The point is not what you *believe*about God, it’s about keeping your inner space Godly; it’s about openness and humility. You are the “priest” of your own inner space. Sometimes your space becomes contaminated, so then it’s time to call out to the Divine, even call out to your own “inner priest” – as the *parshah*says:    
   
אֱמֹ֥ר אֶל־הַכֹּהֲנִ֖ים – *Speak to the priests!*  
  
The person who can reach this openness and humility, the person who accepts what happens and finds peace within their own being, and who also takes responsibility for what they’ve done and for acting to fulfill their *reason* for being – that person truly serves God, even if they say they are an atheist.  
  
On the other hand, the person who complains about what happens, who harbors grudges and anger, who judges others while refusing to take responsibility for what only they can and must do – that person is the true atheist, even as they profess to “believe.” Beliefs about “God” are not the same as *actual*God.    
   
People have believed in various gods for a long time; we seem to have an innate capacity for bowing to something greater than ourselves. Much, if not all extraordinary human achievements and crimes come from that capacity, whether it’s bowing to the God of the Bible or the cause of science; whether it’s Democracy or Nazism. Bowing to something greater is empowering, but it’s not necessarily *good.* That’s the essence of the Jewish prohibition against idolatry – don’t bow to some parasitic ideology, something that is not *good*.  
   
Rather, the inner message of Judaism is: *Hashem Hu HaElohim.*  
   
Meaning: Existence, Being, Reality, *That* is the true Divinity. In other words, take your innate devotionality and aim it at Reality Itself. Reality always Is what it Is, it always Will Be what it Will Be, and yet you can and must bring forth what Could Be – *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh.*  
   
*Bow to That* – don’t resist what is, find the peace within your own being that is the blissful openness of that acceptance.  
   
At the same time, acknowledge – you are here, aren’t you? Take it seriously. There are things only you can bring into being, and there is something only you can do. Do it. All those religious beliefs about God are secondary. They change over time, because at any moment they are either helpful or not. And sometimes they even interfere. But within your own being is the potential:  
   
וְלֹ֥א יְחַלְּל֖וּ אֶת־שֵׁ֣ם קָדְשִׁ֑י – *Don’t empty the Holy Name –*Rather, cry out to *HaMakom,*the transcendent field of Beingness that is not separate from your own awareness, and bring forth your sacred destiny…   
  
  
[**What Do You Say? Parshat Emor**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/what-do-you-say-parshat-emor)  
  
Once, when Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev had finished leading the davening, he went out into the congregation and greeted everyone: *"Shalom aleikhem! Shalom aleikhem!"* – as if he they had just arrived after a journey.   
  
"Rabbi, why do you greet us as if we just got here? We've been praying with you all morning!"  
  
"Have you?" replied the rebbe, "but in your mind, *you* were just in the marketplace, *you*were just wondering what's for lunch, *you* were just arguing with someone, and when the prayers ended, you all returned, so I greeted you!"  
  
The essence of spiritual work is Presence, and the goal of Presence is freedom. Freedom means: no resistance to whatever happens to arise within your experience. It means: no resentment, no blame, no persisting anger – no resistance at all!  
  
​One of the biggest obstacles in our quest for freedom can be the way we talk to ourselves. How do you narrate your experience? How are you framing this moment right now? The way we speak to ourselves has the power to either lead us to more inner clutter, or lead us into the spaciousness of the Present; the power is in our mouths, so to "speak"...  
  
There's a hint in this week's reading, *Parshat Emor*:  
  
 אֱמֹ֥ר אֶל־הַכֹּֽהֲנִ֖ים בְּנֵ֣י אַֽהֲרֹ֑ן וְאָֽמַרְתָּ֣ אֲלֵהֶ֔ם לְנֶ֥פֶשׁ לֹֽא־יִטַּמָּ֖א בְּעַמָּֽיו  
*Speak –* **Emor** – *to the priests, the children of Aaron, and say to them, "don't become polluted for a person among your people..."*  
  
If you wish to keep yourself open, spacious, uncluttered, then "speak to the priests" – that is, know that *you* *are* literally a "priest" – you're not merely a separate entity navigating through life, *you are* a connecting point between heaven and earth – between the vast space of consciousness, and everything that you perceive – thoughts, feelings, sense perceptions – the whole world around and within. Speak to yourself, remind yourself in this way: "Here is this feeling, here is this thought..." And even more, transform it into a prayer:  
  
