

## Acharei Mot-Kedoshim

I have always been fascinated that this parsha, largely about the ritual of the High Priest on Yom Kippur, begins with and is called Acharei Mot — After the death of Aaron's two sons Nadav and Avihu... You will recall that 3 parshiot ago, in Parashat Shemini, two of Aaron's four sons approached the altar with strange fire, *esh zara*, and were instantaneously immolated. Two questions immediately arise: in what way is the service of the high priest on Yom Kippur connected to the death of Aaron's sons? Is he atoning for their sin? If so, that sin has never been made clear, and certainly he, Aaron, has not been implicated in their actions. 2. Nadav and Avihu were killed three parshiot ago. Why bring it up now in relationship to Yom Kippur instead of immediately following their deaths?

I will answer or at least attempt to address these questions but I want to say at the outset that my understanding of these words changed dramatically after my father-in-law died unexpectedly twelve years ago. I traveled home from St Louis to Cleveland following the funeral and a few days of shiva with the girls so that they could go back to camp and I could go back to work and David followed us a day or two later. I remember sitting in the airport, outside of the shiva home for the first time, and feeling so lonely and alienated. Nobody was asking me how I was because nobody knew what had just happened. I felt as if I had left my safe cocoon where no explanations were necessary. As I sat there looking around, I realized that nearly everyone in the airport had probably suffered similar loss and that they too were going about their business, looking normal on the outside, perhaps mourning on the inside, but certainly living *acharei mot* — after the death of ones they loved. If we're old enough, we all live there.

I also learned during those ensuing months, that death is not processed easily or all at once. David would be unexpectedly overcome by grief, sometimes for no apparent reason or with no apparent trigger. Once I remember pulling in to our driveway with him and getting out of the car. He just sat there. I asked, "Are you getting out?" He said, "I can't." I said, "What do you mean you can't?" He said he literally, at least for that moment, could not get up. The weight of mourning was so heavy. Mourning is physical. It happens over time. In that way, I imagine that the delay between Nadav and Avihu's death, and speaking again about that death as Aaron prepared, perhaps for the first time to return to the sanctuary, to perform the Yom Kippur rites, points to that period of grieving, that mysterious and drawn out time when Aaron mourned his sons.

In some sense, we are all grieving now. Not only the death of loved ones, which some of us are suffering, but the loss of the life we knew, which all of us are experiencing. Even if this is temporary, it doesn't feel that way, and we all wonder what life will be like *acharei mot*, after the death — what will be different. The loss of normalcy. the fear of economic toll, the loss of connection — these are all things we are grieving. You can almost feel it in the air.

And just as, long ago, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross outlined the five stages of grief, which by the way, do not happen in a neat progression, we too, now, run through those same feelings: Denial — this virus won't come here, it won't affect me; Anger — You're making me stay home and taking away things I want to be doing; Bargaining — Okay, I will social distance until mid-May, but then everything will be better, right? Sadness — I don't know when this will end. My Dad

confided in me the other day that he worries if he will see us again. And finally, there is acceptance —this is happening. I have to figure out how to go on.

Obviously, the power lies with acceptance. Acceptance means accepting that this is happening, that much is out of my control and that I can't usefully put attention there, but that there are things I can control — I can wash my hands. I can keep a safe distance. I can figure out how to play cards by zoom or hold a birthday party or find time to do something I have put off.

As I said, these stages will not happen in order. There are times when I feel accepting and peaceful and then I get to worrying again about the synagogue, my children, the world... And so it goes.

In this time of mourning, I think there are some helpful things to know about mourning. It's normal. You are not alone. Everyone has these feelings. Everyone is going through this. If someone posts on facebook about how wonderfully they are doing mastering a new language or baking bread, take it with a grain of salt. They are also worrying or getting annoyed with their spouse or children. Everyone is having these feelings although not the same feelings all at once at the same moment. Second, grief pops up when and where it does. You can't control that but you can know that it's OK and that grief, like every other feeling, is an emotion. I like to think about the fact that the word motion is contained within the word emotion. Feelings move through us. The important thing is that when we allow ourselves to feel them, they move. We might imagine that we will feel this way forever, but we won't. We can feel the grief now and move through it or perhaps, more properly, it will move through us.

Similarly, it is helpful not to catastrophize — OMG, what if we don't have high holiday services, and no one rejoins the synagogue and we close our doors next year? What if they run out of food at the store? What if everyone I love dies? It may actually be impossible to stop our mind from generating these scary scenarios sometimes, but we can also take a more active role in generating more positive scenarios — everyone I love won't die. Maybe no one else will get sick because we're doing the right things. The synagogue is playing an important role in people's lives right now.

I have also noticed that we are good at imagining our losses and our fears. We are less good at noticing the good things that might come out of a hard time, or this hard time — a sense of togetherness, a new appreciation for the value of community, the need for universal healthcare, the importance of science, even little things, like I walk on my block and I meet neighbors I never met; my children are sharing the cooking with us — it's nice to have them home — who knows when this will happen again?; my material needs turn out to be much less than I thought they were; the red-tailed hawks and pileated woodpeckers are gorgeous.

