

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Acharei Mot
April 30, 2022 *** Nisan 29, 5782

Acharei Mot in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/75890/jewish/Acharei-Mot-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.

Haftarah Machar Chodesh in A Nutshell – I Samuel 20:18-42

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3572703/jewish/Machar-Chodesh-Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell-for-Shabbat-Preceding-Rosh-Chodesh.htm

Today’s haftarah is read on a Shabbat that is immediately followed by Rosh Chodesh. Indeed, the reading opens with the words, “Jonathan said, ‘Tomorrow is the [first of the] new month.’”

The story is one of loyalty and devotion. David and Jonathan are dear friends. Jonathan’s father, King Saul, despises David, fearing that he will depose him from the throne. Sensing danger, Jonathan told David to hide in the field rather than attend Saul’s Rosh Chodesh feast. Jonathan then attended the feast and gauged the king’s mood. Realizing that Saul was determined to kill David, Jonathan went out to the field, shot three arrows and called to his assistant, “The arrow is beyond you,” a predetermined signal to his friend that it was not safe to return to the king’s palace.

Before parting, the two friends kissed and wept, and swore to maintain their mutual affection for generations to come.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Scapegoat from the Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/acharei-mot/the-scapegoat/>

The strangest and most dramatic element of the service on Yom Kippur, set out in Acharei Mot (Lev. 16:7-22), was the ritual of the two goats, one offered as a sacrifice, the other sent away into the desert “to Azazel.” They were to all intents

and purposes indistinguishable from one another: they were chosen to be as similar as possible in size and appearance. They were brought before the High Priest and lots were drawn, one bearing the words “to the Lord,” the other, “to Azazel.” The one on which the lot “To the Lord” fell was offered as a sacrifice. Over the other the High Priest confessed the sins of the nation, and it was then taken away into the desert hills outside Jerusalem where it plunged to its death. Tradition tells us that a red thread would be attached to its horns, half of which was removed before the animal was sent away. If the rite had been effective, the red thread would turn to white.

Much is puzzling about the ritual. First, what is the meaning of “to Azazel,” to which the second goat was sent? It appears nowhere else in Scripture. Three major theories emerged as to its meaning. According to the Sages and Rashi, it meant “a steep, rocky, or hard place”. In other words, it was a description of its destination. In the plain meaning of the Torah, the goat was sent “to a desolate area” (el erez gezerah, Lev. 16:22). According to the Sages, this meant it was thus taken to a steep ravine where it fell to its death. That, according to the first explanation, is the meaning of Azazel.

The second, suggested cryptically by Ibn Ezra and explicitly by Nahmanides, is that Azazel was the name of a spirit or demon, one of the fallen angels referred to in Genesis 6:2, similar to the goat-spirit called ‘Pan’ in Greek mythology, ‘Faunus’ in Latin. This is a difficult idea, which is why Ibn Ezra alluded to it, as he did in similar cases, by way of a riddle, a puzzle, that only the wise would be able to decipher.

He writes:

I will reveal to you part of the secret by hint: when you reach thirty-three you will know it.

Nahmanides reveals the secret:

Thirty-three verses later on, the Torah commands: “They must no longer offer any of their sacrifices to the goat idols [se’irim] after whom they go astray.”

See Nahmanides on Lev. 17:7

Azazel, on this reading, is the name of a demon or hostile force, sometimes called Satan or Samael. The Israelites were categorically forbidden to worship such a force. Indeed, the belief that there are powers at work in the universe distinct from, or even hostile to, God, is incompatible with Judaic monotheism. Nonetheless, some Sages did believe that there were negative forces that were part of the heavenly retinue, like Satan, who brought accusations against humans or tempted them into sin. The goat sent into the wilderness to Azazel was a way of conciliating or propitiating such forces so that the prayers of Israel could rise to heaven without, as it were, any dissenting voices. This way of understanding the rite is similar to the saying on the part of the Sages that we blow shofar in a double cycle on Rosh Hashanah “to confuse Satan.” (Rosh Hashanah 16b)

The third interpretation, and the simplest, is that Azazel is a compound noun meaning “the goat [ez] that was sent away [azal].” This led to the addition of a new word to the English language. In 1530 William Tyndale produced the first English translation of the Hebrew Bible, an act then illegal and for which he paid with his life. Seeking to translate Azazel into English, he called it “the escapegoat,” i.e. the goat that was sent away and released. In the course of time, the first letter was dropped, and the word “scapegoat” was born.

