

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Acharei Mot - Kedoshim  
April 24, 2021 \*\*\* Iyar 12, 5781

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We welcome all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Acharei Mot – Kedoshim in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/2894/jewish/Acharei-Kedoshim-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2894/jewish/Acharei-Kedoshim-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

Following the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, G-d warns against unauthorized entry “into the holy.” Only one person, the kohen gadol (“high priest”), may—but once a year, on Yom Kippur—enter the innermost chamber in the Sanctuary to offer the sacred ketoret to G-d. Another feature of the Day of Atonement service is the casting of lots over two goats, to determine which should be offered to G-d and which should be dispatched to carry off the sins of Israel to the wilderness.

The Parshah of Acharei also warns against bringing korbanot (animal or meal offerings) anywhere but in the Holy Temple, forbids the consumption of blood, and details the laws prohibiting incest and other deviant sexual relations.

The Parshah of Kedoshim begins with the statement: “You shall be holy, for I, the L-rd your G-d, am holy.” This is followed by dozens of mitzvot (divine commandments) through which the Jew sanctifies him- or herself and relates to the holiness of G-d. These include: the prohibition against idolatry, the mitzvah of charity, the principle of equality before the law, Shabbat, sexual morality, honesty in business, honor and awe of one’s parents, and the sacredness of life.

Also in Kedoshim is the dictum which the great sage Rabbi Akiva called a cardinal principle of Torah, and of which Hillel said, “This is the entire Torah, the rest is commentary”—“Love your fellow as yourself.”

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Amos 9:7 -15

[https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/877057/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/877057/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

This week's *haftarah* foretells the exiles and punishments that will befall the Jews because they strayed after the ways of the heathens — behavior that this week's Torah reading proscribes.

The prophet Amos delivers G-d's message, reminding the people of G-d's kindness to them — taking them out of Egypt and singling them out as His chosen nation.

Nevertheless, because of their misdeeds, . G-d will destroy the Northern Kingdom of Israel; but will not completely destroy the house of Jacob. The Jews will be scattered amongst the nations, but eventually they will return to their land — on the day of the redemption. G-d will then reinstall the House of David to its former glory and there shall be peace and abundance upon the land.

The *haftorah* ends with G-d's promise: "And I will return the captivity of My people Israel, and they shall rebuild desolate cities and inhabit [them], and they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their produce. And I will plant them on their land, and they shall no longer be uprooted from upon their land, that I have given them, said the L-rd your G-d."

### **FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

[Sprints and Marathons \(Acharei Mot – Kedoshim 5781\) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks](https://rabbisacks.org/acharei-mot-kedoshim-5781/)  
<https://rabbisacks.org/acharei-mot-kedoshim-5781/>

It was a unique, unrepeatable moment of leadership at its highest height. For forty days Moses had been communing with God, receiving from Him the Law written on tablets of stone. Then God informed him that the people had just made a Golden Calf. He would have to destroy them. It was the worst crisis of the wilderness years, and it called for every one of Moses' gifts as a leader.

First, he prayed to God not to destroy the people. God agreed. Then he went down the mountain and saw the people cavorting around the Calf. Immediately, he smashed the tablets. He burned the Calf, mixed its ashes with water and made the people drink. Then he called for people to join him. The Levites heeded the call and carried out a bloody punishment in which three thousand people died. Then Moses went back up the mountain and prayed for forty days and nights. Then for a further forty days he stayed with God while a new set of tablets was engraved. Finally, he came down the mountain on the tenth of Tishri, carrying the new tablets with him as a visible sign that God's covenant with Israel remained.

This was an extraordinary show of leadership, at times bold and decisive, at others slow and persistent. Moses had to contend with both sides, inducing the Israelites to do teshuvah and God to exercise forgiveness. At that moment he was the greatest ever embodiment of the name Israel, meaning one who wrestles with God and with people and prevails.