​*"O Hashem, help me to know myself as the vast space of awareness, help me to accept everything that arises and live in simplicity, with love, serving Your highest potential and uplifting the world..."*  
  
**​**Good Shabbos!  
love and all blessing,  
reb brian yosef  
  
  
​[**"Say"- Parshat Emor**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/say-parshat-emor)  
  
***"Mo’adei Hashem asher tikr’u otam mikra’ei kodesh, eleh hem mo’adai-  
​"Special Divine times you are to define as holy gatherings- these are My festivals."***  
*​(Inspired by a teaching from Rabbi Menachem Mendel Shneerson- The Rebbe)*  
  
The Torah reading *Parshat Emor* emphasizes the *mitzvot* of making sacred times- in this case, of setting aside special days in which you put aside all your time-bound agendas so that you can more deeply connect with Eternal dimension of Being. It says, "*Mo’adei Hashem asher tikr’u otam mikra’ei kodesh, eleh hem mo’adai- Special Divine times you are to define as holy gatherings- these are My festivals."*It then goes on to talk about the various festivals, beginning with Shabbat: *"Uvayom hash’vi’i Shabbat Shabbaton- and on the seventh day shall be a Sabbath of Sabbaths."*  
   
Why does it call Shabbat a Sabbath of Sabbaths?  
   
Because ultimately, the purpose of Shabbat- the purpose of the festivals, as well as any other times you set aside for spiritual practice- is not merely to have a special holy experience during those times alone. Rather, the purpose is to immerse in the Eternal dimension of Being so that you can continue to practice Presence even as you operate in the mundane world of time. In that way, all times become like a Sabbath, and the actual Sabbath is then a Sabbath of Sabbaths. Because as we all know, there are many forces of distraction on many levels that block the sense of life being a Sabbath. But when you regularly put those distractions aside in order to do your spiritual practice, you give yourself that space you need and allow the Eternal dimension of Being to blossom more and more into all your life.  
   
So what does it mean to put aside the things of ordinary time? As it says, *"...mikra kodesh- a sacred time- kol melakha lo ta’asu- all melakha, that is all work, don’t do."*  
  
Meaning, anything that has goals in time such as earning a livelihood, traveling, planning, working on projects- all those things that define your life in time, as opposed to your actual life- that sense of simply Being, as you are, right now, don’t do that stuff. Make sure you have some special times that are sacred.  
   
So on this *Shabbat Emor,* the Sabbath of saying, may we say out loud to ourselves our commitment to set aside time to go beyond time, whether in the traditional practices of *Shabbat* and the *mo’adim,* the Sabbath and festivals, or even for just a few seconds throughout the day to stop, breath and be present, perhaps even putting away phones and computers. May the whole world be nourished by our commitment to practice, that we might be greater channels of love and healing in the world.  
  
Good Shabbos!  
  
  
[**The Zombies- Parshat Emor**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/the-zombies-parshat-emor6389072)  
  
Once I saw my son looking at You Tube, ravenously drinking in the old 1980’s Michael Jackson *Thriller*video.   
  
Oh man, that brought me back!   
  
The way Michael morphs into some kind of wer-cat and then leads a band of zombies in that funky dance of the dead-   
  
And then the really scary part- his girlfriend cowering in the corner of her house while zombies crash through windows, breaking through the walls and floor- it’s the classic zombie scene that both draws and repels.  
  
Why is the “zombies-invading-the-house” thing so compelling?  
  
To me, the home is a sanctuary- a place to be safe, to relax, to sip a cup of tea on the couch- wouldn’t you agree? And let’s face it- nothing messes with our nice, safe, home-sanctuary like a bunch of zombies clawing at your window!  
  
But there is also an inner sanctuary- a place of peace and stillness, a place of vitality, of creativity, of light and benevolence. That place is your own deepest layer of being- the space of awareness itself.   
  
When you dwell in that space, you dwell in the temple of your own being, which is also Divine Being. That space is always here, always open and sacred- the space of consciousness that is eternally this moment.  
  
But, there are zombies!!  
  
Sometimes there are only a few pathetic zombies, wandering around on your lawn. Sometimes they are fast, tricky and vicious, fooling and distracting you into letting them in. Sometimes, they are disguised as something you lust for- they are seductive- more like vampires- making your eyes glaze over as you lurch unconsciously toward the door and turn the knob...  
  