The real question, though, is: what was the ritual actually about? It was unique. Sin and guilt offerings are familiar features of the Torah and a normal part of the service of the Temple. The service of Yom Kippur was different in one salient respect: in every other case, the sin was confessed over the animal that was sacrificed. On Yom Kippur, the High Priest confessed the sins of the people over the animal that was not sacrificed, the scapegoat that was sent away, “carrying on it all their iniquities” (Lev. 16:21-22).

The simplest and most compelling answer was given by Maimonides in *The Guide for the Perplexed*:

There is no doubt that sins cannot be carried like a burden, and taken off the shoulder of one being to be laid on that of another being. But these ceremonies are of a symbolic character, and serve to impress people with a certain idea, and to induce them to repent – as if to say, we have freed ourselves of our previous deeds, have cast them behind our backs, and removed them from us as far as possible.[1]

Expiation demands a ritual, some dramatic representation of the removal of sin and the wiping-clean of the past. That is clear. Yet Maimonides does not explain why Yom Kippur demanded a rite not used on other days of the year when sin or guilt offerings were brought. Why was the first goat, the one of which the lot “To the Lord” fell and which was offered as a sin offering (Lev. 16:9) not sufficient?

The answer lies in the dual character of the day. The Torah states:

This shall be an everlasting statute for you: on the tenth day of the seventh month you must afflict yourselves. you shall perform no work at all... On this day, [yechaper] atonement shall be made to [le-taher] purify you; of all your sins you shall be purified before the Lord. Lev. 16:29-30

Two quite distinct processes were involved on Yom Kippur. First there was kapparah, atonement. This is the normal function of a sin offering. Second, there was taharah, purification, something normally done in a different context altogether, namely the removal of tumah, ritual defilement, which could arise from a number of different causes, among them contact with a dead body, skin disease, or nocturnal discharge. Atonement has to do with guilt. Purification has to do with contamination or pollution. These are usually[2] two separate worlds. On Yom Kippur they were brought together. Why?

As we discussed in parshat Metzora, we owe to anthropologists like Ruth Benedict the distinction between shame cultures and guilt cultures.[3] Shame is a social phenomenon. It is what we feel when our wrongdoing is exposed to others. It may even be something we feel when we merely imagine other people knowing or seeing what we have done. Shame is the feeling of being found out, and our first instinct is to hide. That is what Adam and Eve did in the garden of Eden after they had eaten the forbidden fruit. They were ashamed of their nakedness and they hid. Guilt is a personal phenomenon. It has nothing to do with what others might say if they knew what we have done, and everything to do with what we say to ourselves. Guilt is the voice of conscience, and it is inescapable. You may be able to avoid shame by hiding or not being found out, but you cannot avoid guilt. Guilt is self-knowledge.

There is another difference which, once understood, explains why Judaism is overwhelmingly a guilt rather than a shame culture. Shame attaches to the person. Guilt attaches to the act. It is almost impossible to remove shame once you have been publicly disgraced. It is like an indelible stain on your skin. It is the mark of Cain. Shakespeare has Lady Macbeth exclaim, after her crime, "Will these hands ne'er be clean?" In shame cultures, wrongdoers tend either to go into hiding or into exile, where no one knows their past, or to commit suicide. Playwrights in these cultures have such characters die, for there is no possible redemption.

Guilt makes a clear distinction between the act of wrongdoing and the person of the wrongdoer. The act was wrong, but the agent remains, in principle, intact. That is why guilt can be removed, "atoned for," by confession, remorse, and restitution. "Hate not the sinner but the sin," is the basic axiom of a guilt culture.

Normally, sin and guilt offerings, as their names imply, are about guilt. They atone. But Yom Kippur deals not only with our sins as individuals. It also confronts our sins as a community bound by mutual responsibility. It deals, in other words, with the social as well as the personal dimension of wrongdoing. Yom Kippur is about shame as well as guilt. Hence there has to be purification (the removal of the stain) as well as atonement.

The psychology of shame is quite different to that of guilt. We can discharge guilt by achieving forgiveness – and forgiveness can only be granted by the object of our wrongdoing, which is why Yom Kippur only atones for sins against God. Even God cannot – logically cannot – forgive sins committed against our fellow humans until they themselves have forgiven us.

