

Aharei Mot/Kedoshim 5781

After Death....

Today we reach the center of the Torah. I learned from Rabbi Jonathan Jaffe Bernhard that the center of a scroll is where we keep what is most precious. Either way you roll a scroll, the center remains protected.

The center of Torah comprises a twin parashah - Aharaei Mot and Kedoshim. We know the second part better than the first. As we heard Noa read this morning, Kedoshim - the Holiness Code - contains some of our most treasured ideas. Loving our neighbor, doing justice, not putting a stumbling block in front of the blind - they are all here.

What comes before that, though?

As you'll see from the page in the Humash¹, Aharei Mot deals with the Yom Kippur ritual. But if we were reading the Torah for the first time, that's not what we'd see. We don't learn that the ritual in this parashah is to be conducted on Yom Kippur until we have read all the way through it.

What the Torah actually says by way of introduction is this:

God spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons, when they had drawn too close to the presence of the Lord, and had died.

There's nothing here about Yom Kippur. Rather, what is being referenced is what took place in parashat Shemini, on the day the Mishkan first opened. Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's two oldest sons, changed the ritual. They crossed some kind of line. And they died for it.

So the rituals that follow are infused with that memory.

They are immensely intricate. They fall into three stages. In the first, Aaron, wearing white linen clothing, takes a bull for himself and his household, and one goat for the people. He leaves the other standing at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. He offers the bull for himself and his household, then takes

¹ *Etz Hayyim* p. 679

fire, incense and and blood into the Holy of Holies, sprinkles the blood in there, comes out, slaughters the goat for the people's purification offering, takes its blood back in and sprinkles it again.

In the second stage, he comes out to purify the altar by sprinkling it with blood. Then he places his hands on the live goat and sends it away as a scapegoat.

For the third stage he changes back into his full sacred vestments to offer two rams as burnt offerings on the altar, one for himself and his household and one for the people.

And it is only after we have learned all this detail that we discover that these rituals are to be carried out on Yom Kippur; that they are not rites of private mourning but of communal atonement.

Vayikra is the book of patterns. To understand it, we need to look closely at its patterns. Let's explore what they are saying.

Last week's patterns all surrounded the process of healing, the rehabilitation of a healed person into the community. If so, are this week's patterns the way to deal with death? Are they how Aaron is supposed to mourn the loss of his sons? It's a bit too much if so.

So let us do a very Jewish thing. Let us turn to another source of wisdom. I'm going to use a different text to explain this one. The text is from the Talmud² and it goes like this:

Rav, and Rabbi Hanina, and Rabbi Yohanan (or Yonatan), and Rav Haviva taught:

Anyone who can protest the actions of their household and does not is held responsible for the actions of their household.

² BT Shabbat 54b

Anyone who can protest the actions of their town and does not is held responsible for the actions of their town.

Anyone who can protest the actions of the whole world and does not is held responsible for the actions of the whole world.

Aaron's two sons died at a critical time, on the day that stands at the center of the Torah. Since the people were also all there, they - the community - and the Tent of Meeting itself all need expiation.

The Torah is saying that there are some deaths that go beyond the personal. There are some deaths that require not just private mourning but also communal atonement. There are some deaths for which we are all responsible.

We encountered that pattern in our own lives this past week, with the jury in the trial of Derek Chauvin ruling that he was guilty of the murder and manslaughter of George Floyd.

The last time I spoke about George Floyd's death from this Bimah was the High Holydays, the other time when we read this passage of Torah. I don't really believe in coincidences: it feels right and fitting that today is the day to address it once more, to follow the cues the Torah gives us about how to make public atonement when a death - like the death of George Floyd - has crossed the line.

Let us pull out just three of the symbolic threads from the parashah to consider:

The atonement is a staged process. Aaron atones for his own sins, for those of his household, for those of the people. When this much work is to be done, it ripples out from the center.

Everywhere we look, there is doubling. Two bulls, two goats, two burnt offerings, two costumes for Aaron. What should we learn from this? Does the doubling imply connection, mutuality, a shared destiny? Does it invite us into dialogue?

One goat of the pair stays alive. But unlike the bird in last week's parashah, that is sent to fly over the open country into freedom, this goat is sent to the desert and to Azazel in a mysterious and intimidating rite. The Rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud teach us what they think happened. But what does it mean, what does that live goat, and the desert, and Azazel, symbolize for us?

One interpretation: it seems as though the goat goes off on a journey with no destination. But we began this morning by looking at how the Torah reads sequentially. So let's do that again.

The passage in between the Yom Kippur rite and the start of the Holiness Code is one of the hardest pieces of Torah we encounter, and this community does not read it on Yom Kippur afternoon; it deals with boundaries that must not be violated, and in that sense it is in dialogue with the first half of the parashah.

But then we move into Kedoshim. Aharei mot - after death - we learn how to live. Not only that, but we learn how to live well. As Dr Lieber of blessed memory remarks in his commentary, the rules of Kedoshim do not distinguish between ritual and everyday, between personal and communal. Every moment we live can be one of holiness if we:

- respect our parents
- worship what is truly deserving of worship
- leave food for the poor
- deal honestly
- pay wages on time
- judge impartially
- bear no grudges and take no vengeance - instead, have the difficult conversation
- love our neighbor as ourselves, the rule that Rabbi Akiva holds to be the single greatest principle of the Torah

These principles apply to our households, our community, our 'tent' - just like Aaron's sacrifices.

How will we apply them, this year?

In our households - let us learn more about the circumstances that led to the death of George Floyd. Let us discuss and argue them with our families. Let us investigate those circumstances. Let us keep learning. Let us call into question the beliefs we have previously held about race. It is time for them to change.

In our communities, multiple Jewish organizations have been speaking out - ADL, JTS.³ There will likely be more of that this week. But we can do better than statements.

Please watch the recording of the session titled *Black but/and/or Jewish* moderated on Thursday by Dr Mia Bagneris of our community. Produced by the Grant Center for the American Jewish Experience⁴, it drew together four Black Jews - Dr Bagneris, Rabbi Shais Rishon (who writes as the MaNishtana), Rabbi Isaama Goldstein-Stoll, and rabbinical school student Kendell Pinkney. We must listen to what they have to say about living lives of intersection. We must listen to what they teach about having not one but two identities that are not negotiable.

And then perhaps the 'tent' that is the wider world will begin to open.

Aharei Mot George Floyd. We mark it this week. Will we learn this Torah? Will the process once again lead us from death into life?

As always, that will be up to us.

³ https://www.jtsa.edu/statement-in-the-wake-of-the-derek-chauvin-verdict?utm_term=Statement%20in%20the%20Wake%20of%20the%20Derek%20Chauvin%20Verdict&utm_campaign=Statement%20on%20Chauvin%20Verdict%3B%20Monday%20Learning%20Series%3B%20CityStage%20Performing%20Arts%20Program%20for%20Teens%3B%20and%20More&utm_content=email&utm_source=Act-On+Software&utm_medium=email&cm_mmc=Act-On%20Software-_-email-_-Statement%20on%20Chauvin%20Verdict%3B%20Monday%20Learning%20Series%3B%20CityStage%20Performing%20Arts%20Program%20for%20Teens%3B%20and%20More-_-Statement%20in%20the%20Wake%20of%20the%20Derek%20Chauvin%20Verdict

⁴ <https://liberalarts.tulane.edu/departments/jewish-studies/grant-center/public-programs>