

The People of the Hour

This week we have another double Torah portion, *Acharei Mot-Kedoshim* (Leviticus 16:1- 20:27). Naturally, the combined readings are filled with inspiring sacred wisdom. Perhaps most significantly, we find in the 19th chapter one of the most important expressions in all of human civilization:

וְאַהֲבַת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי יי.

And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Each person can find personal meaning and relevance in this exalted teaching. It reflects all of our highest values: love, compassion, self-esteem, generosity, and on and on. Indeed, Rabbi Akiva taught that this is the essence of all of the 613 commandments:

וְאַהֲבַת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ: אָמַר רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא זֶה כָּלֵל גְּדוֹל בַּתּוֹרָה.

*“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Said Rabbi Akiva:
“This is the greatest principle in the Torah.”*

Loving your neighbor as yourself is at the heart of all the other commandments. And with this in mind, let's turn our attention to a rather obscure phrase that comes at the beginning of this week's reading and deals with purification and atonement rituals in preparation for Yom Kippur.

וְכִלָּה מִכִּפּוּר אֶת־הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְאֶת־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְאֶת־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְהִקְרִיב
אֶת־הַשְּׂעִיר הַחַי: וְסָמַךְ אֶהָרֶן אֶת־שְׁתֵּי יָדָיו [יָדָיו] עַל־רֹאשׁ הַשְּׂעִיר הַחַי
וְהִתְוֹדָה עָלָיו אֶת־כָּל־עֲוֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־כָּל־פְּשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכָל־חַטָּאתָם
וְנָתַן אֹתָם עַל־רֹאשׁ הַשְּׂעִיר וְשָׁלַח בְּיַד־אִישׁ עֵתִי הַמְדַבֵּר:

²⁰ When he has finished purifying the Shrine, the Tent of Meeting, and the altar, the live goat shall be brought forward. ²¹ Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated man [אִישׁ עֵתִי *ish 'iti*].

²² Thus the goat shall carry on it all their iniquities to an inaccessible region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.

The phrase *ish 'iti* is often translated as a “designated man” but the Hebrew word עֵתִי (*'iti*) indicates time. Robert Alter’s translation “man of the hour” seems to convey the sense of special purposefulness, a heroic deed taken in a timely manner to benefit the community.

Again, the mitzvah of “loving your neighbor as yourself” is very much at the heart of being a “man or woman of the hour,” a person who stands ready to carry out the difficult tasks that are vital for the welfare of the community.

It goes without saying that we are all much more aware of the many “people of the hour” who are putting their lives at risk to help us through this COVID-19 crisis. In fact, we are surrounded by heroes: doctors, nurses, chaplains, and staff in the hospitals, first responders of the police,

fire departments and emergency teams, the workers in the supermarkets, and the utilities and the countless vital services that we count on ----and far too often take for granted.

So, on this Shabbat let us take the exalted lessons of the Torah and realize that “loving your neighbor” is demonstrated all around us. Please be sure to give a wave, a friendly nod and a heartfelt “thank you” to the “men and women of the hour.”

Shabbat Shalom

Rick

Rabbi Rick Rheins