

**What Do We Do, After...?
Parashat Acharei Mot, 5779
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A fox was once boasting to a cat of its clever tricks and skills for escaping its enemies in times of trouble.

"I have a whole bag of tricks," he said, "which contains a hundred ways of escaping my enemies."

"I have only one," said the cat. "But I can generally manage with that."

Just at that moment they heard the cry of a pack of hounds coming towards them. Both animals knew that these were the howls of the village huntsmen's dogs, and neither wanted to be captured and taken away from their homes in the wild. And so, the cat, acting without hesitation, scampered up a tall tree and hid herself in the leafy boughs at the highest branches.

"This is my plan," said the cat. "What are you going to do?"

The fox thought first of one way, then of another, and while he was debating which plan would be the surest to succeed, the hounds came nearer and nearer, and at last the fox in his confusion was surrounded by the hounds. Soon, the huntsmen trailed after and captured the fox.

The cat, who had been looking on, said, "Better to act decisively and accomplish one success than to sit still and debate a hundred ways whose success cannot be relied upon."

Sometimes, when we are working our way through the narrative of the Torah, we lose our sense of time and place. If I were to ask you, as we are reading Parashat Acharei Mot, where it takes place within the timeline of Jewish history, I would wager that many of us would be less than certain. Yes, we have been brought out from Egypt and we passed through the spiritual heights of Sinai on our way to the Land of Canaan, but where and when are we in our epic forty-year journey? Year 1? Year 28?

It's easy to lose a sense of the flow of time because we focus on one set of events at a time. This parashah focuses on the rituals required of the High Priest, the rites performed on Yom Kippur, and the connection of the Jewish People with God's system of ethical laws, ritual precepts and mitzvot, but each of these are timeless in that they apply year after year.

The only signpost we have that gives us a sense of direction comes in the very opening lines of the parashah (Leviticus 16:1):

וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בָנָי אֶהֱרֹן בְּקִרְבָּתָם לַפְּנֵי־יְיָ וַיִּמָּתוּ:

God spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, who died when they drew too close to the presence of the Holy Blessed One.

What an odd marker of time. It tells us nothing of the day or month or year in which these events took place. For any of you who have read through nearly any section of Torah, usually descriptions are replete with agonizingly specific details: “In the first [month], on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening, you shall eat unleavened cakes, until the twenty first day of the month in the evening,” (Exodus 12:18) or “In the fourteenth year of the reign of Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked and captured all the fortified cities of Judah” (II Kings 18:13). These are all too common throughout the Torah.

So, how are we to understand the context of Acharei Mot? Instead of grounding us in the flow of time in the way we are used to, the Torah decides instead to ground us in a sense of experiential time, an understanding of the world around us not in the context of the days of the week or the months of the year, but in terms of the significant events that shape the perception of our lives.

Sadly, we are all too familiar with this type of time-keeping. To many of us, August 5, 2012 is a set of numbers. So is October 27 or March 15. The numbers, while accurate and informative, are devoid of meaning and depth. All numerical dates carry equal weight in the minds of people living each day.

But what if instead of numbers, I say Oak Creek? What if, in lieu of a calendar reference, I talk about Pittsburg or Christchurch or Sri Lanka? The resonance of these places lies not in their geographic proximity but in the emotional weight they have forever placed on our souls through the acts of violent hatred that occurred there.

This past week, we had to add Poway, and slightly later UNC Charlotte, to our list of locations where hate has claimed the lives of people who thought they had entered safe spaces. Much like the violent and unexpected deaths of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, rocked the entire Jewish People who had built a community together in the wilderness, these modern episodes of hate and violence have shaken our modern communities to their very core.

But this is not a parashah about the horrific nature of these episodes. This is about what we do after horrors beyond explaining shake our world. Just as Sefer Vayikra, the Book of Leviticus, tells us what happens after the deaths of Aaron's sons, we today want to know what to do after the terrifying violence to which we bear witness today. What do we do after Poway? What do we do after Sri Lanka or Christchurch or Oak Creek or UNC Charlotte or the Pulse Night Club or Las Vegas or Columbine or Sandy Hook? What do we do? **WHAT CAN WE DO?!**

וַיֹּאמֶר יי אֱלֹהֵי מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן אַחִיךָ וְאַל־יָבֹא בְּכָל־עֵת אֶל־הַקֹּדֶשׁ מִבַּיִת לַפְּרֹכֶת אֶל־פְּנֵי הַכַּפֹּרֶת
 בְּזָאת יָבֹא אֲהֲרֹן אֶל־הַקֹּדֶשׁ בְּפָר בֶּן־בָּקָר (ג) אֲשֶׁר עַל־הָאָרֶן וְלֹא יָמוּת כִּי בַעֲנֹן אֲרָאָה עַל־הַכַּפֹּרֶת:
 לַחֲטָאת וְאֵיל לְעֹלָה:

And God said to Moses: Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come at will into the Shrine behind the curtain, in front of the cover that is upon the ark, lest he die; for I appear in the cloud over the cover. (3) Thus only shall Aaron enter the Shrine: with a bull of the herd for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. (Leviticus 16:2-3)

After the death of Nadav and Avihu what are we told? On the surface, it might seem like God is instructing Moses to have Aaron just get back to work. Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, get back on the horse. But if we look a little deeper, there is much more than at first glance.

