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ASBI Congregation
Parashat Acharei Mot - Kedoshim

In This Way Shall He Enter the Sanctuary

What if there were only one shul in the world? Some questions would become easy to answer.

“Where are you going to make the bris?”

“There’s one shul in the world!”

“Where will you be for Pesach?”

“There’s only one shul in the world!”

“Where will you celebrate your daughter’s bat mitzvah?”

“There’s one shul in the world.”

How would you prepare to visit? How would you act while you were there? How often would you visit and when would you decide? Although these questions are hypothetical for us, they were once quite relevant. In the times of the *Beit HaMikdash* there was only one shul in the world. There was only one place that was sacred by virtue of its dedication to the service of God. Preparing to enter that space and appropriate behavior while there occupies dozens of mitzvot and page after page of Talmudic discussion and halakhic debate.

Sara shared with me that she recently used this hypothetical-but-once-very-practical question as a way to introduce a group of adult students to the concept of *Tumah v'Tabarab* - the Torah’s system of purity regulations that governed access to the Temple and access to sacred foods such as tithes and sacrifices such as the *korban Pesach*. Verse after verse in the Torah, including dozens in the section of Vayikra we are reading this month define certain activities, and items, and bodily functions as “*tameh*” or impure. And dozens of verses describe the ways in which different types of *tumah*, impurity, can be overcome through purification processes. These laws and their details and the details of their details comprise *Seder Tabarot*, fully one sixth of the Oral Torah as it was organized and codified in the Mishnah.

There are two fundamental ways to conceive of the system of *tumah v'tabarab*. One way is to identify a religious message or an ethical principle that animates the Torah’s classification of the physical world into pure and impure realms. Some have suggested that *tumah* is a manifestation of the Torah’s celebration of life. Everything that becomes associated with death, even the death that is implicit in every childbirth, renders someone temporarily *tameh* so that death and reminders of death are permanently separated from the realm of the sacred. If our religion is to celebrate life and to promote life, then preparing to encounter a sacred space requires removing oneself from the spiritual taint of an encounter with death.

Others, most famously Rambam, have argued that there is no moral valence to *tumah* whatsoever. (Rambam’s t-shirt would have “Tumah Happens” printed in large letters across the front). The Torah arbitrarily declared numerous natural phenomenon and bodily functions as causes of *tumah* for the purpose of making sure that no person could enter the *mikdash*, no individual could go into the only sacred spot on Earth, without days or even weeks of preparations. Anyplace someone can enter whenever he wishes, any activity someone can do whenever she desires, will become casual and common and the *mikdash* is meant to be a place of reverence and intimacy.

Rashi alludes to this dynamic in one of his first comments on *Parashat Acharei Mot* when he explains that even Aharon, the first and greatest *Kohen Gadol*, was told not to enter the innermost chamber of the *mikdash* on a

whim, but must prepare to do so with an elaborate ceremony. In Rashi's words, “**וּלְפִי שְׂגָלוּי שְׂכִינְתֵי שָׁמַיִם**, **יִזְהַר שְׂלֵא יִרְגִיל לְבֵא**”, since God's presence rests within the *mikdash*, you should not enter frequently. Sacred space must be treated with reverence so that we can cultivate an intimate relationship with God.

Today there are more than just one place to pray. Every shul is a *mikdash me'at* a miniature sanctuary and even though the rules of *tumah* and *tabarab* do not govern access to a shul, (maybe *because* the rules of *tumah* and *tabarab* do not restrict access to shul), we struggle to preserve reverence for this sacred space and to enable our time spent in prayer to be a true moment of intimacy with God.

Rambam, the same Rambam who conceived of *tumah v'tabarab* as a method to force preparation for the encounter with holiness, called for preparation for prayer as well.

כִּיצַד הִיא הַכּוֹנֵה. שְׂיִפְנֶה אֶת לְבוּ מִכָּל הַמַּחְשְׁבוֹת וְיִרְאֶה עֲצָמוּ כְּאִלוּ הוּא עוֹמֵד לְפָנֵי הַשְּׂכִינָה. לְפִיכֶךָ צְרִיךְ לִישֵׁב מֵעַט קֹדֶם הַתְּפִלָּה כְּדִי לְכוּן אֶת לְבוּ וְאַחֵר כֶּךָ יִתְפַּלֵּל בְּנֶחֱת וּבְתַחֲנוּנִים וְלֹא יַעֲשֶׂה תְּפִלָּתוֹ כְּמִי שֶׁהִיא נוֹשֵׂא מִשְׂאוֹי וּמִשְׁלִיכוֹ וְהוֹלֵךְ לוֹ. לְפִיכֶךָ צְרִיךְ לִישֵׁב מֵעַט אַחֵר הַתְּפִלָּה וְאַחֵר כֶּךָ יִפְטֹר. חֻסְדִּים הָרַשׁוּנִים הֵיוּ שׁוֹהֵיוּ שְׂעָה אַחַת קֹדֶם תְּפִלָּה וְשְׂעָה אַחַת לְאַחֵר תְּפִלָּה וּמְאַרְיִין בְּתְּפִלָּה שְׂעָה

