

DEBAR TORAH *by* RABBI ROHDE

Emor: Honing to the Specific Statements of God

“So said the LORD to Moses, ‘Say to Aaron’s sons, the priests, saying to them that a priest is not to defile himself for a dead person among his people’” (Lev. 21:1)

“Or whoever touches a crawling creature or a person that makes him unclean, whatever the uncleanness may be— the man who touches any of these will remain unclean until evening. He must not eat from the sacred offerings unless he has bathed himself with water” (Lev. 22:5-6)

“When you sacrifice a thank offering to the LORD, offer it so that it may be acceptable on your behalf. It must be eaten that same day. Do not leave any of it until morning. I am the LORD. You are to keep My commandments and practice them. I am the LORD” (Lev. 22: 29-30)

There are three forms of the Hebrew word for “saying” in the first verse of our Parasha, the second of which, the imperative or command form (אָמַר), lends its name to our Parasha. It is the rather ordinary term for “saying,” although its use three times in a row here lends it quite an emphasis. Much of the time, our Torah uses the term “dabber (דַּבֵּר),” meaning “speak.” Occasionally the Torah uses the term “tsav (צַו)” for “command.” Not all speaking or saying is giving commands, of course. But the unusual use of this term for “saying” three times in this context implies something like “state definitively.” It is a definitive “statement” of the law, translatable as “So stated the LORD to Moses, ‘State to Aaron’s son’s the priests, stating to them that a priest is not to defile himself...’” The textual antecedent to this law was the episode of the death of Aaron’s older sons, in consequence of which this law is now permanently promulgated to remaining sons and descendants of Aaron. In the earlier episode, Aaron’s remaining sons were forbidden to leave their priestly functions to bury and mourn their older brethren, which would have required them to defile the highly purified state they had painstakingly reached in order to serve in the Sanctuary. However, one could have thought that such a ruling was a one-time affair, applicable just to that episode or something similar and, in some respects, it was: According to the final law, priests can defile themselves (unlike Aaron, Elazar and Ithamar in the story), but only for the closest of their kin. For anyone else, our statement reads, they must carry on with their service, as the remaining sons of Aaron had done, and not defile themselves. Hence our text is beginning with a definitive statement of the final law regarding priests whose relatives die.

This specificity of the Torah’s commands, particularly to the priests, in a book like Leviticus makes it all the more opposed to the approach I interpreted last week as having been taken by Nadab and Abihu, who in their enthusiasm undertook it upon themselves to devise an incense offering. In Leviticus, more than in any other book of the Bible, not a single step may be taken without a specifically-stated instruction. Nothing can be left unchoreographed. No wonder it is that the eventual Jewish word for idolatry came to be “avodah zarah,” literally “strange worship.” Any part of worship other than that specifically commanded was seen as alien and considered as if it were or was leading to idolatry. Solely sticking with fidelity to stated, commanded law and behavior could avoid idolatry.

This noticeable emphasis upon sole fidelity to stated Divine command in Scripture (although “commandment” and Scriptural authority was understood to encompass Oral Law and Tradition as well) as a bulwark against idolatry became a hallmark of Judaism. It also inspired some Christians, such as Martin Luther, who was famous for using the phrase “Sola Scriptura” in rejecting non-Biblically based practices in the Catholic Church as “idolatrous.” When I was in school, Rabbi Walter S. Wurzbarger introduced me to the work of the famous Lutheran-based Swiss theologian Karl Barth. Barth’s theology, I would say, advances this concept - that not sticking to Divinely-commanded law inevitably leads to idolatry - yet a step further. Offering incense, after all, is a religious practice, and if not done according to proper command one could see where it could lead. Animal sacrifice, mourning and death practices, and innovated Catholic practices are also religious practices, so the grounds for fearing that they would develop into idolatry are apparent. But Barth ends up expanding that qualm to both “liberal religion” as well as to the atheist. Even the atheist, who might not follow Divine imperatives but by the same token you might not think would likely be led to follow idolatrous injunctions and practices either, will end up in idolatrous error. He will end up worshipping some incarnation of himself or of mankind in general and projecting himself and man’s needs and wants as his idolatrous god. More and more, I think, we see the unfolding of that threat which Barth predicted, that atheism and subjectivism also would inevitably dovetail with and lead to an idolatry. There is only one way to avoid idolatry: Honing to that specifically sanctioned by the definitive Statements of the Divine Command.



