

Sermon  
Ki Tissa & Shabbat Parah  
ח"י אדר תש"פ / March 14, 2020  
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I want to acknowledge the difficult reality of this moment. I am here in a sanctuary that, on a typical Shabbat morning, would have nearly 500 people in attendance. Instead, we have here in the room a small number of congregants, and the family and friends of our bat mitzvah, to whom we are deeply grateful for their commitment to be here for Madelyn to celebrate this moment for her. She has worked for years to reach this milestone, and we are dedicated to ensuring that we honor her on this special day. Mazel tov to Madelyn, to her family and friends, and thank you all for being here with us today.

For our community, for our country, for everyone around the world, this is uncharted territory. When have you heard a rabbi telling their congregants to stay home from shul? When have we instructed people *not* to embrace one another, *not* to shake hands, *not* to sit side-by-side? Typically, we clergy expend significant energies to encourage people to do just the opposite—get closer, demonstrate affection, sit up front and sit together! We are doing things differently not only out of abundant caution and in an effort to protect the wellbeing of each individual in our community, we are doing things differently because, as my teacher, Rabbi Robbie Harris, recently wrote, “If the NBA is canceling basketball games, out of its concern for the sanctity of human life, then how much the more so should we follow suit for the purpose of gathering in worship.” *Pikuach nefesh*, the saving of a human life, is a principle of Jewish law, which commands us, obligates us, to make every effort to protect human life, even if it comes as the expense of another value, including gathering for communal prayer and Torah study.

We are all being told to follow principles of “social distancing,” which is really a euphemism for maintaining physical distance from other people, even if they (and you) appear to be healthy. This means that we will spend significant time apart from one another. This means that we will “meet” virtually on Zoom and other platforms that allow for online gatherings. This means that we will have to dramatically adjust our daily routines and our schedules. Living through this moment can be scary, it can be strange, it can be uncomfortable, and it can be filled with anxiety. If you are feeling any of these emotions, if you are noticing these things, then I want to validate those emotions and feelings. I’m with you. I get it. I understand. I’m living through it with you too.

As a rabbi, I cannot offer any medical advice other than what I have personally heard from qualified scientists and physicians. As a rabbi, I cannot offer my perspective on the policies of our local, state, or federal governments. As a rabbi, I can and *will* do what rabbis do—I will be here to offer strength and comfort, I will be here to share the wisdom of our sacred tradition through online classes and written materials, and I will be here to support each and every one of you during this difficult and trying time. My message to you all this morning, those who are physically here in this room, those who are watching online, and those who are listening in on the phone, my message to you all is that we must remember that this significant and inconvenient disruption to our lives is temporary, it is a state of being for the present moment, and that we will, God willing, return to our normal lives once again. Unsurprisingly, the special Torah portion that we read this Shabbat, Parshat Parah, teaches this same message.

Immediately after Purim, the holiday celebrating the salvation of the Jews of ancient Persia by Mordechai and Esther, we begin preparing for the next holiday: Passover. In ancient

times, Jews from all over Israel and even those who lived beyond its borders were obligated to appear at the Jerusalem Temple with a offering on each of the three pilgrimage festivals.

Passover was unique, however, in that one had the additional obligation to eat from the *korban pesach*, the special paschal offering, a one-year old lamb or goat. In order to participate in the consumption of the paschal offering, one had to be in a state of ritual purity, *taharah*. To heal someone of minor cases of ritual impurity, one might have to immerse in the waters of a *mikveh*, a bath designed by Jewish law for ritual immersion. If one had more severe forms of ritual impurity, then one might need to be purified through the ritual of the *parah adumah*, the red heifer. That ritual is the content of Numbers 19, which is the special *maftir* portion that was read a few moments ago. It was a reminder to the ancient Israelites that in these weeks leading up to Passover, they must ritually purify themselves and thereby prepare themselves for full participation in the rituals of the festival.