Shame cannot be removed by forgiveness. The victim of our crime may have forgiven us, but we still feel defiled by the knowledge that our name has been disgraced, our reputation harmed, our standing damaged. We still feel the stigma, the dishonour, the degradation. That is why an immensely powerful and dramatic ceremony had to take place during which people could feel and symbolically see their sins carried away to the desert, to no-man's-land. A similar ceremony took

place when a leper was cleansed. The Priest took two birds, killed one, and released the other to fly away across the open fields (Lev. 14:4-7). Again the act was one of cleansing, not atoning, and had to do with shame, not guilt.

Judaism is a religion of hope, and its great rituals of repentance and atonement are part of that hope. We are not condemned to live endlessly with the mistakes and errors of our past. That is the great difference between a guilt culture and a shame culture. But Judaism also acknowledges the existence of shame. Hence the elaborate ritual of the scapegoat that seemed to carry away the tumah, the defilement that is the mark of shame. It could only be done on Yom Kippur because that was the one day of the year in which everyone shared, at least vicariously, in the process of confession, repentance, atonement, and purification. When a whole society confesses its guilt, individuals can be redeemed from shame. [1] *The Guide for the Perplexed*, III:46. [2] There were, though, exceptions. A leper – or more precisely someone suffering from the skin disease known in the Torah as tsara'at – had to bring a guilt offering [asham] in addition to undergoing rites of purification (Lev. 14:12-20). [3] Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin) 1946.

Using the Right Tools by Rabbi Max Edwards

<https://truah.org/resources/parshat-achrei-mot-max-edwards-moraltorah/>

My dad once told me as a kid that it's always worth finding the right tool for a specific task. As any IKEA manual will tell you, if you don't have an Allen wrench, brute forcing a bolt into a piece of particle board will not solve all of your problems. I know from experience.

The Book of Leviticus is dedicated to finding the right tool, to creating systems and structures amid the chaos of the wandering wilderness.

One important system in this week's parshah, Acharei Mot, is the use of blood as a purifying agent in and around the Tent of Meeting. The high priest would wind his way through the Tabernacle, sprinkling blood throughout, in order to purify and consecrate items like the altar and the cover over the ark.

Blood is the perfect tool for this act, and while it might sound a little messy to modern ears, it purifies, it prepares, and it consecrates. But blood is only a tool in the right context, and it must be used carefully.

Only a few verses later, we encounter blood again, but this time with a grave warning:

And if anyone of the house of Israel or of the strangers who reside among them partakes of any blood, I will set My face against the person who partakes of the blood; I will cut that person off from among their kin. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you for making expiation for your lives upon the altar; it is the blood, as life, that effects expiation. (Leviticus 17:10-11)

Blood, the life-force of all beings, has the power to purify and to consecrate, but it also has the power to corrupt, to scatter, and to exclude. If we use it improperly, it uses us.

This is not the first time, nor is it the last, that we as readers are reminded of the prohibition on the consumption of blood (see Genesis 9:4, Deuteronomy 12:23), but it comes up again at this point in Leviticus perhaps to draw a distinction — to show the reader that a tool used to purify also has the power to render oneself unclean.

Commenting on this prohibition, the Ramban, a 12th century commentator, notes:

“If one were to eat the life of all flesh (i.e. blood) it would then attach itself to one’s own blood and they would become united in one’s heart. The result would be a thickening and coarseness of the human soul so that it would closely approach the nature of the animal soul that resided in that which he ate. Blood does not require digestion as other foods do – by means of which they become changed – and thus [by eating blood] a person’s soul will become combined with the blood of the animal!”

The thrust of this interpretation, 12th century biology aside, is as relevant for us today as it was in the Ramban’s time: That which we consume has the power to consume us.

This holds true in the ways in which we engage with the world today. There’s nothing today we consume more than media. Broadcast media, social media, print media — these are invaluable tools that inform us, educate us, cause us to act, and bring us stories from around the world. It gives me the opportunity to focus on individuals within an otherwise amorphous news cycle. However, in the wrong context, or through the wrong lens, these tools of engagement have the power to destroy rather than inform; they consume our time, energy, and at moments our good will. Twitter has been this place for me in the past — a generative platform from which I most recently found many supplements for my Passover seder, interspersed with hours of unproductive doomscrolling.