God is not telling Aaron to go back to life as it was before. Life can never be the same as it was before. Something fundamental has shifted in the entire way we look at the world and it cannot be the same the world we once knew.

And so God lays out a new path for Aaron, showing a new way for him to walk in the world. God sets new parameters for how Aaron, the primary example of holiness within this ancient community, might show his people the way forward. Bring offerings, bring praise, bring thanks, but also bring caution, bring purpose, bring a shining light with which your people might see a way forward. “Go back to your sacred work,” calls the Holy One, “but be more careful and purposeful with your words and deeds. For life has changed and your actions are

needed. YOUR actions. It can only be you, for if you choose to do nothing, then nothing good can ever come from this tragedy.”

Much like the fable of the fox and the cat showed that an intentional plan, executed swiftly at the opportune moment, can save a life, so too can sitting by scared and frozen by the dangers around us lead us to ruin. The cat acts, and is brought safely to higher ground. Aaron acts, and moves his people onward toward the Promised Land.

I cannot give words to the depths of sorrow I feel that our reality must now regularly encompass acts of violence and hate in places of worship, sacred spaces for learning, or they myriad of other places that used to be deemed safe from the perils of the world. I find it beyond my power to accurately convey how, even writing these words to deliver to this holy community tears a piece from my soul. No one should ever have to deal with events like these; no one should ever have to listen to a sermon like this. No one should ever have to wonder where is safe anymore or how to feel secure day to day.

Many of you know that the security has been heightened over the last 6 months. Your leadership here is first and foremost concerned for the safety of each and every person who sets foot into our sacred spaces. And we will continue

to work to find more ways to keep each of you safe while still maintaining our most deeply held values of radical welcoming and compassion toward others.

But keeping our doors locked can only do so much. In order to truly create safe spaces, we must act in order to create a world free from such violence. Now is not the time to hide our heads in fear and retreat from the world. This world needs each of us to not only call out hate and oppression when we see and experience it, but to build bridges with anyone, everyone, who is willing to talk with us and be our partners in creating a better world, a world when all can live in peace.

Throughout the Jewish sacred texts we hear calls to welcome, calls to believe in the sacred spark of the Divine within each person. It is our job to model that approach, to bring the same fire to building relationships that we do to decrying violence.

So, what am I really asking of you? Show up. When there is a rally to end gun violence, show up. When there is a candidate forum, show up and ask your representatives what they are doing to curb hate and violent right-wing extremism and hate of all kinds. Show up at your mayor's, alderman's, Congressperson's, governor's or President's office and present them with solutions to

these problems. Join with other groups creating solutions, and let them educate you on solutions that are already in the works.

Every thoughtful action you take, every passionate word you speak, every relationship you create is one more step on the road to a more just and peaceful world. No one will do it for us. If we wait, like the fox of the fable, we will get caught up and nothing will change.

What if Aaron had sat back, unable to move? What if he could not take the next step forward, and the Jewish people continued to wander, stumbling blindly and never reaching the Promised Land? What would that life look like? Would it look too much like our modern world, a world in which many talk, but few act for change, a world in which each violent episode rings out in our lives as a call to actions that are never taken, a cry for justice never sought, a dagger to the heart of our most deeply held values that we do nothing to dislodge.

The only way things ever change is if we change them. So if violence in our sacred spaces angers you, use that fire to address those leaders with their hands on the levers of power and keep it from happening ever again. If it makes you sad, go out and comfort those who mourn. If it shocks you and makes you numb, remind yourself of all of the beautiful things in life you will work to protect, and then take steps to do exactly that.

It is too late to say, “Never again.” It has happened again and again and again and again. Ours is the task of reshaping the world around us. The work is hard and the task seems unthinkable large. But as cultural anthropologist and activist Margaret Mead famously said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

The time for sorrow and mourning is may continue in our hearts and souls, but the time for action is long overdue. Talking about the injustice of these hate crimes is no longer nearly enough. Change must be pursued and I call on each of us here, to everyone who reads these words in the days and weeks ahead, to not only decry injustice but seek to create systems that enable more justice to flow through our world. No one needs to do everything, but everyone can do something.

I don't want to give this sermon ever again. I don't want to look over my notes to look for new ways to address this latest tragedy that feel so depressingly familiar. If you don't know what to do, ask. If I don't have the solution, I promise to walk with you while we find it together. Act, now, not when it is convenient, because it will never be. Let the small disruptions of acting now take the place of

the cataclysmic interruptions that each new tragedy forces in our lives, our communities, our hearts. Action, action, you must do.

Shabbat Shalom.