

April 23, 1999 Parashiot Acharei-mot/Kedoshim

Week of Yom Ha-atzmaut (Israel Independence Day) and National Poetry Month

Rabbi Lisa A. Edwards

When I was in grade school I remember watching some of the kids be mean to a classmate named Ellen. Kids were always mean to Ellen. She was one of those kids that got teased a lot. I went up to her after they went away. I'm afraid to be friends with you, Ellen, I said, I'm afraid they'll be mean to me too, but I do like you. I was a bit of coward in those days, not that I'm especially brave now. I told my mom about the problem later that afternoon. You can't ignore her, my mother said, it's not right that kids tease her, but don't be one of them. Ellen and I were kind of friendly after that, never best friends, just friendly. Sometimes I went over to her house to play. I could see why the kids teased her, but I also kind of liked her. I don't know what ever happened to her.

When I was in high school there was a girl named Susan who was kind of weird. Really smart, and kind of weird. She stayed home a lot from school. She had some psychological problems, had trouble adjusting -- I know that from observing her. She wrote wonderful poetry which my favorite teacher showed me. "Will you go visit Susan at home?" my favorite teacher asked me one day. "Susan doesn't fit in very well, as you know, but I think it would be really good for her if you'd go visit her." I went. We spent a couple of hours talking. I don't remember what we talked about. We also wrote each other a few letters after that -- she sent me some of her journal pages and poetry. She was a really good writer. We were never good friends exactly, just friendly. She went off to one of those small women's colleges in the east -- I forget which one. I don't know what ever happened to her.

No doubt some of why some of you don't love yourselves, despite our Torah's simple instruction to do so, is because of the generations-long fallout from two of its neighboring verses in Leviticus, both of which appear in this week's two Torah portions, "the dreaded verses as we in this community are wont to call them:

"A man shall not lie with a man as he lies with a woman: it is a toevah, an abomination." [18:22]

"A man shall not lie with a man as he lies with a woman: it is a toevah, an abomination. They shall surely die, their blood upon them." [20:13]

I do hope you'll be able to join us on May 14 and 15, when our scholar-in-residence Rabbi Stephen Greenberg, an out gay Orthodox rabbi, takes on the Leviticus verses. But even if Rabbi Greenberg manages to clarify for us, or soothe us in some way, ease the pangs of worry or guilt that I know many of you still feel when you hear these verses, he won't be able to repair the damage that has already been done -- the violence that's come over the centuries, even until this day, in the wake of those verses. They live on, these verses, still used as permission for violence against our community.

If a man lies with a male . . . Mot yu-ma-tu : they will surely die: if our society continues to give tacit permission to kill them. Mot yu-ma-tu : They shall surely die . . . from suicide, from striking back, from the pain, loneliness, and self-hatred that descends when families withdraw their love or express their disappointment. D'mei-hem bam -- "their blood is upon them" -- shed by those who feel free to kill faggots, dykes, queers.

They shall surely die, their blood

This past Wednesday I was listening to the radio, a call in show talking about the school slaughter in Littleton, Colorado. A psychoanalyst was on who specializes in teenagers. Everyone calling in was saying what about the teachers? what about the killers' parents? The psychologist said what about the parents of the other kids? Did anyone ever teach them not to be mean to kids who are different? Did anyone ever teach them tolerance? acceptance? appreciation of difference? He wasn't condemning or judging -- just asking questions. Did anyone ever teach them acceptance, appreciation of difference? My mother taught me, so did my favorite high school teacher.

There is a young Jewish gay man in a California prison today, imprisoned as a teenager for killing a teenage friend of his brother in response to the torment his brother and friend imposed on him because he was gay. I don't defend his actions. I do wonder what might have happened had his own brother been kind instead of torturous.

I'm not defending the killers here. I'm just wondering. I'm wondering how many of us were at some point in our lives victims of teasing or bashing or ostracism, not necessarily because you were gay, just "other" in some way. And how many of us teased or bashed or ostracized, or acquiesced in some way when others did? How many of us do so today?

All experts agree: the seeds are sown years before the war breaks out. Look at Kosovo or Israel, or any other war spot in the world today. Will there ever come a time when we will celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut -- Israel's Independence Day -- without any fear for how long Israel might last? or how long until the next war or terrorist attack? or without any guilt for the oppression of Palestinians that continues despite everyone's earnest wishes that the Israeli government could see its way clear to stopping

upon them, when the seeds of intolerance and hatred overcome the other verses of Kedoshim, the holiness code, the section that comes between the two passages of sexual restrictions and teaches us how to make ourselves more like God, how to make ourselves holy. The sexual prohibitions frame that code, but are not part of it. The way to holiness instead calls upon us not just to control our sexual urges, to think about who we choose as sexual partners; the holiness code tells us how to interact, behave toward people who are not intimates. It too is a poem of sorts -- listen:

*God spoke to Moses, saying:
Speak to the entire community of the children of Israel, and say to them:
Holy are you to be, for holy am I, God your God. Each of you: your mother and your father you are to hold in awe, and my Sabbaths you are to keep: I am God your God.
Do not turn your faces to no-gods, and molten gods you are not to make yourselves, I am God your God.*

. . . .
*Now when you harvest the harvest of your land, you are not to finish (to the) edge of your field in harvesting, the full-gathering of your harvest you are not to gather; your vineyard you are not to glean, the break-off of your vineyard you are not to gather -- rather, for the afflicted and the sojourner you are to leave them, I am God your God.
You are not to steal, you are not to lie, you are not to deal-falsely, one with the other.
You are not to swear by My name falsely, thus profaning the name of your God -- I am God.
You are not to withhold (property from) your neighbor, you are not to commit-robbery. You are not to keep-overnight the working-wages of a hired- hand [with you until morning].
You are not to insult the deaf, before the blind you are not to place a stumbling block: rather, you are to hold your God in awe; I am God.
You are not to commit corruption in*

it?

Who among us who loves Israel even a little bit, feels emotionally tied to it, even if ever so slightly, doesn't feel the ambiguity and the pain -- we want just to love Israel unconditionally, and maybe we do, but we can't find the same love for the government of Israel that we find for the place. Or we love its declaration of independence, just like we love our own country's declaration of independence, but see the way neither country has been so successful at living up to their lofty founding words. In the light of all the conflicts in Israel today: Palestinians vs Israelis; the call for early elections; Israel Vs her neighbors; Ultra-Orthodox Vs progressive Jews (including the attempts to keep liberal Jews by choice from becoming Israeli citizens or Jewish women from praying at the Western Wall); Ashkenazim Vs Sephardim; etc., in the light of all the conflicts in Israel, consider this paragraph from the DECLARATION OF ISRAEL'S INDEPENDENCE Issued at Tel Aviv on May 14, 1948 (5th of Iyar, 5708):

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open to the immigration of Jews from all countries of their dispersion; will promote the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; will be based on the precepts of liberty, justice and peace taught by the Hebrew Prophets; will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens, without distinction of race, creed or sex; will guarantee full freedom of conscience, worship, education and culture; will safeguard the sanctity and inviolability of the shrines and Holy Places of all religions; and will dedicate itself to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

In celebration of Israel's independence day as well as national poetry month, I've been reading some of the poetry of Yehuda Amichai who

justice; you are not to lift-up-in-favor the face of the poor, you are not to overly-honor the face of the great; with equity you are to judge your fellow!

You are not to traffic in slander among your kinspeople. You are not to stand by the blood of your neighbor, I am God.

You are not to hate your brother (or sister) in your heart; rebuke, yes, rebuke another, that you do not bear sin because of that one.

You are not to take-vengeance, you are not to retain-anger in your heart against the children of your kinspeople-- V'ahavta l'rayacha kamocha [Love your neighbor as you love yourself.] but be-loving to your neighbor (as one) like yourself, I am God.

[Leviticus 19:1-4, 9-18 (skip 5-8), trans. Everett Fox, with a few modifications by me]

Sounds simple enough, practical advice. It's not. A stumbling block for one may be a step up for another -- how do you know? The Talmud and other Jewish sources contain endless discussion. Those of you who studied with me last month in our "Words Can Hurt You" class caught a glimpse of how complicated even half a verse can become. What does it mean, for example, not to stand by the blood of your neighbor: Do not help cause someone's blood to be shed? Do not shed someone's blood yourself? Do not just stand there if someone is bleeding? Do not just stand there if you think someone's blood is about to be shed?

Or even the instructions that sound more simple yet:

Lo tignov "You are not to steal;" v'lo t'kha-kha-shu "You are not to deceive;" v'lo t'shakru eesh ba'amito "You are not to tell lies, one to another." [Lev. 19:11]

What about lying to oneself? What about all the situations -- the rabbis of the Talmud thought of lots of them -- when a little lie seems like a good thing? or even a big lie? what about

writes so wrenchingly of the mixed emotions so many Israelis too feel. At the time Amichai's book, *Poems of Jerusalem*, was published in 1988, he had lived in Jerusalem for forty years. This is an excerpt from his poem, "In the Old City":

We are holiday weepers, engraving our names on every stone, infected by hope, hostages of governments and history, blown by the wind, vacuuming holy dust, . . . These stairs [in the Old City] always force us to bob up and down, as if in a merry dance, even those of us who are heavy-hearted. . .
[Yehuda Amichai in *Poems of Jerusalem*, p. 127, trans. by Chana Bloch]

Our friend Rev. Nancy Wilson alerted me to the irony of President Clinton's speech in response to the Colorado shootings, in which he said: "We do know that we must do more to reach out to our children and teach them to express their anger and to resolve their conflicts with words, not weapons." The very next news report, Nancy said, or maybe it was even the President's next comment at a press conference, told of more U.S. bombing raids on Kosovo, including on the office and home of Milosoveich.