The good news is: there once was a Moses. Because of him, the people survived. The bad news is: what happens when there is no Moses? The Torah itself says: "No other Prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deut. 34:10). What do you do in the absence of heroic leadership? That is the problem faced by every nation, corporation, community and family. It is easy to think, "What would Moses do?" But Moses did what he did because he was what he was. We are not Moses. That is why every human group that was once touched by greatness faces a problem of continuity. How does it avoid a slow decline?

The answer is given in this week's parsha. The day Moses descended the mountain with the second tablets was to be immortalised when its anniversary became the holiest of days, Yom Kippur. On this day, the drama of teshuvah and kapparah,

repentance and atonement, was to be repeated annually. This time, though, the key figure would not be Moses but Aaron, not the Prophet but the High Priest.

That is how you perpetuate a transformative event: by turning it into a ritual. Max Weber called this the routinisation of charisma.[1] A once-and-never-again moment becomes a once-and-ever-again ceremony. As James MacGregor Burns puts it in his classic work, *Leadership*: “The most lasting tangible act of leadership is the creation of an institution – a nation, a social movement, a political party, a bureaucracy – that continues to exert moral leadership and foster needed social change long after the creative leaders are gone.”[2]

There is a remarkable Midrash in which various Sages put forward their idea of *klal gadol ba-Torah*, “the great principle of the Torah.” Ben Azzai says it is the verse, “This is the book of the chronicles of man: On the day that God created man, He made him in the likeness of God” (Gen. 5:1). Ben Zoma says that there is a more embracing principle, “Listen, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Ben Nannas says there is a yet more embracing principle: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Ben Pazzi says we find a more embracing principle still: “The first sheep shall be offered in the morning, and the second sheep in the afternoon” (Exodus 29:39) – or, as we might say today, *Shacharit*, *Mincha* and *Maariv*. In a word: “routine”. The passage concludes: The law follows Ben Pazzi.[3]

The meaning of Ben Pazzi’s statement is clear: all the high ideals in the world – the human person as God’s image, belief in God’s unity, and the love of neighbours – count for little until they are turned into habits of action that become habits of the heart. We can all recall moments of insight or epiphany when we suddenly understood what life is about, what greatness is, and how we would like to live. A day, a week, or at most a year later the inspiration fades and becomes a distant memory and we are left as we were before, unchanged.

Judaism’s greatness is that it gave space to both Prophet and Priest, to inspirational figures on the one hand, and on the other, daily routines – the *halachah* – that take exalted visions and turn them into patterns of behaviour that reconfigure the brain and change how we feel and who we are.

One of the most unusual passages I have ever read about Judaism written by a non-Jew occurs in William Rees-Mogg’s book on macro-economics, *The Reigning Error*.<sup>[4]</sup> Rees-Mogg (1928-2012) was a financial journalist who became editor of *The Times*, chairman of the Arts Council and vice-chairman of the BBC.

Religiously he was a committed Catholic.

He begins the book with a completely unexpected paean of praise for halachic Judaism. He explains his reason for doing so. Inflation, he says, is a disease of inordinacy, a failure of discipline, in this case in relation to money. What makes Judaism unique, he continues, is its legal system. This has been wrongly criticised by Christians as drily legalistic. In fact, Jewish law was essential for Jewish survival because it “provided a standard by which action could be tested, a law for the

regulation of conduct, a focus for loyalty and a boundary for the energy of human nature.”

All sources of energy, most notably nuclear energy, need some form of containment. Without this, they become dangerous. Jewish law has always acted as a container for the spiritual and intellectual energy of the Jewish people. That energy “has not merely exploded or been dispersed; it has been harnessed as a continuous power.” What Jews have, he argues, modern economies lack: a system of self-control that allows economies to flourish without booms and crashes, inflation and recession.

The same applies to leadership. In *Good to Great*, management theorist Jim Collins argues that what the great companies have in common is a culture of discipline. In *Great By Choice*, he uses the phrase “the 20-Mile March” meaning that outstanding organisations plan for the marathon, not the sprint. Confidence, he says, “comes not from motivational speeches, charismatic inspiration, wild pep rallies, unfounded optimism, or blind hope.”[5] It comes from doing the deed, day after day, year after year. Great companies use disciplines that are specific, methodical and consistent. They encourage their people to be self-disciplined and responsible. They do not over-react to change, be it for good or bad. They keep their eye on the far horizon. Above all, they do not depend on heroic, charismatic leaders who at best lift the company for a while but do not provide it with the strength-in-depth they need to flourish in the long run.

