

It was a long and unexpected journey that brought me to stand here today. It took me through several centuries and continents, and it ends with me having found a type of joy I'd never known before. This isn't anything I could ever have done on my own, so there are many people to whom I must give thanks. Maya's teaching and guidance have filled me with a love of learning and I thank her for that. Linda, Adina, and Lisa have shared in some of those studies with me, and have taught me so much. Robyn and Sherwin have shown me much kindness, even bringing a siddur to my house so that I could pray. Carmi and Melissa have shared words of Torah with me, and June and Donna have made me feel welcome in their homes. My mother and father-in-law, Paula and Randy, have welcomed me into their family and joined me here today to share my joy. And they have gifted me the most beloved gift of my life – my dear husband Steven. His love and support are everything to me and I couldn't imagine my life without him. And of course, Rabbi Mirel and his amazing wife Julie have listened to me and guided me to stand here today. You all have my deepest thanks.

If you know me, you probably know that I have a genealogy hobby. I think my interest was piqued in this topic because of how little of my family I knew growing up. Both of my grandmothers died before I was born, and one of my grandfathers died when I was in kindergarten. My parents both had siblings, but they were all scattered around the country.

I moved to the PNW from Miami about fifteen years ago. It was just one of many, many moves I had made since childhood. Like the rest of my family, I had scattered all over the country. And by now I had even less contact with my family than I had as a child.

It was here, not long after arriving, that I met my husband. Now that I had my own family, I was curious to learn more about the extended family I never knew. So, I joined [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com)

And my family was waiting there for me to find it. I found my great-great-great grandfather in the 1848 Hungarian Census of Jews. I traced my grandfather's family back to the Mayflower. And I found unexpected sadness as well. Records showed that both of my grandfathers had spent several childhood years in orphanages – not because they were orphans, but because their parents were too poor to care for them. I found ancestors who fled the potato famine in Ireland and the pogroms in Poland. And I found the names of cousins who had not been able to flee persecution listed on the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial website. Amalia, Ludovit, and Edith Strelinger are here with me today in memory.

These stories I found in my research took on a deeper resonance for me during the pandemic. Like many people, I was driven to fear and despair by the horror of the rising daily death totals. For the first time since childhood, I felt like I didn't know what to do. I

didn't know how to live in times that felt so uncertain and dangerous. I needed help and guidance.

It was during this time that I found records for one of my great-great grandfathers. Henry Johnson's death certificate showed that he died in 1918 of the Spanish flu.

This made me realize that the guidance I had been looking for had been there all along. Times like this were not new. My grandparents had all been born in the years of the Spanish flu which killed thirty million people around the world. They knew how to live in such troubled times. And I knew I could learn from them.

I wanted to learn what they knew, and I knew that they had learned from their own rabbis. I had found a few rabbis in my family tree, in fact. So, I searched for a synagogue near me, and I found the website for Bet Chaverim. And I sent an email to the rabbi, which is the path that led me to stand here today.

And we are here today with Parshah Emor. Emor is Hebrew for "he speaks", and in this Torah portion God speaks to Moses, giving him commandments to share with the Israelites. It is here we are commanded to observe Shabbat and the High Holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. And here is also one of the places we learn the details of bringing sacrifices to God.

There's an unusual detail included in this section, however: in the midst of describing what makes an animal acceptable as a sacrifice, God issues a commandment regarding farm fields. The corners of a square field must be left in the ground when harvesting. The text tells us that the corners are to be left so they may be harvested by the poor and the stranger.

This commandment itself isn't surprising, but its location is. The text jumps abruptly from explaining that sacrificed animals must not have any blemishes to explaining that the corners of a field must not be harvested. Why would these two ideas be connected?

We don't offer animals for sacrifice anymore, as there is no temple in which to offer them. But we continue to follow God's commandments, offering our prayers in place of temple sacrifice. So we do still leave the corners of our fields for the poor and the stranger. How do we do that? And why must we leave the corners of our fields?

Most of us don't have fields we farm anymore; we work in offices. So now our jobs are our 'fields', and our income the harvest.

Perhaps the reason the commandment to leave the corners of our fields is placed next to the commandment to offer unblemished sacrifices is to teach us that if we fail to leave

the corners of our fields, so to speak, that we somehow blemish any sacrifice we might offer from that field.

If you brought grain to the temple as a sacrifice, but you harvested that grain without sparing a thought for the poor in your community, maybe this in some way “blemishes” that grain. Maybe it’s saying that to care about God’s expectations of you without also caring for the needs of your fellow human diminishes what you think you give to God.

It seems like all of the commandments are like this. They were written for people living millennia ago, yet there are still important lessons to be learned from careful study. I’ve come to think of the Torah as being like a love letter from our ancestors. Wouldn’t it be great if there were some way you could gather up everything you have figured out about how to live a good and happy life and share that with your children? Can you imagine what knowledge and wisdom your own parents might have gathered up to share with you? Thousands of years ago, our parents learned the hard lessons of how to make a society function, and those lessons were committed to writing. This is one of the miracles of Torah: it is the voice of our fathers and mothers speaking to us through time, calling on us to take their wisdom to heart. And in every generation since – or as we say in prayer, *l’dor vador* – the wisdom of the Torah has been enough that parents taught its lessons to their children. This is an unbroken chain that we are fortunate enough to be a part of. And I am proud to take my place as one of those who in each generation will love God with all my heart, all my soul, and all my might, and I will take to heart the instructions of the Torah, that in doing so I might lengthen and gladden my days.