

Emor begins with instructions for the *Kohanim* – the priests, descendants of Moses’ brother Aaron, who performed the service in the Tabernacle, and eventually the Temple in Jerusalem.

Kohanim must refrain from touching or coming under the same roof as a deceased person. While any Jew who comes in contact with the dead requires purification before entering the Temple, Kohanim must remain pure at all times. An exception is made for the funeral of a close relative or a *mes mitzvah* – a deceased individual who lacks attendants to facilitate a Jewish burial. The Kohen Gadol – High Priest – may not defile himself even for the funeral of his closest relatives – but is still obligated to do so for a *mes mitzvah* –so highly does the Torah value the *mitzvah* of burying the dead.

The Parsha offers a comprehensive list of Jewish holidays [with the exception of Purim and Chanukah, which commemorate events occurring later in history]:

Shabbos/Shabbat – the Sabbath: every seventh day, all work ceases, as we bear witness to God’s creation of the world in six days.

Pesach –Passover: a seven-day holiday commemorating the Exodus.

On the second day of Passover, the Omer – an offering of grain – was brought on the Altar in the Temple. This was the first permissible use of the new spring crop; no newly-ripened grain may be consumed prior to this day. This law is still effective in Israel today, where all Kosher grain products must be certified as “Yashan” – derived from the “old” crop – until after the second day of Passover. Some observe this law outside of Israel as well.

From the day the Omer is brought, we count forty-nine days – seven weeks – until the next holiday:

Shavuos – The Festival of Weeks: a one-day holiday commemorating the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

Rosh HaShana – The New Year.

Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement (a fast day).

Sukkos – the Holiday of Booths: a seven-day holiday commemorating our travels in the desert, sheltered by Divine protection.

Shemini Atzeres – the Eight Day of Assembly: attached to Sukkos, this is actually a holiday of its own – “one last day” of celebration and Divine closeness. This is also the day we complete the annual cycle of Torah reading in the Synagogue – Simchas Torah.

- Note: generally, outside of Israel, a day is added to each holiday: Passover lasts for eight days, Shavuos for two, and Sukkos/Shemini Atzeres for nine. Because the Jewish calendar is based on the moon, there was always an element of uncertainty about when the moon would be sighted, and consequently when the holidays would occur. Although a fixed calendar was instituted centuries ago, the practice of “double days” is retained, for various reasons.

Exceptions are Yom Kippur, which is observed as a single day everywhere, and Rosh HaShana, which is celebrated for two days even in Israel.