

Sermon

Parshat Acharei Mot – Kedoshim

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Believe it or not, we here at B'nai Israel are already starting to plan for the High Holidays. No, they probably will not look like they did in 2019, but they also won't look like they did in 2020. We know that 2021 is bound to put us somewhere in between the two. Parshat Acharei Mot describes the Yom Kippur rituals performed by the High Priest in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. There is a vestige of this ancient ritual in our services even today—it is what we call the *Avodah* during the Musaf service of Yom Kippur, referring to the *avodah*, the sacrificial offerings made on the tenth day of the seventh month, on Yom Kippur. The High Priest of Israel would take two goats, one of which would be sacrificed within the Temple precincts, and with the other, the High Priest “would lay their hands on its head,”

וְסָמַךְ אֶת יָדָיו עַל רֹאשׁ הַשְּׂעִיר הַחַיִּי

וְהִתְוַדָּה עָלָיו אֶת כָּל-עֲוֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת-כָּל-פְּשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכָל-חַטָּאתָם

and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins,

וְנָתַן אֹתָם עַל-רֹאשׁ הַשְּׂעִיר וְשָׁלַח בְּיַד-אִישׁ עֵתִי הַמְדַבֵּר:

putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated person.¹

The collective sins of the Israelites would be placed upon this other goat, and sent off, carrying with it all our sins. All our wrongdoings, both intentional and unintentional, all that we regret, would all be forgiven, the slate wiped clean, as long as the High Priest fulfilled their duties. The

¹ Leviticus 16:21.

Torah's approach to forgiveness for sin is ritualized, streamlined, almost magical. It is almost too easy. All of the responsibility rests on the shoulders of the High Priest, and with this unfortunate goat-full-of-sins. Individually, we shoulder none of the burden. And when the deed is done, our sins are forgiven, and we just move on with our lives.

But *teshuvah*, real repentance, takes a lot more than that. The Rambam writes in his Mishneh Torah that, in the absence of the Temple in Jerusalem and the ancient sacrificial service that took place there, *teshuvah* works differently today. For sins between a person and God, today's rituals of Yom Kippur are efficacious. But for sins that we commit against one another, between human beings, God cannot grant us atonement until we make restitution with the person whom we have wronged and satisfied them by asking for forgiveness, **אִינוּ נִמְחָל** **וְיִרְצָהוּ** **לֹא לְעוֹלָם עַד שְׂיִתֵּן לְחַבְרוֹ מֵה שֶׁהוּא חָיָב לוֹ וְיִרְצָהוּ**.² It is not enough only to make restitution. It is not enough for them to say "I forgive you." Both conditions must be met in order to attain true *teshuvah*, real repentance.

And this brings me, of course, to the momentous event of this past week, when former police officer Derek Chauvin was found guilty of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder, and second-degree manslaughter, in the killing of George Floyd. Across the country, and around the world, seekers of truth and justice breathed a sigh of relief and celebrated the fact that in this particular instance the judicial system worked; justice was done. The Jewish Theological Seminary's statement on the trial marks the significance of this moment: "(1) fellow citizens—strangers—who, with their voices and cameras heeded the biblical exhortation, "Do not stand idly by the blood of your fellow human being"; (2) police

² Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Teshuvah 2:9.

officers who stood for the integrity and values of their badges and oaths by testifying to the unacceptability of the conduct that killed George Floyd; and (3) prosecutors who worked tirelessly within the law to produce a just conclusion.”

There will yet be much written about this case, the series of events that Floyd’s murder sparked, and the manner in which this case sets a precedent for holding police accountable for the excessive use of force. But it would be all too easy to look at this particular trial and use it like the High Priest used the goat on Yom Kippur—we might imagine that this trial held the collective wrongdoings of all moments of police brutality against people of color, that this trial represented all of that which it sparked us to consider racism, inherent biases, and the ways in which they are manifest in our institutions. It would be too easy to think about the trial as the goat-full-of-sins being sent off to the wilderness. It would be all too easy to just breathe a sigh of relief, imagining that the sins are gone, the work is done, the slate is wiped clean. But that is simply not the case here. The trial holds one particular person accountable for one violent act committed against one person of color. The trial cannot be treated as the biblical scapegoat. We cannot just move on, telling ourselves that the work is done. Justice served in one case is not justice served in all. Not all guilty parties have been brought to justice. Not all sins are forgiven. There is much work to do, for us as individuals, as communities, and as a country, if we are to reach real repentance, true *teshuvah*.

What happened this week was necessary, but insufficient, in the fight against racism. Holding a former police officer accountable is a moment of justice, but it is not a moment of *teshuvah* or repentance. Chauvin will have to do that work on his own. In our Jewish system of *teshuvah*, being held accountable does not a penitent make you. Rather, *teshuvah* is the result

of a process which includes both restitution and obtaining forgiveness from the wronged party. That is deeply complicated in a case like this one, where restitution is impossible and obtaining forgiveness is only possible from those secondarily injured. Chauvin will have time to consider whether and how he seeks repentance. The question that remains for us is whether and how we will continue in our pursuit of righteousness, in our work to realize the unfulfilled aspirational dream of all Americans to live in a country that protects our inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

For people of color, for those who seek justice, this weekend is a weekend of calm. Like the goat-full-of-sins being sent off into the wilderness, all can breathe a sigh of relief. The work that was done to bring about this result should be honored and recognized for what it was: a moment of justice. But justice is not *teshuvah*; it is not repentance. The work is still incomplete. A weekend of calm cannot lead to a week of complacency. There is still much work to be done.

There are different ways to be a part of this work. Some are taking an active role in our SEA Change effort, investing time in studying, learning, and working towards building partnerships with other values-based organizations in our area to make Montgomery County a more equitable place to live, work, and thrive. Others are reaching out to neighbors, building relationships, and trying to listen more, talk less, and truly hear the stories of the other, including the ones that are painful and difficult.

On Thursday I participated in a call for community faith leaders. On that call, Rev. Stacey Cole Wilson of the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church called upon us all to “stretch in our capacity to love.” I am not a policy wonk. I am not a lobbyist. I am a rabbi. I am a Jew. I am an American. And it is true, that all of us, myself included, can learn to

stretch in our capacity to love. I am trying to understand the pain and suffering of my fellow Americans who are also people of color. In this moment, I am trying to do more listening, and more learning. Neither you nor I are individually responsible for the collective wrongdoings of a society still hindered by racism. We are not the High Priest of Israel, encumbered with the task of placing everyone's sins on some hopeless scapegoat and sending it off into the abyss of the wilderness. But we are participants in this society, we are members of this community, and we are thus obligated to work towards building coalitions founded on trust and compassion in pursuit of a better life for all our fellow Americans. Heschel said it years ago, and it still rings true today: "Some are guilty, but all are responsible." *Teshuvah* is a process, and the work is not yet done. I wish you all strength, hope, and resilience in your efforts as we move forward together. Shabbat shalom.