

Respect

The first part of Emor deals with limitations put on priests who work in the Temple. Seemingly, this topic has no relevance to us today. It's been 2,000 years since the Temple was destroyed. However, examining these laws can teach us something about Jewish values, which also have implications for current issues.

The limitations placed on the kohanim are primarily regarding impurity and purity. What is impurity? Here it refers to a person exposed to the body of a dead person. This closeness with death, whether it is physical contact or even being under the same roof as a corpse, defines the person as “impure.” The implication of this definition is the prohibition to enter the Temple or come into contact with the sacrifices.

The concept of impurity was meant to maintain a distance between the hard, painful aspects of life and the lofty and sacred aspects of the Temple. An impure person was not limited in his usual life habits, and actually was not even obligated to purify himself unless he wanted to enter the Temple or come in contact with sacrifices.

Incidentally, even today when the Temple is not standing, there is a prohibition of someone who came into contact with a dead person from entering the Temple Mount. Since we have all been in some contact with a corpse (by even being in a hospital that has a morgue), the Chief Rabbinate has determined that all are prohibited from entering the

Temple Mount complex.

So, a regular person can become impure by being in contact with a corpse, but what should a kohen do who works in the Temple?

“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” (Leviticus 21:1).

Until today, kohanim are commanded to beware of impurity from contact with a dead person. Many kohanim are careful in participating in funerals, visiting cemeteries and being near a dead person. What is the law regarding a kohen whose relative passed away?

The Torah refers to this and details a list of seven relatives for whom the kohen becomes impure: father and mother, son and daughter, unmarried brother and sister, and the kohen's wife. When one of these dies, the kohen is commanded to leave his shift at the Temple and take care of the burial without consideration of the impurity affecting him. Afterwards, he will undergo a process of purification. But during these difficult moments, the death of the close relative takes precedence.

It is important to understand: The work in the Temple was considered one of the spiritual peaks a human being could attain. The kohen was called upon to do his work with full concentration and complete intent. But the value of family is of even greater importance. There is no space for spiritual

peaks without the foundation of proper family ties, which in this case are expressed by taking care of the burial of a relative who passed away.

There is one exception: the high priest. This one person, the one and only exception in the nation, was commanded to be wholly devoted to the work of the Temple. His personal life was set aside.

“And the kohen who is elevated above his brothers... shall not come upon any dead bodies; he shall not defile himself for his father or his mother. He shall not leave the sanctuary, and he will not desecrate the holy things of his God” (Leviticus 21:10-12).

The high priest's special religious and national role obligated him to focus on his work, even when that means temporarily putting his family aside. But even for this special person there was one case in which he was commanded to leave the Temple and take care of the body of a dead person. This is the case of the “*met mitzvah*”: an anonymous person who does not have anyone who can take care of his burial. In this case, the high priest himself leaves the Temple and defiles himself to honor this person for the last time.

The order of priorities that the Torah outlines is unequivocal. The greatest religious role of work at the Temple does not defer normal family relations with the singular exception of the high priest, and even then – the honor of an anonymous person defers the spiritual peak of work at the Temple. ■

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Modern blasphemy!

Mark Twain was one of the great writers of American literature, and surely one of the funniest. He was also a famously obscene conversationalist. Helen Keller reports being shocked by how many vulgarities Twain used in everyday speech. Twain's wife, having devised a strategy to cure her husband of this tendency, one day surprised him by letting loose a stream of curses herself to show him how it sounded.

“Honey,” said Twain, “you have the words, but you ain't got the music.”

In Jewish tradition there are words one is not supposed to say. In this week's Torah portion, we are told the blasphemer should be put to death (Leviticus 24:16). That words could be fatal was taken very seriously.

In the later book of Job, when Job's wife gives him the advice to curse God and die, she actually says “bless” God, because to say the opposite would skirt too close to actual blasphemy. (This is *lashon sagi nahor* – the language of suf-

ficient light, which is how one refers to the blind. In other words, to avoid the harshness of certain words, you say the opposite, but the meaning is understood.)

It seems from Job's wife's expression that she believes blaspheming God will lead naturally to death; this is a sort of theological euthanasia, the way to end suffering is simply blaspheme and it will all be over.

ON CLOSER inspection, the tale of Judaism and blasphemy is more complicated than it may appear. We must pay attention not only to the word, but the subsequent music.