The classic instance of the principles articulated by Burns, Rees-Mogg and Collins is the transformation that occurred between Ki Tissa and Acharei Mot, between the first Yom Kippur and the second, between Moses’ heroic leadership and the quiet, understated priestly discipline of an annual day of repentance and atonement.

Turning ideals into codes of action that shape habits of the heart is what Judaism and leadership are about. **Never lose the inspiration of the Prophets, but never lose, either, the routines that turn ideals into acts and dreams into achieved reality.** [1] See Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 1978), 246ff. [2] James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper, 1978), 454. [3] The passage is cited in the Introduction to the commentary HaKotev to Ein Yaakov, the collected aggadic passages of the Talmud. It is also quoted by Maharal in *Netivot Olam, Ahavat Re’a* 1. [4] William Rees-Mogg, *The Reigning Error: The Crisis of World Inflation* (London: Hamilton, 1974), 9–13.

[5] Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001); *Great by Choice* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 55.

## [A Torah to Live By – Aharei Mot – Kedoshim 5781 by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg](https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/GreenbergParashatAchareiMotKedoshim5781.pdf?utm_campaign=Dvar%20Torah%205781&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=122437072&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-)

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In the Damascus Covenant charter of the Jewish sect that lived in Qumran, it specifically states that if a person falls into water and is drowning on Shabbat, it is forbidden to pull them out. Presumably the rescue is forbidden because it would involve actions that violate the restrictions of Shabbat.<sup>1</sup> We know from the Book of Maccabees that a group of Hasidim of those days were attacked on Shabbat and killed because they refused to save their lives by fighting the Greek army and thereby desecrating the Shabbat (I Maccabees 2:38).

However, the Rabbis of the Talmud ruled that one should do whatever it takes to save a life on Shabbat.<sup>2</sup> To the Rabbis it was self-evident that saving a life overrides all but three of the laws of the Torah.<sup>3</sup> Even if there was only a **possibility** that a life is at stake, despite the uncertainty, one should override all the laws and act to prevent death.

The Talmud records a discussion between three leading Rabbis and their students as to what is the legal justification for this ruling. Each gives a legalistic argument, of which the most persuasive is Rabbi Shimon ben Menasia's suggestion that one is permitted to violate one specific Shabbat to enable that person to observe many more Sabbaths going forward.<sup>4</sup>

In the end, the Talmud sweeps aside all these legalistic arguments and logical justifications for doing life-saving actions on Shabbat. The supremacy of life is not based on casuistic interpretation of the laws of Shabbat. The Talmud says that overriding Shabbat to save a life (or even only possibly save a life) is based on a fundamental principle of the Torah in our parashah, one that undergirds all the laws of the Torah. "You shall observe my statutes and rulings [in the Torah] which a person shall do and **live by them**. I am the Lord" (Leviticus 18:5). Says the Talmud: "You shall **live by them** (= the commandments) and **not die by them**" (Babylonian Talmud Yoma 85b). The laws of the Torah were given to people to live by them. If observance of a law will lead to death, then the law is suspended because God bestows the Torah to give us life, not death.

This principle is so fundamental that, according to Maimonides, one should not ask a Gentile adult or a Jewish child to break Shabbat in order to save a life (Mishneh Torah, Sefer Zemanim, Hilkhot Shabbat 2:3). This work should preferably be done by the leaders of the community and Torah scholars. To ask someone not obligated to take the fall would imply we are looking for a technicality to minimize the violation

of Shabbat. Such an approach truly belittles the weightiness of Shabbat observance. Actually, Shabbat laws remain sacrosanct—but the principle that the Torah laws are given “to live by and not die by,” suspends them for the sake of saving a life. Important religious role models should step up and do the lifesaving tasks on Shabbat to make clear the supremacy of life in Torah.