Truthfully, today, Judaism is less concerned with purity and impurity, because being impure does not preclude an individual from most activities of daily living or of Jewish life. And just to be clear, pure, *tahor*, does not mean clean and impure, *tamei*, does not mean unclean in the way that we understand cleanliness and hygiene. Rather, they are states of being that are used to describe human beings, foodstuffs, and objects. Ritual impurity has various levels of severity from the most severe, impurity contracted from a human corpse, to the more benign, impurity from consuming non-kosher meat. Practically, being in a state of ritual impurity today, with a few notable exceptions, does not restrict one from participation in Jewish life. Furthermore, there is nothing objectively wrong or bad about being in a state of ritual impurity. One does not necessarily become impure by nature of sin, and those who happen to come into

a state of ritual impurity may actually do so in the process of doing *mitzvot*, good deeds. For example, the burial of a human corpse is a *mitzvah*, something that we are obligated to do as a way of bringing honor and respect to the deceased. Nevertheless, those who participate and come into direct contact with the body are deemed impure. Ritual impurity is not about wrongdoing or sin. It is a temporary state of being, and one for which there is a mechanism to correct, and allow for full participation in society once again. That mechanism is the *parah adumah*, the red heifer.

Numbers 19 describes the ritual in intricate detail. A perfectly red heifer, without blemish, is to be slaughtered by a priest of Israel outside of the area of settlement. The blood is sprinkled toward the Tent of Meeting, and the entire body of the heifer is then burned to ash, along with cedar wood and other ingredients. The ashes are set aside for safekeeping. In the event that an individual comes into contact with a human corpse, they are then sprinkled with water that had been mixed with the ashes of the red heifer on the third and seventh days of their impurity. When this is done, the individual becomes pure once again, and is able to fully participate in all aspects of Jewish life. But in their state of impurity, they must be careful about where they go, what they touch, and with whom they come into contact. They became this way through no wrongdoing, no fault of their own. They rely upon the community and the leadership to help them become pure once again, and we the community rely upon them to maintain safe distances until the ritual is complete. In the meantime, we all do our part to take care of each other, to treat each other with kindness and compassion, and to remind each other that this too shall pass.

Today, we too are choosing to distance ourselves physically from others, not because we are infected with the virus, but because we wish to do all that we can to prohibit its spread and thereby protect the lives of others. Yes, it means being isolated or distanced from each other from some time. Yes, it means that we must choose to limit our participation in gatherings and activities that we would otherwise not miss. So, too, with the ancient Israelites. Those who were in a state of impurity before Passover had no choice but to step back, to isolate themselves, to keep a distance from others not only for their own healing but also for the prevention of the spread of that impurity. And they were not impure because they did anything wrong or sinful! They were impure because they did something right, because they cared for other human beings and for their dignity in the most unfortunate and difficult times of life. In other words, they understood that the temporary inconvenience was necessary. They refused to allow that temporary inconvenience to become their sustained reality. It did not become a way of life to disengage from communal gatherings and step away from participation in societal life. Impurity was a temporary state of being, and going through the requisite rituals would eventually bring one back to the preferred state of being, purity and full participation.

This is the way that I am choosing to understand the situation in which we find ourselves today. It is unfortunate—we have to keep away from one another, we have to cancel programs and events that a lot of people worked very hard to make happen, we have to restrict our interactions in a way that many of us find unnatural and even alienating. But the situation is temporary. This is not a new reality—it is a temporary state of being. If we comply with what is being asked of us, if we do what is best not just for ourselves but for the wellbeing of the community, the country, and the world, then we will, God-willing find ourselves on the other

side of this, back in our preferred state of being, back in a time and place where we gather in-person instead of online, where we sit side-by-side instead of seats apart, when we embrace, shake hands, and demonstrate our consensual affection for one another with more than just words and nods of the head.

I look forward to that time. I cannot tell you when it will be. I do not know when this will all end, but I know that it will. I know that when we are cleared, when we are told that it is safe to gather once again, when we are given permission to participate fully once again, *that* will be a beautiful day. It will be a day filled with joy and celebration. It will be a day when we give thanks for our health and the health of others. It will be a day when we cry tears of joy and relief. And that day will come if we do what we must.

In the meantime, please remember that I am here for you, that all of our clergy are here for you. We are a community that is not diminished by temporary crisis. This is a time when we will show how strong we truly are, how kind and compassionate we are, and how fortunate we are to have one another, whether it is by email, by phone, or by Zoom. So, if you need us, call us. If you sense that someone else is lonely, reach out to them. Together, we will use this time to prepare: to prepare for healing, to prepare for Passover, to prepare for our redemption. Shabbat shalom.