

Parashat Acharei Mot
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Death, sex, violence, and rules. All the elements needed for a great movie? Well, not this time. It is an overly brief outline of this week's parasha, Acharei Mot.

What connects these various parts to each other and to a people? What can we learn that will help us in our everyday life?

The big question this week is what is there in common? We start with a reminder of the death of 2 of Aaron's sons. Aaron is told not to mourn and then the parasha goes on to detail the way the High Priest (Aaron) is to honor Yom Kippur.

Part of that ritual is the sacrifice of the 2 he-goats, one directed for God, the other for Azazel. The former is sacrificed on the alter, with all the appropriate blood splattering. Aaron lays his hands on the other, giving him the sins of the whole Israelite community. The goat is then set free in the wilderness while later practice has the goat being driven over a cliff.

The parasha then moves to a very specific list of sexual prohibitions, almost all involving details of incest, having sex with relatives, whether by blood or marriage. There are 2 notable exceptions: a woman may not have sex with an animal and a man may not lie with another man as he would with a woman.

Okay, now back to my questions at the beginning: What connects these elements, what do they have to say to us of the Department of Jewish Family Concerns?

At my first Kallah in Santa Cruz, I studied with Deborah Lipstadt. We studied the Holiness code, which begins this week. The purpose of the code, we learned, was to develop a community in which all could live safely, knowing what to expect from others and ourselves. We could trust that others were acting with the same high standards as we were. We knew we were safe. Now, let's look at the parasha again. Aaron's sons were killed because they did not follow the rules. They wanted to draw closer to God and thought they could do more. They tried to go beyond the rules and were punished.

The Yom Kippur rituals were designed to bring the community together. While the High Priest does most of the work, the community has rules as well. Several times (at least 3) is the phrase "it is a law for all times." We were to be a holy community, for our God was Holy. Modern society has changed the concept of the scapegoat. The scapegoat is no longer one who receives our sins, but rather someone who is to blame for them. Maybe a return to the original meaning is best. Isn't that what Yom Kippur is all about? We must first acknowledge our sins, our problems, before we can do something about them, before we can turn away from them.

The main reason for giving the sexual prohibitions is that these are practices in Egypt where we left and in Canaan where we are going. We should separate ourselves from these communities and maintain ourselves as our own community so we will not defile the land or ourselves. Again, we need to know the rules. Some rules are to establish God's authority over us. I am Adonai your God, says the closing verse. Others establish this safe community. In those days women had little rights and few protections. Their status came from their father and then their husband. These sex rules protected the woman. She could feel safe in her home and her community, knowing that those men she was with on a close basis could not have sex with her.

There is a major conflict here with an earlier period in the Bible, however. One of the "rules" states that a man may not marry his wife's sister, there should not be conflict between the sisters. As Ellen Frankel states in her "Five Books of Moses", Rachel and Leah should have been so lucky. In those days, people knew what they were to do and not to do. Jews maintained their closed communities for thousands of years. It wasn't that long ago when Jews could say "Jews didn't do certain things" and really believe it.

Today, the world is different, there are Jewish alcoholics and wife beaters and drug addicts and adulterers. Jewish people have eating disorders and get divorced and have children without marriage. Jewish people get old and need support. Jews are part of blended families, they move away from family. Where is this safe community now? And, by the way, that's what this department is all about; creating safe communities within our temples. We have programs for (almost) all the problems that face our congregants. We have programs or materials on things from eating disorders to bioethics, from marital preparation to aging. We try to give our people a safe place to go, to recognize their problems and deal with them, within the Temple community.

Do we need to re-work this parasha? Many of the "rules" are still valid. Others, including the Yom Kippur rituals, have already been changed. There is no longer a High Priest, there is no Holy of Holies, and there is no one to pronounce the unpronounceable name of God. There are no more sacrifices. If these laws which were "for all times" can be changed, then why not some of the others? With the blended families, we might also need to look at some of the sexual prohibitions. Maybe we should add a man should not uncover the nakedness of his stepdaughters or a son should not do so with his stepsister. And today, with no apologies to Senator Santorum, we do not consider it an abomination if a man lies with another man.

This is not the time to get into a discussion about the specific prohibitions or why some within the Jewish community will say "See it says in the Bible...", about one or two while ignoring others. What is most important is the concept of the reason for the rules, the need for the safe community, the Holy Nation.

This department, led so incredibly well by Rabbi Address and Marcia Hochman, is carrying on the work of the true meaning of the Holiness Code. Marcia has helped us be a Holy Nation and we will miss her greatly. We are creating safe communities in which our people can look at their lives and turn away from their "sins". If we could carry the problems away, on the back of a goat, we would. But we do the next best; we help each person carry on.

And this shall be a law for all times...

Amen