Maimonides adds: if observing a Torah law (such as Shabbat) leads one to allow a human being to die, then that would imply that God is a vengeful authoritarian Lord who gives laws that bring vengeance or cruelty into the world. On the contrary, the Torah’s laws are given to bring more “compassion, loving kindness, and peace into the world.” Therefore, those people who would describe life-saving actions as “violating the Shabbat” turn the Torah’s laws into the curse that the prophet Ezekiel placed on wayward Israel: “I [God] gave them [Israel] statutes that were no good, commandments that one **cannot live** by” (Ezekiel 20:25).

The people that Maimonides is disagreeing with are offering an alternative interpretation of the nature and purpose of the Torah’s commandments. They see the commandments as the rules of service of God. God is a divine ruler who gives orders to his servants. Theirs is not to question why. Human obedience is an acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty. Sometimes a law has harsh or damaging impact on a person, but out of respect for divine authority, one upholds it. Shabbat was not meant to cost lives, but if it turns out that upholding Shabbat costs a life, then that constitutes honoring God and taking commandments seriously. Giving one’s life when our religion is under attack is an honored behavior. Being a martyr is the highest form of loyalty and sacrifice. In a sense, this case of upholding a law at great personal cost is on the spectrum of martyrdom.

This past year, many people were perplexed by the haredi response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They continued to learn and pray in groups although this led to increased infections and many deaths. Did not the haredi Rabbis know what is common knowledge, that life saving overrides most of the Torah’s commandments? Well, a theology of commandments much like the one delineated in the above paragraph accounts for much of this behavior. The haredi rulings to go on with group religious activities accepted that illnesses and deaths would increase but that this is a form of martyrdom, that is, sacrificing lives to stand up for God and honor God’s sovereignty.

I should add here that Maimonides would reject my presentation of the haredi interpretation as too respectful. He calls these people apikorsim (heretics) because they consider life-saving actions done on Shabbat to be some form of violation of the Torah. They are heretics not because they advocate anti-traditional views, but

because their teaching misrepresents the true nature of God. God is not so self-centered as to sacrifice human lives for the sake of upholding the honor and authority of God. God wants humans to be good to each other, to save each other's lives—to just plain live more. The Torah was given to live by.

I embrace Maimonides' view that the commandments are a gift of love from God for humans. They are intended to give people better and richer lives, to guide them to healthier living, and to make them safer from death. In his *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides comments on the verse in Deuteronomy (10:12-13): "...What does the Lord, Your God ask of you... to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you this day **for your good**." The Torah is telling us that the commandments are given for the sake of improving your quality of life including your health and your well-being. If observance of the law is having a negative impact on your life, says Maimonides, then you should revisit the law. You are likely misinterpreting it. (If re-interpretation does not redress the negative impact on your life, he says, then probably you have a wrong understanding of what is good for you).<sup>5</sup>

To me the stress on mitzvot as given to evoke obedience to God comes across as upholding a heavy-handed exercise of authority, more appropriate to a human ruler who wants to assert power for the sake of self-aggrandizement. I would argue that the commandments are all about guiding human beings and helping them live better. A classic midrash captures this approach: "Do you think it matters at all to the Holy One, the Blessed, whether one properly slaughters an animal and eats, or if one kills the animal by cutting its neck from the back [and then eats]?"<sup>6</sup> The commandments were given to refine people" (Sifra Shemini, Chapter 12).<sup>7</sup> The Torah is refining human nature, trying to remove or minimize selfishness and schadenfreude, trying to reduce negative character traits that prevent us from doing right by other people. This is not about control. These instructions are intended to make people more loving, compassionate, ethical, sensitive.

The popular focus on the supremacy of life-saving actions and their priority over all but three of the commandments is probably too narrow an understanding of Torah.<sup>8</sup> I thank God that, in Judaism, human life is more precious than ritual actions, even those that honor God. However, the deeper teaching is that God gives the Torah to help humans **live more**—more lovingly, more vibrantly, more joyfully, more justly. This should guide us not only to save others' lives when they're in danger. It is equally important to enrich lives—others' and our own—all the time. We should interpret the laws to make life more livable. We should apply them to build a society that improves the lives of more people. Our science, medicine, and national policies should be guided by Torah and designed to extend life expectancy

and enable people to live more healthy, productive and fulfilling lives.

