

Parashat Acharei Mot/Shabbat Hagadol (Leviticus 16:1-18:30)
Why Scapegoat?
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On March 31, The New York Times ran an astonishing page: a photo showing Christian, Jewish and Muslim clerics gathered in what the newspaper called “a rare show of unity.” What brought these sometime enemies together? The headline told the story: “Religious Chiefs Decry Gay Pride Fest in Jerusalem.”

Lorri L. Jean, executive director of the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center, sent the article out to many of us in the community with a short introduction: “Finally, the way to peace in the Middle East. Uniting against us!”

Do we laugh or cry? The people in the photo would have us hang our heads in shame, but instead we shake our heads in disbelief. When I read further, I realized why they are afraid – the people they imagine us to be are not the people we are. They envision a scary “other,” a kind of “terrorist” actively seeking to destroy their way of life, while I picture people I actually know, people like me and my partner and my congregants – Jews who take Judaism seriously, living Jewish lives in a caring community. Like many who journey to Israel, we look forward to visiting Jerusalem in the company of others who would gather to study, to pray, to celebrate respect and appreciation for one another, earnest in our belief that we too are created in God’s image, and charged with the responsibility of making our world a better one.

This week’s Torah portion, Acharei Mot, gives us the first of two verses in Torah that have been understood for generations as prohibiting men from having sex with other men: “You shall not lie with a male like lying with a woman: it is an offensive thing” (Leviticus 18:22). Along with Leviticus 20:13, the verse continues to be the source of much agony in our time as gay men and lesbians struggle for civil rights and for a place in religious communities. During discussions of marriage equality or who can be a rabbi, it is still the verse most commonly quoted.

In response to the three clerics who made the front page of The New York Times, in just one week several hundred clergy, mostly from the United States, signed on to a letter of support for WorldPride in Jerusalem, saying, among other things, that “Jerusalem, a living, holy city, a pilgrimage site for people of many faiths and many beliefs, increases in holiness when all are welcome within her walls.”

I am grateful to be hearing voices of other clergy speaking out. But I’m also saddened by the necessity of pitting ourselves one against another, spending our time and energies fighting each other instead of looking for common ground.

Acharei Mot begins with a different set of instructions before arriving at the litany of sexual prohibitions. God instructs Moses to instruct Aaron on the sacrifices of expiation to be offered on Yom Kippur. Therein we find the original scapegoat – an actual goat on whose head “Aaron shall lay both his hands ... and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites” (16:21) before sending it off into the wilderness. Ever since this practice ended (or maybe before it began), individuals and groups have served as scapegoats – the declared cause of this, that and another ill that has befallen society or that prevents people or nations from being all they could be. Having invented the idea of scapegoat, Jews ironically are no strangers to serving as one. So we know the unfairness and inaccuracy of the practice, yet we ourselves also often manage to engage in scapegoating. Liberal Jews scapegoat Orthodox Jews and vice versa, to name but one example.

But as Aaron did with the original scapegoat, when we scapegoat human beings we also send them away into the wilderness. We banish them from our lives by describing them as enemies, by imagining we have nothing in common, by deciding to fear each other, by condemning or dismissing or blaming one another. All of which, of course, makes it increasingly unlikely that we will ever instead get to know one another, ever look for our common humanity, ever discover our shared respect for the values and ethics of our shared religions or our shared God.

This Shabbat is Shabbat Hagadol, the Shabbat before Pesach begins, a time to ready ourselves for this z'man kheruteinu – the “season of our freedom.” Wouldn't it be a wonder if “this year in Jerusalem” we found both freedom of religion and the freedom that comes to each of us when we feel true respect for one another?

Chag Pesach sameach.