

EVERY DAY A HOLIDAY?

Dvar Torah For Parshat Emor, 5781

Americans love holidays...perhaps too much! For instance, officially in the month of May, Americans celebrate one federal holiday that is prominent on the legal and employment calendar, and that of course is Memorial Day. If I am correct, each federal holiday is given an official stamp of approval by a formal act of congress, and no other holiday can call itself an official holiday in the United States without such approval. However, this is America which is the land of the free market and the home of the strange, so we Americans have no problem establishing all sorts of holidays in the private sector that reflect the tastes and concerns of popular sentiment and culture. For example, check out the following list of little-known American holidays that have been “declared” by some segment of the American population, or at least some business seeking to sell its products. Mind you, I am assured of the accuracy of this list because I found it on the internet!

May 1 is Mother Goose Day and Save The Rhino Day; May 2 is Fire Day; May 3 is Lumpy Rug Day; May 4 is National Candied Orange Peel Day; May 5 is National Hoagie Day; May 6 is Beverage Day; May 7 is International Tuba Day, Paste Up Day, and National Roast Leg of Lamb Day; May 8 is No Socks Day and Have A Coke Day; May 9 is Lost Sock Memorial Day; May 10 is Clean Up Your Room Day; May 11 is Eat What You Want Day and Twilight Zone Day; May 12 is Limerick Day; May

13 is Leprechaun Day; May 14 is National Dance Like A Chicken Day; May 15 is National Chocolate Chip Day; May 16 is Wear Purple For Peace Day; May 17 is Pack Rat Day; May 18 is International Museum Day and Visit Your Relatives Day; May 19 is Frog Jumping Jubilee Day; May 20 is Eliza Doolittle Day; May 21 is National Memo Day and National Waitresses/Waiters Day; May 22 is Buy-A-Musical-Instrument Day; May 23 is Penny Day; May 24 is National Escargot Day; May 25 is National Tap Dance Day; May 26 is Grey Day; May 27 is Body Painting Arts Festival Day; May 28 is National Hamburger Day; May 29 is End Of The Middle Ages Day; May 30 is My Bucket's Got A Hole In It Day; May 31 is National Macaroon Day.

Impressive list, huh? What particularly impresses me is how it reflects the incredible diversity of Americans' interests, and our insatiable appetite for satire and ridiculousness. We are a nation dedicated to pursuing our crazy interests, and to celebrating them publicly, even if only ten people show up to the National Macaroon Day conference. Even our official holidays seem to be more about fun, family, and vacations from work than about the meaning of what they commemorate. This suits us well, given our largely secular perspective on life and our collective historical amnesia that distances us from remembering why our holidays were established in the first place.

One gets a very different picture of the meaning of holidays when reading Leviticus, chapter 23, which is found in Parshat Emor and which contains one version of the biblical holiday cycle. Consider the repeated phrases that are the foundation –one might say the glue- of this chapter. *Moadei Adonai*, “the fixed or

set times of the Lord,” repeats five times in this chapter; *Mikraei Kodesh*, “sacred occasions,” repeats ten times in this chapter; *Kol Melekheth Avodah Lo Taasu*, “you shall not work at your occupations,” repeats six times in this chapter, corresponding to the six holidays that are mentioned, other than the even more sacred times of Shabbat and Yom Kippur. All of these phrases point to one basic spiritual idea: the focus of the Jewish holiday cycle is for the community to temporarily leave the world and its occupations at specific times of the year in order to celebrate sacred occasions with God. As it were, God loves God’s holidays, and not only asks but insists that we take time to celebrate them with God and with each other. However, God’s vision –as it were- for our celebration of the holiday cycle is very concrete and quite focused on the human pleasure of celebration with family and friends. Note in particular the last repeat phrase that I mentioned: *kol melekheth avodah lo taasu*, “you shall not work at your occupations.” This phrase is used to prohibit work during the first and last days of Pesach, the one day of Shavuot, of Rosh Hashanah, of Sukkot, and of Shmini Atzeret. However, during Shabbat and Yom Kippur, we are prohibited from doing *Melakhah*, “work in general,” which the tradition normally defines as creative or destructive work, not merely physical labor. The two phrases both make clear that on any of these holidays or on Shabbat we are not to work: on those days

we are dedicated to God and each other, not to worldly pursuits. However, one subtle difference between these two ways of talking about not working –one specifically for Shabbat and Yom Kippur and the other specifically for the other holidays- points to the major difference in practice between Shabbat and Yom Kippur on the one hand, the rest of the holidays on the other hand. According to traditional halakhic interpretation of this and other chapters of the Torah, on all the holidays *except Shabbat and Yom Kippur*, we may perform almost any kind of otherwise prohibited work that is connected to preparing food and carrying food from one place to another. Even more than Shabbat, and certainly in contrast to Yom Kippur, these other holy days are there to focus us on celebrating with God by celebrating and feasting with each other.

However, I want to take these distinctions one step further. In his code of Jewish law, the Mishneh Torah, (*Hilchot Shvitat Yom Tov*, 1:1), Maimonides points out what should be obvious to us from a simple reading of this chapter of Leviticus: according to the Torah, there are six celebration days annually during which we modify our working lives, apart from the weekly Shabbat and the yearly Yom Kippur. (Don't get confused by the additional second days of Yom Tov; they are later, added prohibitions not found in the Torah.) This sequence of six days should ring a bell in our heads. Shabbat and Yom Kippur are both called *Shabbat*

Shabbaton, the ultimate days of rest during which all work stops, so that we can recognize God as the sole Creator. They are interspersed with these six other holidays when some work is permitted, so we can feast and be happy. Think about Leviticus 23's rendition of the holiday cycle almost as a year-by-year version of what Judaism asks us to do week-by-week: work, live in community, and be in the world for six days, then set aside the seventh day to immerse ourselves in God's world entirely.

Our civil holiday calendar is filled with days of celebration, both the official ones of public joy and solemnity, and the unofficial ones that are the by-products of pop culture and personal predilection. Certainly, every day of being alive should be worthy of joyous celebration. However, I think we as a culture miss something when we turn our most solemn public celebrations almost exclusively into sales at the mall and into family barbecues; as a culture we miss something when we try to turn every day into a personal holiday. The Torah's holiday cycle seems to be calling us back to a more refined, contemplative way of thinking about holidays. Yes, holiday celebrations are about good food, good times, friends and family. God isn't asking us to sit around during Shabbat and Yom Tov in a state of mourning and ascetic contrition. On the contrary, our holidays, even Yom Kippur believe it or not, are about having a great reason to party. However,

the partying must happen in the larger context of a community, it must deepen our consciousness of the preciousness of life and life's source, and as the Torah also points out in this chapter of Leviticus, it must at all times involve reaching out to those who are needy, and not as blessed as we are to celebrate with good food and drink. To mark the sacred times of our year and the different moments – joyous and sad- of our personal and family lives, we human beings engage in meals and celebrations. The Torah reminds us to infuse each of those occasions with a touch of the sacred, a deep respect for the Creator and for creation, a love for each other, and a hopeful recognition that we do not celebrate in isolation, but in community. Shabbat Shalom.