

Acharei Mot 5/4/19 “Vulnerable” (Poway)

Shabbat Shalom. It goes without saying that our thoughts and prayers go out to the victims of violence in Poway/San Diego. Many people have expressed to me their sadness about this tragedy, and some of those people also expressed a sense of urgency about taking measures to ensure our safety, a mandate which our shul has been pursuing over the past few months. However, other individuals seemed resigned to their expectation that it will happen again, because this took place just 6 months after Pittsburgh, and they reported feeling numb.

But it's important that we **not** give in to that kind of numbness, for several reasons. Not only can resignation impede our efforts to protect ourselves, but even more importantly, the Torah says that we **must** allow ourselves to feel – we must not become like a rock that cannot express feelings. The purpose of every tragedy is to connect to spirituality, to Torah, and to God.

Our Sages teach us that these are the kind of events that should encourage us to do teshuvah, to return to God. This week's Parsha is fitting for this sentiment in several ways. The title is *Acharei Mot*, “after the deaths of,” which unbeknownst to us, was probably meant for this week and year. It's also fitting that the content of *Achrei Mot* is also the service for Yom Kippur, the day set aside for Teshuvah. Moreover, this week's portion is where we find the Yom Kippur Torah readings: On Yom Kippur morning, we read about the service in the Beit Hamikdash on Yom Kippur, found at the beginning of *Achrei Mot*, and in the afternoon we read about illicit relationships, which is at the end of this week's parsha.

In all these ways, our parsha is intimately tied to Yom Kippur. It may seem surprising, then, that the Parsha never mentions Yom Kippur. Why not? The reason is because **our parsha is the source** for the Yom Kippur service, **not** the other way around.

It actually discusses the service performed on the first day of Nisan, which was the inaugural ceremony of the Mishkan in the desert, and we use that service to teach us what we will do in the Beit Hamikdash on Yom Kippur. Nonetheless, this begs the question – what is the basis for the connection between our Parsha and Yom Kippur?

There are several other questions many commentators ask about our parsha. Why does the parsha begin with “Acharei mot shnei bnai Aharon”, “after the deaths of the 2 sons of Aharon,” an episode which occurred 4 weeks ago in Parshat Shemini? Why suddenly mention it now? And why is that phrase so important that it becomes the title of the parsha? Another question is, why do we read about illicit relationships in this parsha and on Yom Kippur? There are many commentators who try to connect that topic to Yom Kippur, for example, they suggest that it's the sort of issue we should be most concerned about on Yom Kippur, but that connection seems tenuous and somewhat shallow.

There must be a deeper explanation, and we can find a clue in the story of Yosef and his brothers. When they do not recognize him at first, he takes that opportunity to accuse them of espionage, which he expresses by saying, “Ki et ervat ha'aretz batem lirot”, “You came to see the nakedness of the land.” *Ervat ha'aretz* -- the same word used for illicit relationships, *arayot*. Because nakedness – *erva* – is a concept that refers to vulnerability.

Yosef accused his brothers of trying to take advantage of “*Ervat Ha’aretz*”, where the Egyptians might be vulnerable. Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler in *Michtav Me’Eliyahu* when explaining the concept of *tzniyut*, modesty, clarifies that the purpose of *arayot* is not simply a prohibition, to determine who you’re **not** supposed to relate to. The purpose of the *arayot* list is also to help you identify who you **should** relate to. Because *Erva* - nakedness - vulnerability --is **not** simply the basis for negative interactions in which we can be taken advantage of. *Arayot* teaches that **vulnerability is also the foundation for meaningful relationships**.

The essence of Yom Kippur is that it’s a day on which we make ourselves vulnerable to God. That’s why the theme of death runs throughout the day.

We wear a *kitkel*, a garment of death, and we act like angels in the spiritual world, by refraining from activities connected with our physical life - eating, drinking, bathing, wearing shoes, etc. It’s as if we’re dead while we’re alive. Because nothing can make you feel more vulnerable than acknowledging that you will die someday. And that feeling of vulnerability brings us closer to God and helps us return to Him.

Which brings us back to the phrase *Acharei Mot*. When Nadav and Avihu died in Parshat Shemini, Aharon accepted their deaths, even though he didn’t understand why they died. Because that kind of acceptance of vulnerability is what makes us closer to God. Therefore, the name of our Parsha is *Acharei Mot*, which literally means “after death”, because we realize we’re most vulnerable when we’re reminded of our mortality. That’s the realization Aharon had.

This is why we read this section on Yom Kippur - because it reveals the importance of vulnerability, both in its section of *Arayot*, and its reference to the deaths of the Aharon’s sons.

I also think that’s the significance in the sequence of the modern Jewish special days that are currently occurring - Yom Hashoah this past week and Yom Hazikaron and Yom Ha’atzmaut in the upcoming week, and later on in the month, Yom Yerushalayim. Real success can only occur after coming face to face with the awareness of the vulnerability of the human condition.

If there is anything the San Diego and Pittsburgh shootings can teach us, it’s that we’re vulnerable human beings. Every breath we take is literally in God’s hands. But the lesson of our Parsha is that we can use that feeling for a positive end, by channeling it to strengthen our connection to God. I think the parsha might be signaling to us that there is only one way to end this madness -- if we can accept our vulnerability during the commemoration of the terrible events from our past, we can go on to celebrate the victories that we will, God willing, soon experience in our future. Shabbat shalom.