In the words of the classic Amidah (standing, silent prayer): “By the light of Your Face, You [God] have given us a Torah of life, of loving kindness, of righteousness and blessing, of compassion and life and shalom (peace/wholeness).”<sup>9</sup> It is our generation’s task to develop this **Torah of life** to guide all our actions toward increasing life. That would make the Torah what it wants to be—in all its details—a Torah to live by.<sup>10</sup>

**Shabbat Shalom.** <sup>1</sup> “But should any man fall into water or fire, let him not be pulled out with the aid of a ladder or rope or (some such) tool” Damascus Document XI, translation from G. Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Maryland, 1968), p.113. <sup>2</sup> See for example, Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 74a and ff. <sup>3</sup> Sanhedrin 74a. <sup>4</sup> Rabbi Akiva cited the fact that priests did their sacred sacrificial work every day of the week including Shabbat; the sacrifice worship overrode Shabbat. Nevertheless, if the priest was needed to testify in a capital punishment case and his testimony might save the life of the accused by tilting the case toward acquittal, then he was called away from divine service. If a possible long shot saving a life overrode a service weightier than Shabbat then how much more so should one do on Shabbat the medical actions needed that could save a life. Rabbi Elazar cited the case of circumcision. Circumcision is performed on the eighth day of the baby’s life—even on Shabbat. If taking care of one limb of the body overrides Shabbat, then taking care and saving the whole body certainly overrides the laws of Shabbat. Others offer additional such rationales. See Talmud Yoma 85b. <sup>5</sup> See Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, part 3, chapter 28. <sup>6</sup> In shehitah, the knife cut is from the front of the neck to cut the jugular vein and esophagus and instantly cut off the flood of blood and air so the animal loses consciousness immediately. <sup>7</sup> Also see Beresihit Rabbah 44:1 and Vayikra Rabbah 13:3. The Hebrew phrase is le-tzoref et habriyot (= to refine people). The verb, le-tzoref is used in metallurgy for the process in which copper or other impurities are removed in order to yield pure gold. <sup>8</sup> This is hinted at in the Talmud’s statement that even a situation when there is a remote possibility of saving a life triggers all the necessary work to be done including overriding all Shabbat restrictions. The point is that we are commanded to uphold life and not just act in a case where a life will be lost immediately. <sup>9</sup> Adapted from *The Koren Siddur* (Jerusalem, 2015), p. 132. <sup>10</sup> Where the present application of Torah constricts life, or degrades forms of life or reduces equality and dignity of people, it is our task to bring it up to the standard “shall live by them and not die by them” (wholly or in degree).

[The Palace of Torah Expanded: 15 Years Later – Acharei Mot - Kedoshim by Daniel Nevins](https://www.jtsa.edu/the-palace-of-torah-expanded-15-years-later)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/the-palace-of-torah-expanded-15-years-later>

For many modern readers, engaging with Torah presents a paradox. Biblical and rabbinic voices reaching us from the distant past are like starlight emitted millennia ago—brilliant and often shockingly current, but also artifacts from light sources that may have dimmed or even expired. This paradox can be constructive, drawing

modern readers out of our own cultural assumptions, challenging us to notice wonders that we might otherwise miss. The Torah's poetry, its stirring demands for justice, and its vast system of devotional rites prime us for faith and sanctity. And when we encounter a Torah text that rings false or hurtful, we may use that encounter to clarify our own understanding, to articulate our community's sacred values. This responsive reading method allows modern Jews to embrace Torah as an *etz hayim*, a living tree with deep roots, whose branches continuously expand in delightful new directions.

We encounter this paradox already in the first chapter of Genesis. It is a wondrous and inspiring account of the origin of life on earth. The Torah declares everything wrought by the Creator to be good, understands humanity to be fashioned in the divine image, and teaches people to take responsibility for others and for the world itself. We may read these texts dozens or hundreds of times over the course of our lives, cherishing them and gaining insight even if their central premise—creation of the Universe over the course of a week—is falsified by modern science. Like ancient starlight reaching modern eyes, the words of Torah convey wonder even when their original radiance must be refracted through a new lens.