When will we learn, or rather, when will we remember, asked another minister this week, remembering the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. -- when will we remember that violence only ever leads to more violence? [essay on NPR on Wed. afternoon]. I do believe that, and yet I acknowledge yet again here my ambivalence. If we do stop bombing, we had better not just leave the country alone, we had better come up with some other way to intervene.

But what way? Why, after all this time, haven't human beings and government leaders, and religious people (I include myself) and resolution conflict negotiators figured out how to solve problems, or at least protect lives, without

when telling a lie might keep someone's blood from being shed? Nothing easy here. Our commandments are not always clear when they stand alone; and up against one another they often seem to contradict.

The situation in Kosovo or the ability of children to be mean to one another are not the only problems with no obvious solutions, or clear course of action toward solution, toward learning instead how to love ourselves and one another.

"Perhaps these are not poetic times at all," wrote the poet Nikki Giovanni, her line captured on one of those delightful poetry-on-the-billboards that have sprung up around town. [In NYC they have poetry on the subways, and you get a whole verse, or even a whole poem, because you get more reading time on a subway ride than driving by a billboard. . . .]

"Perhaps these are not poetic times at all," I read the other day, and thought about how Nikki Giovanni had been one of the first poets I remember studying, back in grade school or junior high, when one of my teachers used her as a way to teach us about difference, people of different cultures, who use language differently. My teacher taught us how to read poetry and how to see in it a world of difference and how to appreciate that difference and that other world and the people who live in it. Mostly she taught us that the other world is really our world -- we all live here together, and we need to learn to share it, and rejoice in our differences and our humanness . . . "our holiness," I suppose I might say now.

Perhaps these are not poetic times at all, or perhaps poetry is all we need to learn to save the world, to return it to poetic times. I leave you with one more poem. The poem is called "Poetry" and was written by Nikki Giovanni:

*poetry is motion graceful as a fawn
gentle as a teardrop strong like the*

resorting to violence? Why haven't we managed to so even in our own families and communities?

"After all this time," I said, a moment ago, by which I mean in all the time since we've had Torah, specifically since we've had the verse in this week's portion: V'ahavta l'rayacha kamocha - Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Sounds easy, but how many find themselves unable to fulfill even what sounds easiest in that instruction: "love yourself." I can't tell you how many times I've sat with one or another of you while you tell me of the ways you don't love yourself, let alone feel capable of loving someone else. You can be sure those two young men in Littleton didn't love themselves.

Another poem. This one by Ruth Brin, on Leviticus 19, the Holiness Code: [Kedoshim Love Your Neighbor Leviticus 19]

In the center of the Torah is the Book of Leviticus, in the middle of Leviticus is the chapter on holiness, At the core of the chapter on holiness is the command to love your neighbor as yourself.

You are in the midst of Israel, trying to begin by loving your neighbors. But before you can love your neighbor, you must have achieved love of yourself.

Before you can revere your parents, you must have struggled to fulfill the demands of parenthood yourself.

Before you can love a stranger, you must have been a stranger in a harsh land.

God, how can we possibly experience enough and understand enough to love as You love?

From the deep center of our beings, we pray: Lead us toward wisdom and humility, teach us compassion and understanding,

For we long to feel the holiness of Your presence at the inmost center of our lives.

[Ruth Brin in Harvest, p.66 {I changed "Lord" to "God"}]

*eye finding peace in a crowded room
we poets tend to think our words are
golden though emotion speaks too
loudly to be defined by silence
sometimes after midnight or just
before the dawn we sit typewriter in
hand pulling loneliness around us
forgetting our lovers or children who
are sleeping ignoring the weary
wariness of our own logic to compose a
poem no one understands it it never
says "love me" for poets are beyond
love it never says "accept me" for
poems seek not acceptance but
controversy it only says "i am" and
therefore i concede that you are too
a poem is pure energy horizontally
contained between the mind of the poet
and the ear of the reader if it does
not sing discard the ear for poetry is
song if it does not delight discard
the heart for poetry is joy if it does
not inform then close off the brain
for it is dead if it cannot heed the
insistent message that life is
precious*

*which is all we poets wrapped in our
loneliness are trying to say*
[1975, in The Norton Introduction to
Poetry, 2nd ed., J. Paul Hunter, 1981]

Heed the insistent message, then,
won't you? the insistent message that
life is precious.

Shabbat Shalom