



# Temple Beth-El

Ithaca New York est 1924

Parshiyot Acharei Mot / Kedoshim – April 23, 2021 – 11 Iyyar, 5781

Dear TBE Family and Friends,

Traditionally in rabbinic parlance, specific dates are identified by referencing the Hebrew year and the Torah portion read in the week during which they fall. Thus, a *ketubah* (wedding contract) might state that a wedding took place “on the first day of *Lekh Lekh* in the year 5765”. According to this system of nomenclature, the events of this week would be referenced as having transpired *Acharei Mot* (literally, “after the death”).

One can think of few more apt ways to capture the spirit of this week – or of the past 48 weeks (since George Floyd’s death), or the past the past nine years (since the death of Trayvon Martin, whose killing by police sparked the Black Lives Matter movement) than *acharei mot*. After the death – or more accurately, the deaths – of not one but scores of unarmed black men (and, occasionally, women) at the hands of the police, deaths captured in video and then witnessed in unending replays by millions of viewers throughout this country and around the world, after these violent deaths precipitated (when there was a clear precipitating factor) by transgressions that seemed little more than a public nuisance, and certainly bore no resemblance to a capital crime, after these deaths, how could we be the same?

Shockingly, perhaps, the Torah portion *Acharei Mot* does not actually deal with death. It alludes only in passing to the deaths of Aaron’s two sons, Nadav and Avihu. Rather the portion is, for the most part, an account of the ancient purification rites associated with Yom Kippur. In other words, it is the story of how a society that comes to recognize that it is badly flawed and in need of healing and repair takes steps to build back better, how they reconcile themselves with one another and with God.

In ancient times, the toolkit for addressing such an existential failure was relatively straightforward and, in our eyes, perhaps, primitive: a confession by the nation’s leaders is followed by the designation of a scapegoat, which is then taken



# Temple Beth-El

Ithaca New York est 1924

to the borders of their civilization and banished, ostensible taking with it the sins of the people. What a neat solution to a society's collective guilt!

But in the years since such Temple rites have fallen by the wayside, there has been a realization that true atonement and, more significantly, true *teshuva* ("return to a state of internal wholeness and one-ness with our Source and our sense of purpose") cannot be achieved by appointing spokespersons to effect rituals of healing on our behalf. Our guilt cannot be excised simply by laying the blame on others. Indeed, no singular act of condemnation or pledge of reconciliation can right the habits and ways of thinking and action that make certain patterns of wrongdoing all but inevitable at a societal, if not an individual, level. These changes require intense and prolonged efforts to right them and that work is only just beginning in the area of racial justice in America.

*Acharei mot.* As we begin to move beyond the acute shock, pain, disorientation and outrage brought on by George Floyd's murder – as Eric Chavín's crime is now acknowledged to have been – what are the avenues available to us to meaningfully address the deep flaws that have been uncovered in our society more broadly?

Moreover, how do we through our own actions make this a week, in which we realize the message of both the Torah portions that will be read this Shabbat (*Acharei Mot* and *Kedoshim* – "holy vessels"): How do we walk forward out of the darkness of this death to build structures that allow us to access holiness in our lives and in our world?

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Rachel Safman