What is to be understood by concentration of the mind? The mind should be freed from all extraneous thoughts and the one who prays should realize that one is standing before the Divine Presence. One should therefore sit awhile before beginning to pray, so as to concentrate the mind, and then pray in gentle tones, beseechingly, and not regard the service as a burden which carries and which will be cast off as one proceeds on the way. One should, accordingly, also sit awhile, after concluding the prayers, and then leave. The ancient saints were wont to pause and meditate one hour before the service, one hour after the service and take one hour in its recital.

The *kavanah*, concentration and mindfulness of prayer require time and effort. The reward for that effort is to experience standing in intimate proximity to the Divine Presence. Just as Rashi wrote, about the Temple **לְפִי לְבֵא** - since God's presence is revealed there, do not enter in a casual way, Rambam expands to all of our prayers. In order for God's presence to be felt, we must overcome casualness.

One of the most demoralizing tasks that I regularly perform as the rabbi of Anshe Sholom is sending text messages when there is no minyan during the week. This is a doubly demoralizing task. First, when only seven or eight men show up to pray together out of a community that can fill this room, I have the sensation that something which I value and prioritize in my own religious life, *tefilah b'tzibbur*, communal prayer, is not widely shared among our community. And second, after sending five or ten or fifteen text messages, when we finally are able to pray, I then get responses buzzing in my phone for the next twenty minutes. I should put the phone aside, but after sending fifteen texts, I usually put the phone in my pocket where it distracts me for the next thirty five minutes.

I do appreciate when people respond to my texts. It is courteous and I particularly appreciate when people invite me to ask them to come some other day even if they cannot be available at that precise time. But, a buzzing phone in my pocket makes it so much harder to concentrate.

This challenge was brought to my attention from two polar opposite places on the Jewish religious spectrum in recent months. We were given several hundred “cellphone sleeping bags” from the post-denominational liberal-jewish organization “Reboot Judaism” which is trying to reinvent Jewish connections for young unaffiliated Jews. The cellphone sleeping bags were part of an annual campaign to designate one Shabbat each year as a time without digital distractions. This rebranding of Shabbat for a new generation focused, not on one of the classic halakhic categories of labor like plowing or threshing, or weaving, but on the devices

that epitomize a contemporary lifestyle in which work and leisure bleed into one another and it can be impossible to immerse ourselves into sacred times and sacred places because of our electronic tethers to our mundane lives.

There are cellphone sleeping bags in shul. Feel free to use them for Shabbat or Yom Tov or any other occasion when you wish to set aside your phone.

And, at the same time as I learned about Reboot Judaism's phone campaign, I received an annual phone call from an Orthodox activist from Los Angeles requesting that I once again post a flyer in the shul to advertise a campaign that he has spearheaded to encourage Jews to leave phones outside of shul when we pray with a congregation during the week. The sincerity of this man is uncommon. (He is the only person who routinely speak to me in the third person, a common form of respect among some segments of Orthodoxy, which is not something I expect, or even enjoy, but is certainly something that makes our interactions different). He believes that so many of the troubles that afflict our world and our community are the result of Jews not praying in an appropriate or respectful fashion and in particular he thinks that bringing cellphones into shul during the week has a pernicious impact on our ability to pray and therefore on our ability to communicate with God and therefore he believes it has a negative impact upon the entire world.

I cannot say that I endorse his theology or each step of his thinking, but I find it so very inspiring to meet someone who is convinced that the world can be transformed if we all prayed a little better. At his request, there is a poster on the shul bulletin board with a hotline you can call to hear recorded messages of great rabbis encouraging phone-free prayer environments.

I'd like to conclude with two positive steps we can take to enhance our experience when we pray as a community. *Tefillah b'Tzibbur*, communal prayer is, according to the Talmud, an elevated and superior way to fulfill the mitzvah of prayer. When we recite our private amidah, standing amidst a congregation, our community praying somehow accomplishes something greater than the sum of its parts. And if we speak more about the mitzvah of *tefilah b'tzibbur* and less about "making a minyan," all of us can be better off.