When we reach Parashat Aharei Mot–Kedoshim the paradoxical encounter with Torah reaches a new intensity. Many of the Torah's most powerful and meaningful ideas are found in these chapters. We learn to love our neighbor as ourselves, to dignify our elders, to respect and protect people living with disability, and to create a livable spiritual practice (*vehai bahem*—live through the mitzvot, Lev. 18:5). Some of its commandments such as the prohibition of incest and adultery remain compelling, and others such as the ban on mixed species challenge us with their obscurity. However, some statements found here are foreign and hurtful to contemporary readers.

When the Torah prohibits sexual intercourse between two men, calling their lovemaking an abomination, there is no avoiding our discomfort and increasingly our disagreement with this ancient text. The Rabbis gifted us with techniques of non-literal interpretation, and modern readers have offered more acceptable approaches to these verses. For example, they might be read to prohibit only cultic, or coercive, or unloving, or incestuous sex between men. Still, the most honest and useful approach is to admit that these verses have been understood for millennia to condemn sexual intimacy between men. Today we understand this ban to be hurtful and oppressive. What is to be done?

Every year thousands of Jews present essays and speeches struggling with these texts, using them as a foil for our own evolving understanding of gender and sexuality. This itself is a redemptive response, but we also need to revise communal norms. Within Conservative Judaism we have tried different approaches, some effective but none entirely satisfying. Fifteen years ago, I joined with two other rabbis in composing a responsum that placed the Torah's heteronormative

assumptions in tension with its own teachings about human dignity and the value of intimate partnership in life.

We argued that the Torah's declaration that "it is not good for a person to be alone" (Gen. 2:18), its commandment to love one another as ourselves, and its warning to avoid humiliating and harming others were all in tension with the ban found here on gay sex. So too with the expansions added by the Rabbis on sex between women: the cultural assumptions of their time undermined some of the Rabbis' most beautiful teachings about respecting and protecting one another. The ancient Rabbis said, "So great is human dignity that it supersedes a negative principle of Torah" (BT Berakhot 19b and elsewhere). As modern rabbis we applied this powerful idea to our contemporary reality and to protect the dignity of all people in our day.

I would like to take this opportunity, nearly fifteen years later, to appreciate the positive impact of our responsum, and to revise some of its less beneficial claims. On the positive side, almost immediately after our paper was approved in 2006, Jews and other people of faith began to discuss sexuality through the lens of dignity. The tone of the discourse changed, certainly within our own denomination, and so did the policies. Synagogues, schools, and camps changed their rhetoric, and queer youth, adults, and families were gradually, and then suddenly, embraced as dignified members and leaders of their communities. Our seminaries in New York and Los Angeles quickly shifted to admitting gay and lesbian applicants, as did our school in Jerusalem five years later. Dozens of remarkable rabbis and cantors who openly identify as LGBTQI+ now lead our communities, and we have benefited from a richer and more diverse covenantal community.

It is hard to remember just how different things were fifteen or twenty years ago. Encountering ancient text on matters so intimate is always difficult. Sometimes a text from only fifteen years ago can feel ancient, and I admit that this is true of my own work.

We used the word "homosexuality" in our title to signal a scholarly and unbiased approach that might convince skeptical readers, including fellow law committee members whose votes we needed. But for many readers that term already felt passe and even hurtful in its clinical tone. We should have been consistent in using the language preferred by gay and lesbian Jews, for whose benefit the paper was intended.

Our core halakhic claim was that sexual orientation is a fixed feature for many people, and that the prior demand that gay and lesbian people suppress their sexuality and try to pass as straight was demeaning, cruel, and futile. As such, it violated the rabbinic principle of human dignity, causing shame and suffering, which are themselves biblically forbidden. In passing, we commented that for bisexual people it might be difficult but not impossible to restrict themselves to the ancient heterosexual norms. This comment was problematic at the time, and has caused

pain and anger, which I deeply regret. Bisexuality is its own identity, often misunderstood, that deserves respect and protection from hurtful comments and policies. Our paper should either have included bisexuals in its conceptual framework, or left their questions for a different responsum, much as we left transgender issues for a different project.

