After the Death – Parashat Aharei Mot

In the Jerusalem neighborhood of Talpiot lived an older gentleman in a sprawling mansion. He visited the synagogue regularly, especially when large kiddush lunches were served, and stood at the buffet table stuffing himself with kugel and cakes. Everyone at shul enjoyed the sweets but this elderly man took twice as much, filling his pockets and his mouth. Fellow congregants smiled at his anxious hoarding, wondering how a person living in such a large home could be so desperate for just a little bit of herring. Once a curious neighbor asked the gentleman to explain his unusual behavior. The old man replied heavily: "In the concentration camps in Poland there was never enough bread. I guess I have not quite liberated myself from the fear that tomorrow there might not be any more food to eat." (From A Different Night by Noam Zion and David Dishon, p. 33).

I first read this story in Noam Zion and David Dishon's brilliant haggadah, A Different Night, which also includes the tale of Israeli actor, Ezra Dagan. When Dagan was chosen by Steven Spielberg to play the rabbi in his iconic film, Schindler's List, the actor decided to go visit a friend whose father was a Holocaust survivor in order to get a more intimate feel for the experience of those who had lived through Auschwitz. Arriving as the family was sitting down to eat, Dagan was amazed by the rapid pace with which the older gentleman consumed everything on his plate. "Does your father always eat so very quickly?" he asked politely. "I never noticed such a thing but you are right," replied his friend. "It must be a lesson learned from all those years in the camps. There, one could never be sure when one's next meal would come or when it would suddenly be taken away."

"*Vaydaber Adonai el Moshe acharei mot sh'nai b'nai Aharon* – God spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons" (Leviticus 16:1). Thus begins our Torah portion this morning, Aharei Mot, named for

the first two significant words in the parasha's opening line. Aharei Mot literally means "after the death," and refers to the passing of Nadav and Abihu, the priestly boys who perished while drawing too close before God. Yet, the phrase seems particularly apt this morning as we celebrate the first Shabbat after Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) which we commemorated this past Wednesday night and Thursday, standing in solidarity and sorrow with Jews throughout the world. This is the first Shabbat *after the death* of the six million Jews who were murdered in Nazi Europe, entire families and communities wiped out and our most vibrant centers of Jewish learning and culture destroyed. Just as our ancestor Aaron's grief knew no bounds when his precious children were taken from him without warning, so too do our hearts still ache all these many decades after the end of World War II.

Passover and Yom HaShoah have always been closely connected, not only because Holocaust images of deprivation and tyranny such as those captured by Zion and Dishon are perhaps the closest thing to slavery that most of us have ever experienced, but also because of a poignant synchronicity of the Jewish calendar. While Yom HaShoah could have been marked at any time of the year, the rabbis initially chose the date of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising for its observance in order to convey the message that memory of the Holocaust should include not only stories of victimization but also tales of courage and resistance. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising actually occurred on the holiday of Pesach itself but a series of negotiations worked to move Yom HaShoah late enough in the month that there was time to give both the Exodus and the Holocaust their due, yet not so late in the month that the date's symbolism should be lost entirely. As a result, we move from the sweet, freedom-infused taste of fresh hametz on our tongues right back into the bitter waters of history's darkest hour just a few days later.

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising occurred on Erev Pesach 1943, and just over 76 years later, on the last day of Pesach 2019 a gunman entered a Chabad in Poway, California killing a 60-year-old woman and

injuring three other individuals including an 8-year old girl. This terrible event occurred six months to the day after the horrific massacre at Tree of Life congregation in Pittsburgh, it occurred just a few years before we would witness a rabbi and his congregants being held hostage in Colleyville, Texas, it came to be but one of a number of different of chilling events that remind us that the idea of individuals targeted for violence simply because they are Jews is, unfortunately, not something that disappeared with the fall of the Nazi party. "V'hi she'amda," we say on Passover night, "For not just one enemy has stood against us to wipe us out. But in every generation there have been those who stood against us to wipe us out." Aharei Mot – after the death – no longer refers to ancient history. Tragically, it speaks all too well to events in our own day too.

