

Blood, Dirt and Payphone Emotions: Saying Goodbye with Acharei Mot

By Billy Richling

May 6, 2016 / 29th Nissan 5776

A version of the below d'var torah (literally "a word of Torah" - an analysis of a biblical text) was presented at New York University's Bronfman Center for Jewish Student life in celebration of the final Shabbat service of the 2015-2016 academic year.

"Parasha" is the name given to each of the 54 parts of the Hebrew Torah, which are read week-by-week over the course of a Jewish calendar year. Each parasha is named after the first unique word that appears in its text; the parasha being analyzed here is called "Acharei Mot" or "After the Death."

Sources are provided via hyperlink. Additionally, in this piece I make reference to another d'var torah I'd presented a few weeks earlier. If you'd like to read that first, you can [do so here](#).

In this week's parasha, Acharei Mot, the Israelites are still in the Sinai Desert, and the story picks up, somewhat disjointedly, where parasha Shemini left off a few weeks earlier.

There, the Israelites had been building the Mishkan (tabernacle) as a way to reaffirm their covenant with God after the incident with the golden calf. During the ceremony, two of Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, died after they ran into the inner sanctuary of the Mishkan against God's will.

Acharei Mot tells of how, after the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, God warned that only one person, the Kohen Gadol ("High Priest") could enter the innermost chamber of the Mishkan, on Yom Kippur, to make an offering of a blend of herbs called the ketoret. The parasha also explains that, during Yom Kippur, the Israelites should cast lots over two goats; one will be sacrificed to God in the Mishkan, while the other will be sent into the wilderness, carrying all the sins of the people of Israel on its back. This story is, coincidentally, is where the contemporary concept of "the scapegoat" comes from.

There's a lot of focus on sacrifice and death here. It's depressing. It's also interesting because although ritual sacrifice played a central role in early Judaism, we've moved away from it almost entirely in the modern world. The Torah scholar Rabbi Richard Rubenstein [writes that](#) "an aura of embarrassment hangs over the treatment of sacrifice in contemporary Jewish liturgy." First, he writes, Jews switched from actual sacrifice to a

spoken recitation of the practice. Then the Reform and Conservative movements made efforts to remove recitations regarding sacrifices from their liturgy entirely. Orthodox communities stick to the original script, Rubenstein says, but without a real explanation of why these sacrificial prayers are still relevant to modern life. He points out that one of the reasons we abstract and distance ourselves from sacrifice is that the actual act is, of course, incredibly violent and bloody. Blood means injury or death. It freaks us out.

Later in Acharei Mot comes the commandment not to consume blood, which has become a standard part of Jewish dietary law. The [actual text](#) of the parasha instructs us that “the soul of the flesh is in the blood.” Rav Aaron Raskin, a contemporary Lubavitcher rabbi, [points out](#) that in the Jewish mystic tradition of Kabbalah, dam (blood) represents vitality. The name Adam, which means man, has two parts: the letter aleph and the word dam. Kabbalah teaches that the aleph alludes to God’s holy name, which translates to “I will be that I will be.” The sum of all this is that the name of God gives vitality to blood and therefore, a person’s strength comes from God through their blood.

Blood, the text seems to say, represents something important about our lived experience. Rav Rubenstein contends that there is value in the “symbolic assertion” of ritual sacrifice as a central element of Jewish life. Sacrifice, in whatever form it takes, allows us to bring our aggressions, frustrations and guilt into the domain of the sacred and deal honestly with them. Sacrifice, Rubenstein says, highlights the “multidimensional character of human strivings” that we cannot afford to ignore.

We’re reading this text, of course, in the context of the end of the academic year and my imminent graduation from NYU. So I’m thinking about the ways in which we learn important lessons, and the ways we carry our experiences with us. What Acharei Mot says to me, in evoking the deaths of Nadav and Avihu and in sanctifying blood, is that we cannot learn if we try to sidestep the heart of a challenge. Acharei Mot literally means, “after the death,” and the unfortunate reality of growth is that it often happens in the aftermath of the most awkward, painful or difficult moments of our lives. When we abstract sacrifice, when we pretend that it’s something distant or foreign, we’re doing so because we’re afraid to see the blood that must come with it. But Acharei Mot reminds us that the blood itself is our vitality, the core of who we are. We can’t absolve ourselves for sin, strive for greatness, or grow at all, if we’re unwilling to engage with the visceral, complicated reality in which we live.

