

Rabbi Noah Arnow  
Kol Rinah  
Parashat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim  
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1-800-273-talk. That's the national suicide prevention hotline. You can call anytime. They'll answer the phone. I'll be mentioning that phone # a few more times, so you'll remember it.

Suicide has come to the forefront of our attentions and conversations because of a show on Netflix, based on a book of the same name, called *Thirteen Reasons Why*. It's controversial, and has been accused of glamorizing teen suicide. I haven't watched the series, but I did read the book, and what we discover in the book is that a girl's suicide is the result, to some extent, of thirteen people around her—they are the thirteen reasons why, but also very much about the guilt and loneliness she lives with, that bring her to, and over this precipice. It's a powerful read. The book, and I assume, the series, don't pay enough attention to depression as the fundamental cause of a suicide though, of depression being a serious, potentially fatal illness.

Today after Kiddush, we'll be having a presentation of a play by an organization called "Slaying Dragons," founded by our member Helene Meyer, and presented by Slaying Dragon's Youth Actor's Theatre. The piece presented is entitled, "Losing Hope: Is suicide really the only answer to a teenager's cry for help?"

This is not fun stuff. But it's real, and it's important. Please stay for it, if you're able. It's important to support these young people who have been rehearsing this piece for months now.

It's important because we don't talk about depression, or suicide much. And when we don't talk about things, it makes it so we can't talk about things.

And it's important to learn more, so that we can recognize and help those who may be on the precipice themselves.

My talking about suicide this morning, and having this presentation later this morning, I hope, will enable us to talk a little more about this taboo topic. But this is just an opening. It's not everything we need to know, or say, or do. But it's intended just to open the door. We have members of this congregation who have lost family members to suicide. We have members of this congregation who have attempted suicide. And there may be people here today thinking about suicide.

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You don't really know what someone else is thinking. That's one of the messages of *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Unless and until someone tells you, you can't know what someone is thinking. But we can wonder, and be attentive. And when someone takes their life, or even dies in anything other than a very natural way, we are left with many questions.

I want to turn our focus to our Torah portion.

Some of the only narrative pieces in Leviticus are about death—the death of Aaron's two sons.

What were Nadav and Avihu thinking about when back in Parashat Shemini, in Leviticus chapter 10, they offered strange fire before God? Did they anticipate the result would be fire coming out and consuming them? Were they sacrificing themselves to God? Or maybe they were punished for doing something they shouldn't. But did they know that—was this intentional on their behalf?

And what about Aaron? He is famously silent after they die. What emotions is he keeping inside himself? In addition to tremendous grief, does he also feel guilt, guilt at not having stopped them, or seen what was happening, or warned them, or been there, or that they were taken and not him?

And then, fast forward to this week's parasha. Why mention at the beginning of this parasha, Acharei Mot, that it occurred after the death of Aaron's two sons? If the Torah is a chronological narrative, with things happening in order, then anything after Leviticus 10 is automatically after. Including Leviticus 16. Yet, we are reminded here that God spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons, when they came close to God and died, and God said to Moses, speak to Aaron, your brother, and then it goes on to give the rules and instructions for Aaron, the high priest, for Yom Kippur.

But why mention it here? Let's look a little further at what comes immediately after. God instructs that Aaron should take a bull for a sin offering, and various other animals for offerings, and first bring forward the bull for the sin offering, and atone for himself and for his household. That's first.

What could Aaron need to atone for? And what could Aaron's household need to atone for? Maybe nothing. Maybe the golden calf, although it seems like he already was forgiven for that back at the beginning of Shemini, before his sons die. Or maybe Aaron and his household do bear some responsibility for Nadav and Avihu's death. And most likely—they're not really responsible, but they cannot help but feel guilty anyway, they cannot help but feel like they could and should have done more.

So this sin offering is for Aaron, and for his family. Supporting this reading is that this whole ritual is not initially described as being what happens on Yom Kippur. It's only at the end of the chapter that that detail is mentioned. As Aaron is hearing about this, he is being told, in a sense, that he has an opportunity to seek forgiveness, to repent, to remove his guilt, real or imagined, not because it's Yom Kippur, but because he needs this opportunity.

Maybe the Torah mentions the death of Aaron's two sons because they are all Aaron can think about, and maybe Aaron himself is thinking that he'd rather die than live. Immediately, he's given a way to deal with his guilt, and the reminder that he matters, that he has purpose, a role in the spiritual life of the Israelite people.

And Moses, in that verse, is referred to as his brother. That's unusual. We know they are brothers, but they are not regularly referred to as brothers. But in that moment, God is reminding Moses to be attentive to his brothers, Aaron, and reminding Aaron, if Aaron hears the command, that he has Moses, his brother, who cares about him. He's not alone.

Is this really what the text is about here? Probably not. But to me, the lesson is that whenever you even have an inkling that someone may not be ok, ask. Tell someone you're worried about them. Don't ignore it. If you're wrong, you've done little harm. And if you're right, you've saved someone's life.

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Shabbat shalom.