

Acharei Mot
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This Shabbat is Shabbat Hagadol, the great Shabbat. According to Jewish tradition, one of the things that makes it great is that on this day, the rabbi would give his or her longest sermon of the year. So sit back and relax and we can enjoy the oneg in about an hour. Just kidding. Actually, I will be talking about Shabbat Hagadol and other interesting themes of Passover tomorrow morning when we have a discussion and teaching during services. So I invite you to return tomorrow to learn more about Shabbat Hagadol. In the meantime, tonight I wanted to talk a little about the Torah portion for this week and how it can inform our lives today.

The title of this *parasha*, *Acharei Mot*, means after death, and refers to the death of two of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu. In a previous portion, they brought "alien fire" to the Tent of Meeting and in doing so, they drew too close to the presence of God. For this act they were entirely consumed in fire like a sacrificial offering. Interestingly, Moses, Aaron and Aaron's remaining sons do not mourn their loss, though the rest of the community does. I find it fascinating that the actual death of Nadav and Avihu took place three weeks ago in the text. Between then and now we read about *kashrut* and various forms of purity and impurity. Seemingly out of nowhere we are reminded about the death of Aaron's sons and the narrative then continues on about the ritual that is now associated with Yom Kippur. Why is it important to mention in the midst of laws about sin and purity that two of Aaron's sons died? We were already told about their deaths and we moved on from there. So why are we being reminded now?

Throughout the Torah, God's instructions to Moses begin with the line "*Vayomer Adonai el Moshe leimor*" "God spoke to Moses saying..." God is the speaker and Moses is the listener. This time though, the conversation is introduced with the words, "God spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron..." The difference is that Moses is no longer just a listener but is also a mourner. The conversation is now contextualized by loss and tragedy.

What does it mean to be a mourner? Most of us in this room have lost people or pets that we loved dearly. At first it was really hard. Getting used to the idea of someone being gone from our lives was really a struggle at times. A picture, a song, the empty place at the table all reminded us that our father, husband, sister, daughter wasn't coming back. We felt sad and alone and couldn't understand how the rest of the world could keep going forward as if nothing had happened when our lives had just been turned upside down. In a way it gets better with time. The sharpness of the pain eases and life takes on a new way of being normal. As the weeks turn into months we no longer think about our loved one every waking minute of the day. Tasks and priorities claim our attention and we focus our energy outside ourselves. Of course the people around us, our co-workers and friends, have long since forgotten our loss. They don't ask us anymore how we are doing; they just assume we are over it. We may not be over it, but we don't bring it up. We look the same on the outside but our inside is different. The loss stays tucked inside our hearts and we move through our days as changed people.

Grief doesn't just affect us personally; it affects our communities as well. When we are in mourning we are less productive, less able to give time and attention to projects

and committees and organizations that count on us. What if the loss isn't only personal but affects an entire community, like the death of someone who was well-known and loved or a large-scale tragedy in which many families experience a loss? Collective mourning takes time and energy and needs to be acknowledged as a potent force in our lives.

Trying to comprehend the meaning of death is magnified when the loss is on a global scale. Consider for a moment the 22 million people worldwide who have died from AIDS. 22 million. It's almost impossible to imagine so many people. And what about the half million who have died in Darfur and Chad in the last three years? Or the 29,000 children who die every day from preventable diseases? And when we stop to consider that each one of these people who are now gone had parents and families and people that cared about them, the amount of collective grief on the planet is enormous. It is tempting to respond with numbness or silence or rush to move on to other parts of our lives. Yet a grief shared is a load that is lightened. We can move away from the potential of paralysis and hopelessness by confronting our feelings and speaking about them.

Acharei mot – how are we supposed to respond after death both as individuals and as a community? What can the Torah teach us about this universal experience? This portion begins with the acknowledgment of death. Even though it seems that life in the Israelite camp simply continued after Nadav and Avihu died, the reminder we received this week of that event interrupts the flow of laws. It reminds us that the work of building a sacred community is now taking place in the shadow of loss. Perhaps the laws that follow are a result of that tragic event; an attempt to ensure that people will live lives of true holiness and avoid the misstep that cost Nadav and Avihu their lives. For many if not most of us, it takes a concerted effort to become aware of the persistent deaths that occur in places geographically and socio-economically distant from our daily realities. It requires even more effort to internalize what that means and to keep that truth alive in our consciousness and our hearts. *Acharei Mot* ensures that we do not simply forget and move on, allowing death to recede into the background. Rather, it becomes contextualized into the guidelines for how we live our lives afterwards.

What is the message the Torah is trying to impart? It is twofold. First, we do need to get on with our lives. Our own health and well-being depends on getting out of our sorrow and depression and moving on with the business of life. It doesn't help us or our loved ones to become stuck in grief. Channeling that energy into something productive honors the memory of the person who has gone before us. It gives us something to do, a renewed sense of purpose. The living have work to do. Other people need us. The community requires our attention and our time. The imperative that God gave us to be holy is fulfilled when we care for people who are vulnerable; the poor and the stranger who lack the resources that we have.

Second, despite moving on from our loss, we are forever changed. We are all mourners to some degree. Thinking about our losses softens the edges of our hearts. The experience we have been through helps us to have compassion for other people who have been through the same thing. In this way we can love our neighbor as ourselves. We become closer to people we thought were strangers when we realize our shared humanity. By being sensitized to the ache of loss, we create connection and hope. We gain the awareness of being part of a larger whole and that helps to put our own losses into perspective.

Maybe the next time we find ourselves reacting to someone we will pause to consider that person in a larger context as someone who is more like us than we may realize – a person like us with losses to bear. Perhaps some of us will feel moved to act in the larger world to help alleviate the suffering and grief we find there. Let us take the opportunities we have to dissolve the isolation and strangeness that exists between us. Let us be moved by our losses to act in the world with compassion and holiness.

I found a lovely reading on this portion by Lea Goldberg in the newly published book, The Torah: A Women's Commentary. I want to share it with you as a thought to take with you as you move from this space into the consciousness of the other parts of your lives.

In everything there is at least an eighth part that is death. Its weight is not great. With what secret and carefree grace we carry it everywhere we go. On lovely awakenings on journeys, in lovers' words, in our distraction forgotten at the edges of our affairs it is always with us. Weighing hardly anything at all.