

Torah Thoughts Emor

5778:

Time changes everything, particularly our feelings about everything. Before the fact, we may be totally opposed to something occurring, but after it has already happened we often moderate our reaction. I can suggest two reasons for this kind of change of heart: 1) We discover, to our surprise, that our early opposition was unfounded, that we were wrong out the outset; 2) even though we felt something was wrong, and feel it still to be so, there is no point in making things even worse by being upset about it.

Jewish tradition also takes into account these changes of heart. There are a number of situations in which something is prohibited *l'hatkilah*, before the fact, but accepted, if not encouraged, *b'di'avad*, after they have already occurred. One such case occurs in this week's parshah, where a number of rules establish whom among the *kohanim* are fit to serve God, and whom the priests can marry and remain fit to serve as *kohein*. Among those a *kohein* cannot marry are divorced women and converts. In the rabbinic period, this was understood to mean that before the fact a *kohein* cannot marry a divorcee, for example, but that having married one, their marriage is valid after the fact.

That approach creates a certain amount of legal and ethical tension. If such a marriage is prohibited, why should one that takes place be sanctioned in any way after it has occurred? More generally, why would any prohibited act have an 'escape clause' for one who transgressed and knowingly engaged in a prohibited act?

Jewish tradition has never been absolutist. It recognizes that ideals do not always translate into reality. We should never shy from establishing communal rules for living a righteous life, but Judaism has always understood that the human being is a frail creature, and that sometimes we make choices that fall short of our tradition's ideals. Saying that something shouldn't happen doesn't mean that if it does we should give up our ideals. Life is too complicated to expect ideals to be lived up to in every situation, so we must have the equanimity to accept 'plan B' when the situation calls for it. In Jewish tradition, idealism is always tempered by realism.