It is also helpful, as I have noted before, to ground yourself in the present. If you meditate, it's a good time to keep your practice going, focus on your breath. You can also simply ground yourself in where you are — name five things in the room. Notice that at least in this moment, you are safe. None of the bad things you anticipated are happening. You have food. You are not sick. You might say outloud or to yourself how things feel — the desk is hard, the blanket is soft, I notice my breath coming through my nostrils.

It's a good time to let go of what we can't control. I can't control what someone else is doing. I can control whether I stay six feet away, whether I wash my hands. Focus on those things.

Finally, it is a good time to practice compassion. The other day I was in a supermarket and an older woman at the checkout started screaming at me that I had come too close to her. I left the market and went to my car to get my grocery bags which I had forgotten. When I returned, she was still screaming, again at me, at the grocery checker, the manager and anyone else in earshot. When she left, the store manager, who had handled the situation as best as anyone could, apologized to me. I said, "It's OK. It's not your fault. You handled it well. She was just scared. We are all scared right now." I have lost my cool more times than I care to admit and I have watched others lose it uncharacteristically too. Practice compassion for them and for yourself.

About rituals of mourning, I mean actual mourning of the dead — funerals, shivas, etc. I have seen online and in the paper that some of these are being indefinitely postponed. At a future date, the notice reads, when we can all come together, there will be a celebration of life.

I think this is a big mistake and I strongly discourage it. It might be nice to imagine that we can bottle up our feelings, put them on the shelf, and take them down to deal with at a later date. Unfortunately feelings, including grief, do not work that way. My experience is that mourning will present itself and take its toll whether you choose to put attention on it or not. So, I think it is really important that we continue to hold funerals and shivas right now. I know that none of us wants a zoom funeral, that it is painful not to be with loved ones, not to hold them, not to be together — this is not what any of us hoped for.

But I have learned from others that a funeral and a shiva, conducted perhaps by zoom, can still be deeply moving. We can still pay a meaningful tribute to a loved one's life, we can still comfort mourners, we can be together virtually if not physically. And there might even be some ways it could be better. I heard one woman describe attending a zoom funeral. She feared that it would be somehow less, but she found that sitting silently alone in her home, seeing the faces and hearing the stories up close in a focused way, undistracted by the people she would normally be sitting with at a funeral, moved her and touched her perhaps more deeply and truly than many funerals had. She found it more loving and more revealing.

Another person described a shiva that she found more meaningful than a regular shiva - there was no sense of a party atmosphere, no idle talk, no food or liquor. After the service, visitors were invited to speak directly to the mourners in the presence of everyone else about the deceased. People spoke movingly and personally and everyone listened. Everyone could see the faces of the mourners and how the words about their beloved touched them. In some ways, the shiva was about what it was meant to be about, when some shivas are too often not.

I also heard about a mourner writing letters of thanks to those who had attended the funeral or shiva and really taking the time, in the letters, to talk about their relationship with the person to whom she was writing. Calling each person to mind, writing to them at some length, felt to her like a virtual hug.

Sometimes our rituals become rote, like worn-down armchairs. This moment forces us to create new rituals and the immediacy of the need for those rituals makes them feel more authentic.

Finally, when my father-in-law died, and I sat in that airport, what I wanted most was for the world to stop. I couldn't believe that life was just going on as usual, and there I was, bereft, and expected to join the parade.

Today the world has stopped. There is time to settle into grief. There is less pressure to get back to business as usual. There is time to go inside or to write notes or sort through photo albums or connect to memories or call people we love. There is an opportunity to grieve.

All this is to say that we need our rituals of grief and mourning even as we are forced to mourn the fact that they are not what we hoped for or wanted. Funerals are for the living, because they enable our lives to go on.

I want to return now to my initial question. What is the connection between the death of Aaron's sons and the ritual of Yom Kippur, a ritual intended to effect atonement, to enable us, after sin, to draw close to God again, to reset the table as it were?

As I sit here in this moment of a kind of extended mourning, the answer to that question becomes clear. After death, after such rupture, after mourning, we need to draw close to God again. We need atonement or at-one-ment. We also need forgiveness. Particularly after a death, our own faults and the ways we failed the deceased can haunt us. We also realize that life is short and we are not always living it the way we intend to. We need forgiveness and we need, as Yom Kippur, provides, an opportunity to reset our course. And finally we need to forgive. We need to forgive ourselves for whatever mistakes we have made and we need to forgive God for making a world that is full of pain and suffering, a world in which death and sickness are a natural part of life, even as it is also a world of magnificent beauty and goodness.

Yom Kippur, more than any other holiday, is the holiday in which we construct meaning of our lives. After the death, after all this grief, we will need Yom Kippur to draw close to God, to forgive and be forgiven, and to begin to construct meaning, meaning I cannot yet anticipate, out of events that have shaken and reshaped our world. Yom Kippur, like a funeral, is an important ritual to help us in that process of meaning- making.

It is among my dearest hopes that we will be together in person on Yom Kippur in our sanctuary. But if we are not, we will not postpone Yom Kippur. We will find ways to come together and do the work we need to do and create new ritual to respond to this moment in time. And in those new media and new rituals, we will both grieve the old but also, I am sure, find surprising silver linings. And we will hold funerals, we will celebrate Yom Kippur, each in its right time, because we need to. Because we must. Because our lives call us to, as we are drawn inexorably forward into the great stream of life.