In the Talmud, the rabbis posit that one who hears blasphemy should tear his garment. Then Rabbi Hiyya explains the true state of things: “One who hears a mention of God's name in a blasphemous context nowadays is not obligated to make a tear, as if you do not say so, the entire garment will be full of tears (Sanhedrin 60a). In other words, blasphemy had become

so common that marking it was impossible. Far from a rare breach that would incur death, it was rampant.

Even when careful to avoid blasphemy, the rabbis sidestepped with great skill. Making a play on the verse “Who is like You among the gods?” (*elim*) the school of Rabbi Yishmael taught, “Who is like you among the mute? (*illemim*) (Gittin 56b).” After all, God has a disconcerting habit of not joining in when the Divine voice would be deeply appreciated. Still, labeling God as dumb is pretty daring, and could certainly be seen by some as blasphemy.

Yet even this is building on an earlier tradition. Abraham already questions God's justice when told Sodom is to be destroyed: “Shall the judge of all the earth not do justice?” (Genesis 18:25). Blasphemy may have been interdicted, but the impulse to hurl indictments toward heaven found ways of expressing itself.

All of this reminds us that listening to objectionable speech and learning how to deal with it is part of the natural

linguistic immune system. In the same way that letting kids play in dirty fields builds up their resistance, allowing words to range freely gives us a way to cope with words whose import we object to or even despise.

This is continuous with the wisdom that objects to banning books. It is good for the young to react to powerful ideas. They should grapple with them and grow out of them. We did.

And one must hear things to understand why they might be believed and how they can be argued against. Ruling ideas and expressions out of court does not make them disappear, it just labels them as explosively powerful. We need to relearn the Talmudic practice of preserving the rejected as well as the accepted opinions.

After all, the central declaration of the prayer service is not to speak, but to listen, Israel. ■

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This generation's existential threat

Applying Herzl's thinking to counter Israel-bashing

At the Seder, Jews around the world were reminded that “in every generation someone is rising to destroy us.” The threat changes from generation to generation. Last week we marked the last generation's attempt – the Holocaust.

Fifty years prior, in the 1890s, a lone alarmist, Theodor Herzl, warned that Europe was heading in that direction. During his time, the conventional wisdom was that with the secularization of the Christian population in Europe, age-old Jew-hatred was over.

Herzl, who perhaps held similar utopian views at first, quickly came to the conclusion that European opposition to Judaism is chronic and evolves as European and Jewish circumstances change.

Indeed, during his time, the emancipation of Western European Jews created new circumstances: Jews suddenly had rights, were competing with Europeans for jobs and amassing wealth. Reaffirming the Passover mantra, secular Europeans developed a new form of opposition to Judaism – national hatred. Toward the end of the 19th century this form of opposition was given a new name: antisemitism.

Some antisemites claimed that they were not Jew-haters and merely wished to reform the Jews. Some Jews, including Herzl, engaged with antisemites. Yet, as the 20th century progressed, antisemitism became so deeply ingrained in mainstream European consciousness that it was used as the ideology for the genocide of European Jewry.

Today, antisemitism is no longer an existential threat to Judaism. There is no institutional, state-sponsored attempts to kill Jews as there were throughout history, and the antisemitic populace, such as those marchers in Charlottesville yelling “Jews will not replace us,” do not have the destruction mechanism. They might pose a threat to individual Jews, but not to the survival of Judaism.

Yet, just as the Passover text predicted, a new existential threat to Judaism arose – Israel-bashing. Like the threats of previous generations, Israel-bashing has both retail populous support and the institutional destruction mechanism.

Populace component: occupationalism

Israel-bashing is empowered by occupationalism – Westerners hijacking the Palestinian plight and turning it into what has become an autonomous movement with no consideration to Palestinian interests. As discussed in last week's *Magazine*, occupationalism has turned into a populous movement that is deeply entrenched in Western society.

The occupationalist populace is armed with a perceived “license to hate” by credible organizations: the UN, Amnesty International and media outlets, which “certify” the facade that the opposition is merely to Israel's policies or to Zionism, and not to Judaism.

While the retail component of Israel-bashing is dogmatic, it is actually the institutional component of Israel-bashing that houses this generation's destruction mechanism of Judaism.