The interpretation of Torah is an evolving and expanding activity. For millennia male rabbis argued that only men were obligated to study Torah, and they fought to preserve their monopoly on the spiritual inheritance that rightfully belongs to all Jews. Men built this patriarchy, and men may be partners in the task of dismantling it. But it is the scholarship and activism of women that have been the driving forces in this change. The same is true of LGBTQI+ Jews who have emerged from being objects of rabbinic interest to subjects and authors of Jewish discourse. The prior closeting and oppression of these Jews is an ongoing source of pain and shame; the new era of openness and gay pride is the beginning of a holier and greater stage of Jewish history.

As I approach the end of my term as a JTS dean, I am inspired and thrilled by the diverse identities of our students and alumni. Many of our wisest and most prominent teachers today have identities that were recently excluded from leadership. This is true not only for sexual and gender identity, but also for Jews of Color, and those living with disability. As a straight white male who was raised Jewish, I recognize how privileged my position has been. I have committed myself to removing barriers so that the Torah can be enriched by diverse perspectives, and our communities can rise to their potential. Much more work remains to expand the palace of Torah so that its paradoxes can become constructive challenges. Only then may we fulfill the Torah's most expansive command, "You shall be holy, for I Adonai your God am Holy." (*Daniel Resnick is the Dean of the Rabbinical School and the Division of Religious Leadership at JTS*)

### [Committing Ourselves to the Actions Required for Full Inclusion by Cantor David Berger](https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/committing-ourselves-actions-required-full-inclusion)

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/committing-ourselves-actions-required-full-inclusion>

At its best, the Torah can lift up humanity, reminding us of our place in the continually unfolding story of God's Creation of the world and our role in the hopeful journey toward freedom. At its worst, it can serve as a tool for domination, oppression, hatred, and all that is base and vile within the human soul. Both potentials are always there. As it turns out, what we believe to be true about the Torah — about the guiding values that drive us in our lives — has as much to do with who we are as human beings as it does with the sacred words of the Torah itself.

As a gay man, I approached this week's Torah portion with a fair amount of trepidation. Within this double parashah of Acharei Mot-K'doshim are verses that

have been used to harm people like me, and to be honest, as ammunition to attack me personally. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 seem at first and, truthfully, even at a second glance, to be straightforward prohibitions on sex between men, and are deployed every day by all manner of people as justification for discrimination. There are, of course, contemporary explanations that recontextualize these verses and redefine what it is that the Torah means to prohibit here, but for those people looking to base their homophobia in the Bible, those contemporary interpretations are easily dismissed. I gave up long ago trying to convince people of what the Torah “really” means here. I have not given up on the Torah of love that demands sacred witness to — and healing for — the pain LGBTQIA+ people experience navigating a world of all too human hatred and bigotry.

The history of religious homophobia is long and terrible, and worst of all, it isn't just history — it is the present. As I sit at my desk writing today, there are literally dozens of anti-LGBTQIA+ laws advancing through legislatures around the United States and around the world. Less publicly, there are daily hate crimes and acts of violence perpetrated on people just like me. It is overwhelming. Most days I am lucky enough to be able to push out all of that hatred and focus on being a good husband, father, and cantor, but there are also times when it is just too much. Why, I wonder, among all the problems of our world that are so difficult, and need so much attention and care, would people choose reducing my civil rights as worthy of their time? Is there nothing else more important they can think of to do?