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL
The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

Shabbat Emor

May 1-2, 2026 | 15 Iyar, 5786

SCHEDULE

Hertz: Parasha: 513 | Haftarah: 528

Kaplan: Parasha: 610 | Haftarah: 1172

Candle Lighting | 7:34 pm

Evening Services | 7:00 pm | Main Sanctuary

Zemirot | 8:15 am | Main Sanctuary

Shahrit | 9:00 am | Main Sanctuary

Tot Shabbat & Youth 5+ | 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room

Jr. Congregation | 10:30 am | Little Synagogue

Kiddush | following services | Levy Auditorium | *Sponsored by Valerie & Ted Schweitzer, in memory of Carol Feinberg & Stuart Schweitzer*

CSI YOUTH: The Lag La’Omer Amazing Race | 4:00 pm | Dalya & Jake
| on Paved Paradise

Shabbat Afternoon Class | 6:45 pm | Rabbi Soloveichik

Teen Shiur | 6:45 pm | Baruch-Lev Kelman

Evening Services | 7:30 pm

Habdala | 8:33 pm

Lag La’Omer begins on Monday night.

Weekday Service Times

Mornings:

Sunday: 8:05 am

Monday-Friday: 7:05 am

Evenings:

Sunday-Thursday (Minha & Arbit): 6:30 pm

SAVE THE DATE: June 16, 2026

5786 Spring Gala: *Night At The Museum*

A unique Semiquincentennial experience curated by Rabbi Soloveichik

Mark your calendar — invitations coming soon.

FROM THE SISTERHOOD

NEW! Knitting & Needlework

Alternate Thursdays | Starting THIS week, May 7 | 2:30-4:00 pm

Knitters, Crocheters, and Needle Crafters: bring your own supplies and projects to work with like-minded crafters in the comfort of our homes. Please contact Vivienne (vivienneroumani@gmail.com) or Aura (aurabijou@yahoo.com) if interested.

SAVE THE DATE:

Final Spring Sisterhood Meeting & Flower Arrangement

Tuesday, May 12 | *Workshop by Rose Edinger* | Registration coming soon!

Hear what we are planning for the Fall & Winter 2026-2027 and how you can get involved.

SHABUOT PREVIEW

Learn more at shearthisrael.org/shabuot5786

- Rabbi Soloveichik's Shabuot Late Night Lecture
- Young Professionals Shabuot Dinner
- CSI Youth's Shabuot Ice Cream Bash
- Girls' and Young Women's Book of Ruth Reading

KIDS KORNER

The Lag La'Omer Amazing Race

THIS Shabbat afternoon, May 2 | 4:00 pm | Paved Paradise

Bring your A-game for relay races, games, snacks, prizes, and more!

Graduation Shabbat: Kiddush & Scroll of Honor

Shabbat, June 13 | Following Morning Services

Submit graduate info and/or sponsor kiddush at shearthisrael.org/graduation5786.

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mazal tob to **Valerie & Daniel Feder**, upon the birth of a granddaughter, Serena Rae (Zora Sarah), born to their children, Rebecca & Kurt Moskovitz.

Mazal tob to **Mayer Smouha** on his 100th birthday!

Visiting us this Shabbat morning is **Kinasnu**, a practical Israeli leadership program designed to broaden the political knowledge of individuals seeking to lead change at the national level.

COMING UP: SEMIQUINCENTENNIAL PROGRAMS

Jewish History Tour of Central Park

Presented by the Shearith Israel League | Sunday, May 17 | 4:30 pm

Annual Chatham Square Memorial

Memorial Day, Monday, May 25 | 10:30 am | Chatham Square Cemetery

Special Guest Speaker: Joshua Obstfeld, FBI Counterintelligence

With remarks from: Mikhael G. Smits, Captain, US Army

Registration is now open!

Register at shearthisrael.org/faith-freedom-symposium



Faith, Freedom, and the First Amendment: A Symposium on Religious Liberty

June 8, 2026

11:00 am - 12:30 pm | followed by collation

HELD AT

Touro Synagogue, 72 Touro Street, Newport, RI

HOSTED BY

Congregation Shearith Israel, New York City
and Congregation Ahavath Israel, Newport



EMCEE and
KEYNOTE SPEAKER:
Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

CONFIRMED SPEAKERS



Rabbi Dr. Stuart Halpern
Author of, *Esther in America*,
and, *Proclaim Liberty Throughout
the Land: The Hebrew Bible
in the United States*



Dr. Tevi Troy
Presidential scholar and author of,
*The Shifting Twenty-First Century
Presidency: Assessing the Implications
for America and the World*

REGISTRATION
REQUIRED

\$10/person