Institutional component: The mechanism to eradicate Judaism

The same European governments that for gener-



THE ICONIC photo of Zionist visionary Theodor Herzl leaning over a hotel balcony in Basel, Switzerland, during a Zionist Congress, early 1900s. (Wikimedia Commons)

ations engaged in campaigns to eradicate Judaism – from deportations from England and France to liquidation in Spain – are in this generation strong allies of the Jewish state.

But at the same time those governments have empowered multinational organizations, and those now have lethal mechanisms that could be deployed toward the destruction of Judaism.

For example, the International Criminal Court, heavily funded by Europe and housed in Europe, has the capability to deliver paralyzing blows to Israel's security, economy and society, such as by threatening to arrest Israeli government officials, military personnel, settlers – in short, all Israelis.

Other multinational organizations – from the UN to ad-hoc coalitions – have other capabilities such as boycotts, divestments and sanctions. Such mechanisms were instrumental in eliminating other pariah states such as South Africa and Ba'athist Iraq, and could in theory be deployed against the Jewish state, which, after all, is deemed by credible organizations as an apartheid state that commits war crimes and crimes against humanity.

At this point in 2022, the danger of Israel-bashing becoming the ideology for the political destruction of the Jewish state seems as absurd as the threat of antisemitism becoming the ideology for genocide of European Jews was in the 1890s during Herzl's time. Friendly governments would not fulfill the threat.

But as Herzl argued, governments are subject to the will of the people, and those people today are indoctrinated with occupationalism and Israel-bashing. “Even if we were as near to the hearts of princes... they could not protect us. They would only feel popular hatred by showing us too much favor,” Herzl wrote.

Moreover, political situations can change. One of the lessons of the 1973 Yom Kippur War is to threat-analyze capabilities, not just intentions. Indeed, the capabilities to eradicate Judaism are now in place.

So how to deal with it? Indeed, look to Herzl.

Applying Herzl's approach: The return to Judaism

Until now, the primary response to Israel-bashing has been *hasbara* (public diplomacy). Herzl mocked such efforts.

In his time, *hasbara* was done through “committees against antisemitism.” Herzl argued that they are futile since one cannot convince people who use dogmatic thinking. Hence, a radical solution was needed – the establishment of a Jewish state.

Today, Israel-bashing is too dogmatic in mainstream Western societies for rational arguments to be effective. Once again, a radical approach is needed to deal with this threat: the change of global consciousness of what is Judaism. As discussed in this column, Zionism is becoming the primary conduit through which both Jews and non-Jews relate to Judaism – through positive and negative connections alike.

Once there is a broad recognition that Judaism has transformed and Zionism is now its organizing principle, then Israel-bashing becomes Jew-bashing, and this in-turn dramatically alters the nature of the existential threat to Judaism of our generation. ■

The writer is the author of the newly released book, Judaism 3.0 – Judaism's Transformation to Zionism (Judaism-Zionism.com). For more of his geopolitical articles: EuropeAndJerusalem.com

Herzl Forum inaugurated

The *Jerusalem Post* in 2019 instilled some Herzl awareness to its readers in its special issue Herzl-2019, and in dozens of Herzl articles since. “Herzl is our modern Moses,” then prime-minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the *Magazine* in his introductory remarks for that issue. Indeed, Herzl has not only led the Jews' ascension back to the Promised Land, but, like Moses, also gave us tools to preserve it.

In particular, he understood the evolving nature of opposition to Judaism: “They will not leave us in peace. For a little period they manage to tolerate us, and then their hostility breaks out again and again.” Hence, studying Herzl's vision is not just a matter of history and self-awareness, it is also a tool to counter contemporary threats to Judaism.

Yet not only is there no study of Herzl's philosophy in universities, yeshivot and think tanks, there is not even basic awareness of Herzl the man. Research commissioned by Aliza Lavie, when she was chairwoman of the Herzl Center, showed that much of the public simply does not know who Herzl is.

To address this, the World Zionist Organization inaugurated the Herzl Forum under the leadership of Yaakov Hagoel, chairman of WZO – a position once held by Herzl himself. The forum, which includes Zionist leaders and Herzl scholars, kicked off its activities through a tour of places Herzl visited in his 1898 trip. Hagoel, who is also acting chairman of the Jewish Agency, said that through following Herzl's footsteps in the Land of Israel, “we can learn about how the visit influenced his vision for the Jewish state.”

– G.K.