What my dad didn’t tell me was that it can take years to find the right tool and to learn how to use it properly, or in the words of Leviticus, blood is meant for sprinkling, not consuming.

This parshah reminds us of the tools at our disposal and the responsibility we all have to treat them, and ourselves, with care and discernment.

(Rabbi Max Edwards is a 2021 graduate of the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College in Newton, MA, and currently serves as the Assistant Rabbi at Temple B’nai Abraham in Livingston, New Jersey.)

[Who is the Stranger? - Acharei Mot by Linda S. Golding](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/who-is-the-stranger/)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/who-is-the-stranger/>

Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the universe, who differentiates the creatures.

What a great invitation, I thought, to write a d'var Torah on Aharei Mot! The opening verses that include “Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come at will into the Shrine behind the curtain . . . lest he die” came immediately to mind. The directive to be mindful and thoughtful when entering God’s presence and the presence of others certainly aligns with a chaplain’s way of being. When entering a hospital room, for example, I know that the Shekhinah, God’s healing presence, is at the head of the patient’s bed. Holiness is already in the room, and I must be prepared to pay attention.

But I very quickly realized I could not avoid taking up a verse that appears later in the parashah, Leviticus 18:22: “Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abhorrence,” an injunction that has caused decades if not centuries of pain. To ignore the verse or to set my focus on a different section would deliberately contradict my practice of chaplaincy as an act of advocacy for those in my care; for spiritual, social and health justice; for diversity and inclusion; and for God’s presence in the world.

This verse reminded me of Jack, a patient from long ago. He was a frail, elderly man in a hospital bed, who raised both arms in frustration and shouted, “I am going to Hell! I have done things I am not supposed to do, bad things.” Quite a conversation opener for a chaplain, me, just beginning her pastoral training! My mind raced through a list of possible bad things until I calmed down enough to say, “Hmmm. Such as . . . ?” Jack, who identified as Christian, told me there were religious rules he had broken for which he would be punished.

I wondered if Jack was telling me he was gay. I knew nothing about Jack’s specific religious beliefs or experiences, but Yom Kippur and its intensity was still fresh in my ears and my heart, as was my community’s annual choice to read the alternate afternoon Torah portion—that is, to substitute Kedoshim (Leviticus 19:1–18) for Aharei Mot (Leviticus 18:1–30) in order to avoid the public reading of the painful verse. (The Kedoshim reading itself, of course, stops ahead of the repetition and enhancement of the verse, with a call for death in 20:13.)

As a hospital chaplain, I describe my role as helping patients, family and staff to remember who they are when they are not in such vulnerable circumstances. My work is to help them articulate their core beliefs and values even as they are ill, suffering, struggling. Physical therapists tell me that patients begin to lose muscle tone after about 48 hours in a hospital bed, and I believe those same patients also begin to lose “person tone”, aspects of their identity, in that same time frame. Families’ lives are turned upside down as they try to cope with a loved one’s illness, and staff struggle with the same anxieties and agitations around the pandemic, and local, national, and global affairs as the patients and families. My daily work includes listening to stories. I am attentive to the narrative as well as the spaces between the words and to what is unsaid. I reflect back what I hear to help people hear themselves; to encourage them to confront and release concerns

and fears from their bodies so they have room to breathe and to heal; and to help them re-orient, re-member through the chaos of illness or work. Every day I meet strangers for whom the hospital, a temporary structure made of concrete and steel, and its language and customs, are foreign. I try to welcome each person to themselves, even in this time of crisis. I know what it feels like to be a stranger to myself and to others; to be trapped in crisis and illness, in a web of bias, judgment, and isolation. I do not pretend to know what anyone else's versions feel like. As a chaplain I have the honor, pleasure, and responsibility to help reduce these feelings in others and commit daily to keeping my eyes, ears, and heart open. Encountering Leviticus 18:22 is a sharp reminder that the world is filled with hatred, shame, resentment, and fear of the other even in the best of times. There are people who use this verse as a weapon against themselves as well as against others. Sometimes this verse is the only one people know, forgetting about caring for the poor, leaving gleanings for the hungry, treating others as they wish to be treated.