Interestingly enough, Parashat Aharei Mot begins with the death of Aaron's two sons but then moves into a reading we now associate with Yom Kippur, the ritual of the two he-goats. In order to cleanse the people of their sins and to purge the Tabernacle of impurity, the High Priest would designate two goats by lot – one marked for God and offered up as a sacrifice and the other marked for Azazel and sent into the wilderness. This chapter, Leviticus 16, is actually the origin of the common term "scapegoat" as the priest symbolically laid the sins of all the people upon the animal's head; the goat bore the burden of the community's misbehavior through no fault of his own. The rabbis of the Talmud take pains to describe that the two creatures who are chosen in this ritual should be as nearly identical to one another as possible in appearance, height, and value in order to emphasize the fact that there is a certain randomness to life – some of us end up on the path of blessing while others stumble around alone in the wilderness not necessarily because of anything we have or haven't done but because of the vagaries of fate. Indeed, this is also true when it comes to being victims of blame and prejudice. Certain people are randomly designated for hatred and blame though they have done nothing to deserve the malice and prejudice foisted upon them.

A former congregant of mine in Princeton once suggested that the two goats of Aharei Mot reminded her of Isaac and Ishmael, Isaac nearly slaughtered on the altar as a sacrifice and Ishmael sent into the wilderness to starve. And I wonder if the two goats aren't also somehow symbolic of Aaron's four sons – Eleazar and Ithamar marked "for God" and meriting to preside over the sacrificial rite while Nadav and Abihu, for reasons that are not entirely clear, are marked for "the Devil" (as Azazel is sometimes thought to be) and sent to an untimely death. Or perhaps it is exactly the opposite with Nadav and Abihu becoming the very sacrifice that they were supposed to offer while their brothers are launched into the wilderness of grief, shouldering the sins of the community through their role as priests. Either way, the lesson seems to again reinforce the teaching of the rabbis – privilege, status, whether one is seen as superior or inferior – these distinctions are largely controlled by luck or chance rather than by inherent characteristics. It is so easy to blame others– to see Jews, or Muslims, or immigrants, or Blacks as responsible for the ills of society. To designate a scapegoat may be wildly unfair but it can also be psychologically satisfying.

It is not necessarily comforting to me to see those murdered in the Shoah, or the members of Tree of Life Synagogue, or other victims of violence and hatred as the *seir l'Adonai* – the goat marked for "the Lord" in our *parasha* which is ultimately consumed as a sacrifice. While these individuals may indeed by martyrs in the sense that they were ultimately killed simply because they were Jews, I can't believe that God could possibly want for it to be this way – that God somehow wished for these very lives as an offering of any sort. Yet the randomness of the he-goat ritual somehow resonates for me this morning as I think about Poway and Pittsburgh and the Holocaust – how a friend of mine's father, a regular shul-goer at Tree of Life, just happened to stay home that morning with his sick wife and was thus blessedly spared from the massacre, how someone else arrived on the scene at exactly the wrong time and lost her life. How a concentration camp prisoner was clandestinely pulled from the line during selection by

the strong hand of a well-placed friend, while his brother inadvertently looked the wrong way at a vicious guard and was sent to his death. Colleyville could just as easily have been White Plains, could just as easily have been any Jewish community, which is one of the many things that makes it so scary. So much of life depends on pure luck and chance.

In a recent article, Arnie Eisner, former Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, wrote about the question *"Ma Nishtana*?" that we ask each seder night, observing that recent years truly do seem different because of the rise in anti-Semitism that has shaken us to our very core. And indeed this day, this year, feel not quite the same post-Pittsburgh and post-Poway and post-Colleyville which makes this Yom HaShoah feel a bit different as well. It is not even these terrible assaults, horrific as they are, that strike fear deepest in my heart for they are the acts of singular individuals, deeply disturbed and not necessarily representative of society at large. But when we see anti-Semitism growing on both the far right and the far left, when we see our college campuses become bastions of anti-Israel sentiment and champions for BDS, when we watch our neighbors in Ukraine be terrorized by the capricious whims of an evil despot, we can see the shadow of Nazi Germany's past and how an entire nation or even a whole world can slowly, insidiously, start moving towards violence and bigotry. Aharei Mot – on this Shabbat after so very many senseless deaths, we must commit ourselves anew to stemming this terrible tide. We must learn from the lessons of the past and remember how quickly and perniciously hatred can grow.

Aharei Mot – After all of these deaths may we finally learn to send prejudice into the wilderness where it belongs so that we, and all people, can truly be "for God" - dedicated to values of unity, tolerance, and peace.

Shabbat Shalom,

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