

Drash on Emor, May 9, 2009

This drash is based on “The Language of Truth” – teachings from the S’fat Emet, with commentary by Arthur Green.

“S’fat Emet” is the name of the main work of Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger (1847-1905), and so he is known by the name of that book, as “the S’fat Emet.”

Arthur Green: A contemporary authority on Chasidism; former Dean of Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and a founder of Hebrew College (Boston).

Parashat Emor (Leviticus 21-24) is about a few topics:

- * Priestly regulations and sacrifices
- * Shabbat and Festival calendar
- * The Tabernacle
- * Story about a blasphemer, lex talionis, punishment of the blasphemer

A: The role of the priest

21:10: “Hacohein hagadol mei’echav”

The S’fat Emet comments: Although the pshat translation of this phrase is “The priest who is greater than his brothers,” it was read by the rabbis as “The priest who is great *from* his brothers.”

Thus, the holiness of the priest depends on that of the people, and this is connected with the preparation of the whole people in regard to the imbuing of Aaron with the priesthood.

Arthur Green notes: Chasidism often jumps from the priest to the rebbe, giving the rebbe almost magical powers. But in Gerer Chasidism, like Kotsker Chasidism, the powers of the rebbe are downplayed. “The holiness of the tsaddik depends on his community. It is ‘the gifts of his brothers’ that makes him great.”

B: Purity of Torah

Leviticus 23: 15-16 discusses the counting of the omer – the seven weeks (+ 1 day) from Pesach to Shavuot; today is Day 31.

In regard to this, the S’fat Emet notes that the Midrash quotes Ps. 12:7: “Amarot Adonai amarot t’horot”; “The utterances of Adonai are pure utterances.”

What is the connection between purity and the counting of the omer? In Exodus, we learn of a period of purification by the whole community before the people receive the “*aseret ha’dibrot*” (the 10 “utterances”), and today, there is a practice of using the time of counting of the omer as a period of personal introspection and purification, in preparation for symbolically re-receiving the Torah on Shavu’ot.

The S’fat Emet comments on the reciprocal nature of the purification process: “A person an [truly] enter into Torah only insofar as that person is pure.” But he then adds, “Words of Torah themselves serve to purify the one who studies them.”

Arthur Green amplifies this idea: “If true Torah requires purity of heart, how are we impure ones ever to attain it?... What about those of us who never feel pure enough to receive the Torah?”

C. Fear and Peace

One of the topics discussed in the parasha are the priestly laws related to death and burial. The S’fat Emet put together a sequence of citations to make a point based on this issue.

First, he notes that the Midrash here quotes Ps. 19:10: “*Yir’at Adonai t’horah*”; “The fear/awe of Adonai is pure.”

Deut 16:16 says “*Shalosh p’amim bashanah yeira’eh z’chorcha et p’nai Adonai*”; “Three times a year your males shall be seen/fear Adonai.”

And Ps. 34:10 says, “*Ki ein machsor l’y’rei’av*”; “There is no lack for those who fear him [God]”

The S’fat Emet says, “there is no lack” means that one is complete, whole, which brings us to the word “shalom.” Thus, Aaron, who had fear/awe of God, was able to attain peace, and is, in fact, known as the exemplar of a man of peace.

He adds that “*Y’rushalayim*” can be parsed as “*yir’ah*” and “*shalom*.”

Arthur Green comments: We don’t usually think of “fear” and “peace” together. Usually, we think of fear as disturbing our peace. Here, the “awe of God” is a different kind of fear, that “takes us beyond ordinary selves, allowing us to leave behind all other fears, ...attachments.”