What of Jack? Over the course of our visits, I learned he had grown up in New York City, was retired from civil service, had never married, and lived alone. He did not socialize much, or go to church, and desperately wanted to be discharged home. When the hospital social worker went to check the apartment for safety, he returned with the sad truth that the apartment was in such a state of disarray and filth that it was not habitable. Jack would be discharged to a nursing home, and his apartment emptied and returned to the landlord.

I never did learn which religious rules Jack believed he had broken or why he was sure he would be punished in Hell. I did, however, learn some basics of the chaplaincy I try to practice every day—to care for the person in front of me as she/he/they present, to rejoice in difference as much as in similarity, to welcome the stranger in each of us, and to tolerate the uncertainty of not knowing the answer.

These words from Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah in the Talmud (BT Hagiga 3b) speak volumes: “May we acquire an ear like a funnel and a perceptive heart to understand all the contradictory voices.” **Amen.** *(Linda S. Golding is Staff Chaplain and Coordinator, Pastoral Services Milstein Hospital, New York Presbyterian Hospital; Adjunct Lecturer at JTS)*

[The Threat And Promise of Conformity by Rabbi Dr. Bradley Shavit Artson](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/threat-and-promise-of-conformity/)
<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/threat-and-promise-of-conformity/>

In the movie *Zelig*, Woody Allen portrays an individual who repeatedly rises to the pinnacle of success through his uncanny ability to become identical to those in power. Time after time, Zelig is able to transform himself into the image of people around him, and those people reward his ability by offering Zelig influence,

prominence and prestige.

The movie audience sees Zelig in photographs with Indian chieftains, Nazi generals and capitalist millionaires. In each case, he has become more like them than they are themselves. Always in the center, always a passionate advocate, Zelig's zeal and enthusiasm bear the mark of his insecurity. His very passion reveals his wish to belong.

Zelig portrays the Jews throughout history. Like him, we too have managed to adopt the look and the rhythm of the cultures in which we dwell. We take it as a matter of pride that we become better guardians of the dominant culture than are its biological children. Always under suspicion of being outsiders, we seek to prove our right to belong through our zeal and our ingenuity.

Assimilation, the drive to become like the people we live among, is a time-honored Jewish passion. It is certainly one of our consummate talents. American Jews talk, dress, vacation and work as do all other Americans. With a few exceptions, our habits and lifestyles reflect the priorities of American culture.

Our Torah portion addresses this issue in clear terms. "You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you . . . You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live."

Against Assimilation

Here, God speaks out clearly against all forms of assimilation. The guiding assumption of this passage is that we are tempted to become like the people with whom we live, so there is a need to speak out against this all-too-natural impulse. Why? Because one cannot blindly adopt the standards of other people and simultaneously remain true to the values of the Torah and rabbinic traditions. You cannot serve two masters. Or can we? Is the condemnation of assimilation really that sweeping? Isn't it possible to learn (albeit selectively) from the accumulating wisdom of human experience, science and insight?

Two medieval interpreters do read the verse in a more restricted light. Rashi understands this as applying only to the Egyptians and the Canaanites, who were "more corrupt than all other nations." Abraham ibn Ezra (12th century Spain) explains that this stricture applies to "the Egyptian legal system."

Both of these sages perceive that there is much to be learned from the wisdom of non-Jews. Not only in the realm of science, but also in human relations, Jewish traditions have been open to insights from other peoples. The key, both to this Torah verse and to the later interpretations, lies in the final phrase.

Those non-Jewish practices and insights which strengthen Jewish survival, which sensitize us as a people, which teach us how to be more loving, more caring and more sensitive, which prompt us to understand more about Judaism and to practice it more fully, pose no threat to our Jewishness.

On the contrary, we benefit from their inclusion. An openness to learn, however, should not be mistaken for the blind adoption of all Gentile standards. Torah and later Jewish traditions stand as the ultimate counterculture—opposing all that would cheapen human life or reduce our consciousness of the holy.

Much in modern life deserves our opposition. But those insights that strengthen Torah, which make Jewish identity more vibrant and more central, deserve our study and our adoption. In cultivating those insights, we harvest a growing Torah. By adding to the riches of our heritage, we assure its continued greatness.

(Rabbi Dr. Bradley Shavit Artson is dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies and vice president of American Jewish University in Los Angeles. He is also dean of the Zacharias Frankel College in Potsdam, Germany, ordaining Conservative rabbis for Europe. His website is www.bradartson.com.)