In thinking about this process of growing up, evolving and changing, I was reminded of [a short piece](#) published in The New Yorker this January, that has stuck with me. It was written by Ian Frazier, and it’s about the new Link kiosks that are replacing New York City’s old payphones. They’re super fancy; you can go on the internet, there are free calls, free wifi and USB ports to charge your phone. Scott Goldsmith, the president of Intersection, the company installing the Link kiosks, says they’ll “completely change how people interact with the city.”

But Intersection is also refurbishing and leaving in place four old payphones, all on West End Avenue, all of them with the old “superman style” booths. They’ll serve, he says, as “a nod to the wonderful history of the payphone” in New York. In thinking about the change from old to new, Frazier writes:

By design, the Link has no flat surfaces on which you can leave, say, an almost-empty Pabst bottle in a wrinkled paper bag. These Superman booths still have the little shelf beside the phone and always will. Their small privacy will still vibrate, occasionally, with the old lonesome pay-phone emotions of our former lives. The Links, savvier about human entanglements, will not.

At one point in Acharei Mot, we’re commanded to cover the blood of slaughtered animals with dirt. But we only do this for animals that are not put on the altar as a sacrifice for God. Rabbi Baruch Davidson, a hasidic scholar, [explains](#) that blood represents “life, warmth and enthusiasm.” These attributes should be sanctified, so we sprinkle blood on the altar in the Holy Temple. Our excitement should be open and unrestrained when we serve God, help someone in need, or fulfill mitzvot. But during parts of our lives that are more mundane or purely for our own benefit, we should check ourselves, and “cover the blood” as a sign of humility.

Rav Raskin, whom I mentioned earlier, says we when we become totally dedicated to God and do everything for the sake of God, then we can bring joy and passion and vitality even to everyday business and earthly, ordinary things.

This is a lovely message; as we move forward in lives and careers, we should strive constantly to be working in the service of some greater good, and to do everything we do with the passion and love and respect that we would dedicate to God, even if we at times fall short.

But I think, too, about those “old lonesome pay-phone emotions of our former lives,” and about how even as New York experiences profound changes, and as Goldsmith works to make the city better, more modern and more accommodating of its residents, there is value in keeping those four old phones around, in humbly acknowledging what came before the Links, and in paying respect to the grittier, dirtier New York in the rearview mirror. Keeping the superman booths around is like smudging a handful of dirt against the shiny new heart of our city.

The beginning of this parashah recalls the deaths of Aharon’s sons, Nadav and Avihu. In [examining the original text of that story](#), I argued that Nadav and Avihu died in part because, caught in a wave of religious furor, they neglected their responsibility to pull each

other back from the brink. I explained how we have a responsibility to our siblings, not only to support them but to hold them accountable.

Acharei Mot, in evoking the viscerality of sacrifice and the rituals of Yom Kippur, reminds us that supporting each other (and continuing to grow ourselves), is often a challenging, confusing task. Rabbi Shai Held [has explained that](#), according to the 1st-century scholar Rav Eliezer, on Yom Kippur, Israel will be “purified [only] of its sins before God—for violations between people, we have to first seek forgiveness from the person we’ve mistreated.” In other words, we cannot rush straight to God for salvation; first and foremost, our responsibility is to communicate with each other.

All this is to say that, even as we move on from the current semester, or from NYU itself, the relationships we’ve built here are meaningful, long-lasting and deep. And as we work towards greater things, higher-level jobs or other dreams, it’s always worthwhile to remember where we came from and the people we knew when we were there; to stop by the superman-style payphone of our former lives and check in on how things are doing.

I guess what I’m saying is: it’s been a pleasure to be here, and I hope we keep in touch.

Shabbat shalom.