These zombies and vampires are your own thoughts.  
  
There was once a hassid who went to his rebbe for advice on how to empty his mind. He knocked on the door of his rebbe’s house, but no answer. He peered through the window- the rebbe was sitting at a table, reading.   
  
The hassid knocked again, a little louder- no answer. Growing more and more frustrated, his polite greetings and knocks turned into screams and bangs, pounding on the doors and windows. This went on for hours!  
  
Eventually, the rebbe opened the door-  
  
“Just as I can ignore you, no matter now much fuss you make, so you can ignore your own thoughts and not admit them into your mind.”  
  
It’s true, your zombie/vampiric thoughts can trick you, distract you, lure you, entice you. But unless you believe in them, they have absolutely no power. It is your own mind that is creating them; if you let them be and don’t get drawn in, they fade away. The power is completely with you.  
  
This can be learned and practiced, but it is not merely a technique. It is a way of being that reveals your own inner freedom, your own inner divinity.  
  
Free from thought, you dwell in the sanctuary of presence- a space of freedom, of blissful goodness within your own being. This is the space of *kadosh-*holiness, or sacredness. *Kadosh*means “separate”, because in it you are separate from the tornados of life. However, it’s not a separateness of alienation, but of the closest intimacy- not far off at a distance from the storm, but at the eye of the storm.   
  
Get seduced by the storm- get absorbed into the drama of time and people, get dragged around and eaten by those flesh-rotten zombies, and you become *tamei-*spiritually contaminated. Let go of the drama, let the thoughts dissolve and you return to the Presence- to the *Kadosh.*This is your role, if you choose to accept it, as priest or priestess of your own inner sanctuary.  
  
On that subject, this week’s reading begins with Moses telling the priests,   
  
*“L’nefesh lo yitama b’amav-*  
"You shall not become *tamei*(spiritually contaminated) to a person among your people.”  
  
In its plain meaning, it’s talking about a priest not becoming *tamei*from touching a corpse (a regular corps, not the undead!). But metaphorically, it also can refer to the inner *tuma*we can incur from allowing our thoughts about others to contaminate our minds.   
  
When was the last time you allowed your mind to become *tamei*because of what some person did or said that you didn’t like, some argument you had, or anything else involving another person? It’s one of the great traps.  
  
And yet, the power is with YOU! Remember- the *tzures*(suffering) you experience is mostly generated by your own mind. You can stop empowering it NOW and come into the sanctuary.   
  
And yet, the next verse qualifies the first-   
  
*“Ki im lish’eiru hakarov-   
"*EXCEPT for a close relative…”  
  
Here we move from the metaphorical to the actual- from people as thoughts in your mind, to actual living and breathing people.  
  
There are people who are our “close relatives”- not necessarily blood, but those in our tribe, in our community, in our web of interdependence. For them we must become *tamei*at times*,*meaning that the relationship sometimes requires the sacrifice of our own needs in order to serve.   
  
Sometimes that sacrifice takes a few minutes, as with a screaming child, and sometimes it can go on for years, as in someone who needs on-going care. Sometimes we must sacrifice the plush-ness of *kadosh*for love, for the love that binds us together.  
  
But then there are those who are not “close relatives”, who seek to insert themselves into your life for whatever reason. They have their dramas, their pathologies, their fixations, and they are truly zombies and vampires, seeking to drag you down to their level.  
  
As all famous people learn, you can’t let every person into your life who tries to get in. It’s impossible. But, this truth is not just for famous people. The rhythm of reality dictates we work with both sides of the Tree of Life- the *Hesed*and the *Gevurah-*the loving-kindness and the setting of boundaries and limits. And life/Hashem will test you on this- you must learn both sides of the Tree!  
  
Of course, there is also gray area- folks who lie somewhere in between close and not-so-close.   
  
Then what do you do?  
  
Make a decision, and don’t worry. Each moment is new. The enemy is not the *not-knowing*, it is the *not-deciding.*  
  
On this *Shabbat Emor,* The Sabbath of Saying, may we speak our intentions with decisiveness, balancing openness with boundaries. And, once our decisions are made, may our minds let go and drink in the Divine Words that are being said in this moment, *as* this moment.