[When Leaders Have Moral Failings by Rabbi Charles P. Sherman](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/all-of-our-sins/)

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/all-of-our-sins/>

Violent Divine retribution. The slaughter of animals. The sprinkling of blood. Sexual perversions. Arcane rituals. Shame and atonement.

These are not topics culled from “yellow journals” or television “news magazines,” but rather from the Torah portion, Ahare Mot, or “after the death...” Passages such as these have often been difficult for moderns to digest, let alone difficult to comprehend.

After all, why should we care to read about how the ancient priesthood of Judaism conducted ritual sacrifices, the slaughter of animals, or how to dash blood about? And why would anyone care to read, in precise detail, about seemingly arcane rites of purification, the priestly wardrobe? And does anyone really need to be told not to engage in bestiality?

Easy to Dismiss

It is easy to respond patronizingly to such texts and to explain them away as remnants of our primitive past. But “difficult” texts like Parshat Ahare Mot contain meaning for the contemporary world — and even for social action itself.

The death referred to in the title of this portion refers to the deaths of the High Priest Aaron’s sons, who were punished by God after offering up “strange” sacrifices. This portion begins with descriptions of priestly sacrificial rites, outlines priestly conduct for Yom Kippur, and details forbidden sexual acts. We no longer offer up animal sacrifices to God, but the ethical insights of this text are eternal: it is not just about ritual purity, but moral purity as well.

Most especially, Ahare Mot is concerned with the purity of leaders. The text directs Aaron, the progenitor of the Jewish priesthood, that “from all your sins shall you be clean before God.”

We might imagine that Aaron, alongside Moses the leader of the Jewish people in their exodus from slavery and their journey toward revelation, would not need to be told to behave in a pure fashion. And yet not only did Aaron’s sons cross the

boundaries of Judaism, but Aaron himself was also a key participant in the idolatrous act of worshiping the golden calf. Leaders — even religious leaders — can clearly behave inappropriately and, unfortunately, unethically. Even religious leaders who seem beyond reproach, the very leaders who seem to transcend the moral weaknesses of most human beings, are themselves sometimes subject to the same ethical challenges of humanity as a whole. But for many of us, including this writer, the moral failings of leaders are far more difficult to absorb than the sins of the proverbial “average Joe.”

As the sages lament, power can stain those who possess it, and “would that on leaving the world” leaders be “as free of sin as upon entering it.” From financial to sexual improprieties, we are endlessly bombarded with new revelations of our leaders’ failings. This is also true of our own Jewish communal leadership, and not simply that of society as a whole.

Ethics Matter

This Torah portion is in part a warning that no matter how charismatic, no matter how skilled, and no matter how successful in serving a cause, a leader’s ethics matter. No matter how much money is raised or how many people are served by a leader, his or her ethics have an impact upon the entire community and upon our community’s moral agenda. And efforts on behalf of tikkun olam (repairing the world) cannot somehow cancel out an individual’s ethical — or unethical — conduct.

This lesson, unfortunately, needs to be reiterated over and over again — not only in public life at large, but also in our own community. If the priests of antiquity needed to cleanse themselves of their sins, so too do our contemporary leaders — even, or especially, those identified with social action, and with Jewish causes at large — need to be ethically whole. Let us not morally compartmentalize our personal and common moral agenda. May all of us, leaders and “regular Joes” alike, strive to be clean before God. (*Rabbi Charles P. Sherman, D.D., has been the spiritual leader, teacher, and counselor of the Temple Israel in Tulsa, Oklahoma since 1976. Ordained in 1969 at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, he is a Past-President of the Southwest Association of Reform Rabbis.*)

Reading The Prohibition Against Homosexuality In Context by Rabbi Neal J. Loevinger

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/reading-the-prohibition-against-homosexuality-in-context/>

You shall not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; it is abhorrent” (Leviticus 18:22

Pshat

This whole section of the Torah is called the *arayot*, literally the “nakednesses” (if that’s a word). It is a list of sexual relationships forbidden to Israelite men, including various forms of incest, bestiality, and, apparently, homosexual relationships.

Drash

This verse is one of the most problematic in the entire Torah; its meaning seems to be quite obvious, and yet it is extremely difficult for many Jews to take at face value. Could the Torah — which has at its core the message that Israel must not despise or abuse the weak, helpless, or outnumbered in its midst — really be declaring that loving relationships between two consenting adults is abhorrent, even worthy of the death penalty? (Cf. [Leviticus 20:13](#), a repetition and strengthening of this prohibition.)

