

Lady Gaga Stole the Show

Parashat Tazria; Shabbat Ha'Chodesh

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Lady Gaga Stole the Show...How many sermons begin with Lady Gaga?! I want to talk to you for just a few short minutes about Lady Gaga, and her appearance last Sunday night at the Oscars alongside wheelchair bound Liza Minelli. This was very late into an already overtime running Academy Awards...the moment everyone had been waiting for, the award for Best Picture. From the corner of the stage Lady Gaga, the 36 year old singer, songwriter, and actress appeared in a sparkling tuxedo with black stilettos, and beside her the 76 year old singer and dancer Liza Minelli, who is now confined to a wheelchair. I was shocked at first...I didn't know that Liza Minelli could no longer walk, and even more than that she seemed a bit flustered and overwhelmed by the spectacle, not to mention handling the cue card. At one point she looked up at Lady Gaga and asked "Now?" As in, should I speak now? I was taken aback by her frailty and confusion.

Now for those of you who were still awake, it was close to 11:30, way past Jillian's bedtime, and mine too, you might have thought the most memorable part of the Oscars was the literal smack down between Will Smith and Chris Rock. Rock made a joke in very poor taste about Smith's wife Jada Pinkett Smith's alopecia. To which Will Smith responded by mounting the stage and smacking Chris Rock in the face, followed by a shouting a bleeped out curse at the comedian. It was all pretty awful, and while Will Smith tearfully apologized to the Academy after accepting the award for Best Actor, he did not apologize to Chris Rock for hitting him on live television. I'm not sure if Chris Rock apologized either. I was thinking of all the impressionable kids, and adults for that matter, who were watching this shameful act.

As many of us know the ailments referred to in Parashat Tazria are understood by the rabbis to be the result of *lashon ha'ra*, speaking negatively about others. In a famous drasha connecting last week's parasha which is largely about kosher foods with this week's which is about 'kosher speech,' Rabbi Yisrael Salanter states that just as we must watch what we put in our mouths, we also must watch what comes out of them. As crass and offensive as Chris Rock's joke surely was, things went from bad to worse when Will Smith went up and hit him. I was relieved that my 15 year old son had left the room to go take a shower and missed that whole debacle...though I'm sure he's seen it on social media since. Notwithstanding Smith's speech about protecting people and the abuse that famous people have to endure, I wish he would have demonstrated a different way of protecting his wife than resorting to violence. Everyone has been talking about this! It was the lead news story on the 11:00 news that started at 11:45 on Sunday night. I bet it will be on the cover of every entertainment magazine. But to me, that was not the show stopper. That was not the most memorable part of the Oscars. And as much as I loved seeing Amy Schumer suspended in the air in a Spiderman costume, and adored the live rendition of the *Encanto* hit song "We don't talk about Bruno," the most touching part of the whole night was watching Lady Gaga showing the utmost tenderness, respect, and care for Liza Minelli.

When they first arrived on stage Lady Gaga said to the Minelli who won an Oscar 50 years earlier, "The public, they love you!" As the applause thundered, Minelli was both appreciative of the recognition, and also bit disoriented by it. Unsure what to do, the mic picked up Lady

Gaga leaning over to Minelli and saying “I’ve got you,” and a relieved Minelli responding, “I know.” The whole interaction probably lasted less than 30 seconds, but it was remarkably touching and inspirational.

Our parasha this morning not only relates vivid details of diseases, infirmities, inflammations, impurities, and leprosy, but also how the afflicted person is isolated from the community until he or she recovers. I think the Covid-era has forever transformed how we think about we think about isolation and quarantine as they appear in these ancient verses. Bible scholar Tamara Cohn Eskenazi makes a critical point in her commentary on Tazria. She says that the parasha also “concentrates on reconnecting the persons who have been isolated an on bringing them back to the center. The more marginalized the ill persons have been,” Eskenazi writes, “the greater the effort to bring them back into the fold.”

If you’ve ever been ill, ever spent extended time in a hospital, in rehab, or even in quarantine, you know how destabilizing that can be. The longer you are away from your family, your friends, your job, your community, the more disoriented and detached you feel. Life may go on for others, but not for you. And then, when you do eventually return to your routine, catching up with what you missed, whether it’s family news or paying bills, can all be pretty overwhelming. If you return in an altered state, say in a wheelchair, you may have to endure the looks and questions and whispers of others. It’s hard to come back to life as you knew it. Just ask the leper of today’s parasha. But the Torah also implemented an elaborate ritual of reentry into the community, made official by the presence of the Kohen who officiates, and ultimately pronounces the person “pure.” These rituals are meant to remind the community that though this person experienced confinement due to a life-altering disease, they are nevertheless still human beings, deserving of compassion and respect as full-fledged members of the community.

As I watched the Oscars on Sunday night, I thought of the importance of these rituals, and how they are actually not as outdated or anachronistic as they might seem. As Liza Minelli entered that room full of peers and spectators, with a live television audience of millions, it was none other than Lady Gaga who ushered her back from isolation. No one was prepared to behold her weakened state. But with grace, kindness, reverence, and warmth, she was able to maintain her dignity and composure. Our last name doesn’t have to be Cohen, or Gaga, to help someone who has been weakened to return to strength, who has been isolated to come back to community. Any of us can say to someone else, “I’ve got you.” Those are the three words, and the indelible image that I will remember most from the 94th Academy Awards.