A minyan for prayer is defined in *halakhab* as ten men. That excludes women who are discouraged from attending shul during the week by our emphasis on "making a minyan." Why come to shul at all if you can never "make the minyan?" But a focus on "making a minyan" also excludes the eleventh man who walks into the room, or the twentieth man. Counter-intuitively, this creates an incentive feedback loop where coming to minyan during the week and finding a packed *beit midrash* with 15 or 20 men there can serve as a discouragement for future attendance. If my motivation for coming to shul is to "make the minyan" then I don't want to be the fifteenth man to walk into the room. I'd rather have a second cup of coffee. Famously the Israeli town of Elazar in Gush Etzion had a reliable daily minyan when only ten men lived in the community, but when the eleventh family moved in, it was months before they had a reliable minyan.

"Making a minyan" also sounds like the attitude that Rambam condemned. It is a burden to carry and then dispose of as quickly as possible. I have shared before that my teacher Rav Aharon Lichtenstein has written that none of the criticisms of Modern Orthodoxy are as devastating as the experience of trying to pray with a certain infamous four-minute rushed Mincha minyan in a certain university library.

Tefilah b'Tzibbur is a spiritual opportunity that everyone, men and women, can use to enhance their relationship with God. It is an enhancement to the mitzvah of daily prayer that the third woman or the seventeenth man to walk into shul can equally partake, and it can train us to think of prayer as an opportunity for intimacy rather than a burden.

Our community's children are also part of the *tzibbur* and they also represent an opportunity and not a burden. When our children come back to shul from groups on Shabbat morning, take advantage of those minutes that we can spend with them to teach them about the reverence that should be felt in this space.

Over the years some have complained to me about children's behavior in shul. I have to confess that I have almost never noticed children misbehaving in shul. I have noticed parental behavior that could be redirected. When children return to shul from groups we have just a few minutes with them to share our love for God and our appreciation for *tefilah*. Sing Ein Keloheinu with enthusiasm and joy while your child, or a friend's child sits next to you and learns how joyful it is to sing praises to God together with a community. Stand respectfully and listen to mourner's kaddish so that the next generation will understand the importance of reciting kaddish themselves when their turn comes to mourn.

Rambam concludes his halakhic treatment of the vast array of the laws of *tumah* and *tabarah* by teaching that they function as a giant metaphor for spiritual transformations.

In the final *halakhah* in the final chapter of Rambam's *Sefer Taharah*, the book of *Mishneh Torah* devoted to purity laws, Rambam concludes:

ברור וגלוי שהטמאות והטהרות גזרות הכתוב הן. ואינו מדברים שדעתו של אדם מכרעתו. והרי הן מכלל החקים. וכן הטבילה מן הטמאות מכלל החקים הוא שאין הטמאה טיט או צואה שתעבר במים אלא גזרת הכתוב היא והדבר תלוי בכונת הלב. ולפיכך אמרו חכמים טבל ולא החזק כאלו לא טבל. ואף על פי כן רמז יש בדבר כשם שהמכוון לבו לטהר כיון שטבל טהור ואף על פי שלא נתחדש בגופו דבר כך המכוון לבו לטהר נפשו מטמאות הנפשות שהן מחשבות האון ודעות הרעות. כיון שהסכים בלבו לפרש מאותן העצות והביא נפשו במי הדעת טהור. הרי הוא אומר (יחזקאל לו כה) "זרקתי עליכם מים טהורים וטהרתם מכל טמאותיכם ומכל גלוליכם אטהר אתכם". השם ברחמי הרבים מכל חטא עון ואשמה יטהרנו אמן:

It is obviously clear that the laws concerning defilements and purities are biblical decrees, and not things which the human mind can determine; they are classified as divine statutes. So too, immersion as a means of ridding oneself from defilement is included among the divine statutes. Defilement is not mud or filth to be removed with water, but is a matter of biblical decree; it depends on the heart's intent... Nevertheless, there is some ethical allusion to this: just as one who sets his mind on becoming clean becomes clean as soon as he has immersed himself, even though nothing new is produced in his physical being, so one who sets his mind on purifying himself from all the spiritual defilements, namely wrongful thoughts and evil traits, becomes clean as soon as he made up his mind to abstain from those notions, and brought his soul into the waters of reason...

Let us resolve to purify our traits and to prepare our thoughts for prayer, every single one is a unique and irreplaceable opportunity for intimacy with God.