It makes no sense from an ethical perspective: A central purpose of ethics is to regulate and make fair differentials in power and privilege. To put it another way, ethics is about keeping everybody from taking advantage of one another. Thus, mutually consenting relationships between equals would seem to present no ethical problem.

Many people of a traditional religious perspective see these verses as establishing the primacy of heterosexual relationships — for them, the ethical message is one of preserving “traditional” — i.e., heterosexual — families. The claim is often made that validating gay or lesbian relationships would undermine such families and give people the “option” of choosing nontraditional lives. Yet the children of gay and lesbian families turn out to be gay at roughly the same rate as everybody else — so this theory would seem to have little credence.

It seems, rather, that some people are naturally attracted to same-gender relationships, and find in them all the emotional and personal fulfillment that any heterosexual couple might hope for.

Let’s assume further that a good and loving God would not create certain people to face the awful choice between permanent loneliness and loyalty to Torah — I cannot accept that the God of Israel’s Redemption would not love all those who are created in God’s Image.

So how then do we interpret, or re-interpret, these verses, which apparently deny gay and lesbian Jews even the possibility of affirmation? Dr. Avi Rose, a psychologist and Jewish educator (and sometimes Kolel faculty), reviews current thinking about the historical context of this verse in a lovely and moving essay in the anthology *ReCREATIONS*.

Dr. Rose notes, for example, that the prohibitions on homosexuality occur in the context of rules forbidding Israelites from copying the religious practices of other nations. Furthermore, he quotes scholars who show that other ancient nations did, in fact, engage in rituals with temple prostitutes “of both genders.” The word for “abhorrent act,” *to’evah*, may be specifically related to non-Israelite religious practice.

Another possibility is that the Torah is specifically forbidding relationships between grown men and boys. This would make more sense as an ethical rule, given that children can never be considered truly consenting in sexual relationships.

What seems clear to me is that this text in Leviticus could not have been prohibiting long-term, loving, open, committed relationships between people of the same genders — because such relationships were probably inconceivable to the Torah's human editors. Instead, the Torah seems to be talking about sex in the context of non-Israelite religious practices, or abusive uses of power, or some kind of sexual contact outside established, consensual relationships.

In other words, the Torah is probably prohibiting the kind of sexual behaviors a contemporary Jewish ethic might posit as problematic for any religious and ethically sensitive Jew, gay or straight. By looking at both historical context and making plain our theological assumptions, one may thus find the seeds of ethical guidance and holiness of deed in even the most difficult and controversial passage. *(Rabbi Neal Joseph Loevinger is currently the rabbi of Temple Beth-El in Poughkeepsie, NY. A former student at Kolel, he served as Kolel's Director of Outreach from late 1999-2001. He was ordained in the first graduating class of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies of the University of Judaism, and holds a Master's of Environmental Studies from York University in Toronto.)*

~~~~~  
**Coming Up at Kol Rina**

**Two excellent Brunch and Learn opportunities in May**

**Chef Noam Bar Osher, May 1 at 10:30 am**

Live from Israel, Chef Noam Ben Osher will teach us the art of Israeli salatim (salads) and their significance in Israeli culture, as well as the relationship between the cuisines of other Middle Eastern/Mizrachi countries and Israel. Join us for this fun cooking experience via Zoom. Ingredient lists will be provided to all who register.

Noam Bar Osher is an Israeli chef, living in Jerusalem. A graduate of the Bishulim Culinary School in Tel Aviv, his expertise is in creating innovative and high end Israeli cuisine. Noam has worked in Israel's top restaurants, including "The Rooftop" at Mamilla and "La Regence" at the King David Hotel.

Use the following link to register on Eventbrite:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/workshop-creating-israeli-salatim-salads-w-chef-noam-bar-osher-tickets-321271249957?>

\*\*\*\*\*

**Henry Sapoznik, May 22 at 10:30 am**

Henry Sapoznik, a five time Grammy-nominated producer/performer and founding director of the sound archives of the YIVO institute, will speak to us on "Jews and Jazz." Details to follow; save the date!

\*\*\*\*\*

**Both of these excellent Brunch-and-Learn programs are sponsored by the Susan Marx Fund for Adult Education at Kol Rina.**