In 2006, I had the incredible honor of joining together with activists and religious leaders at World Pride Jerusalem. More than any of the large scale and impressive events with thousands of people that filled the public schedule, I remember a smallish circle of queer ordained Jewish, Christian, and Muslim clergy, and (like me at the time) students preparing for lives in the clergy. We sat in a garden on the beautiful campus of HUC-JIR overlooking the walls of the Old City and shared stories of the past and hopes for the future. We talked about the “bad old days” and how much better things were. We strategized about the new challenges we saw coming towards us. We celebrated the expanding vision of God's image we saw developing within our own communities and dreamed together about a world where that vision could be fully embraced. Sitting in a circle of giants — of leaders who had fought so hard for so long — I was overwhelmed at the spiritual power, faithful devotion, and pure audacious grit of this sacred assembly. The Torah I learned that day — that hopeful faith in God and humanity can flourish even after decades of bitter struggle enduring the absolute worst of hatred and violence — has been a continual source of strength for me when facing the ugliness of the world.

So, what to do with these Torah verses that have been used to cause such pain? In a Reform context, where we choose a particular piece of the Torah portion to study and publicly chant, the easiest solution may be to simply avoid them and to read something else. But easy solutions are often not the best solutions. The harder

work many of us need to do in confronting these verses centers on the people impacted most by them. It is not enough to put up a safe-space sticker on the wall or to declare your synagogue an inclusive congregation, though that is a good start. Consider this Shabbat, this place in our Torah reading cycle, as an opportunity to feature queer people’s stories. Confront the ways in which you, and your own communities still need to grow in embracing the diversity of God’s image we see in human sexual orientations and gender identities. This is hard and can be uncomfortable. We love to focus on the joy and beauty of pride and inclusion, but if there is no space for the pain, anxiety, and fear LGBTQIA+ people experience then that “inclusion” just isn’t real. When I’m not sure how to best accomplish this work, I depend on the tremendous body of resources and assistance available through Keshet, an organization working for LGBTQ equality in Jewish life. I believe that the same Torah that has facilitated harm can also be the Torah that inspires us to find healing. As we pray each morning in the Ahavah Rabbah prayer: “God, enlighten our eyes with Your Torah” — that we may see, both within ourselves and our communities, in pain and in joy, the full spectrum of humanity with love; “focus our minds on Your mitzvot” – that we may recommit ourselves to the action required for full inclusion; “unite our hearts in love and reverence for Your Name.” Then we will never feel shame, never deserve rebuke, and never stumble. May this be Your will. (*Cantor David Berger is the cantor at KAM Isaiah Israel Congregation in Chicago, IL, a board member of the American Conference of Cantors, and a Ph.D. student at the Chicago Theological Seminary.*)



**Yahrtzeits**

- Elaine Berkenwald remembers her mother Jean Berkenwald on Sunday April 25<sup>th</sup> (Iyar 13).
- Linda Dorf remembers her mother Annette Pinkowitz Dorf-Hills on Sunday April 25<sup>th</sup> (Iyar 13).
- Ronnie Klein remembers her father Walter Leibowitz on Friday April 30<sup>th</sup> (Iyar 18).



**Coming up at Kol Rina...**

**Friday Torah Study and Service, April 23**

Our Friday evening observances will begin at 5:15 with Torah study led by Len Levin. Kabbalat Shabbat, led by Natasha Cooper-Benisty, and Maariv, led by Rich and Treasure Cohen, will follow, beginning at 5:45. Lori Goldenberg will give a d'var on “Four Generations of a Jewish Family in Louisiana.” We hope you will join us!

**Use the following Zoom link to attend:**

<https://zoom.us/j/533517572?pwd=dVFHR2NGZFBCYWp1Yzd6ald0bzFRdz09>

**Board meeting, Sunday evening, April 25**

The Kol Rina Board of Trustees will meet on Sunday, April 25 at 7:30. All are welcome to attend. ***Use the following zoom link:***

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86457774020?pwd=Vnh4S0dBNUJnZjVPa0dwbFF1R2swZz09>

**Monday evening minyan, April 26**

Our regular weekday evening minyan will take place on Monday, April 26, beginning at 8:00. Your presence allows mourners and those observing yahrzeits to say Kaddish. Please support your Kol Rina friends by attending.

***Use the following Zoom link to attend:***

<https://zoom.us/j/97663987468?pwd=NjFhaVZUZkpSZ3pxQWJjOU5UWFR4QT09>