

Acharei Mot 5779

Parshat Acharei Mot begins: וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי־יְיָ וַיָּמָתוּ:

“Gd spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron’s two sons....”¹ It is always after somebody’s death. The world is a brilliant combination of life and death, one leading to the other, neither standing on its own. What hurts is when the death is one of your own, when it is a family member or someone you love. It is difficult to go on when the loss is someone who was lodged in your heart.

One of the strengths of Judaism is that all Jews are lodged in our hearts. Not like our family. Not like our closest friends, but all Jews are there, somehow. No one here may have known Lori Gilbert-Kaye, of blessed memory, but I know someone who is related to one of her best friends. She was lodged in my heart.

Yesterday was Yom haShoah, Holocaust Day, on which we remember those who were killed in the Holocaust for being Jews. All of them are lodged in our hearts, and the pain is almost unbearable. Children. Elderly people. Babies. Young couples in love. Fathers and mothers, siblings, cousins, friends.

The word ‘holocaust’ comes from Greek, *holos*, completely, and *kaustos*, burnt, often referring to a kind of burnt offering or sacrifice. When we look at the recent history of the Holocaust, it may seem like a flame that came from nowhere, a raging fire of hatred that devastated many of the great Jewish centers of the world. But it did not come from nowhere.

1. Leviticus 16:1

The flame that roared to life in Germany in the 1930s was found sparking here and there throughout the Roman Empire. It burned strongly in early Christianity, and it never entirely went out. It flared up in the creation of Islam. It was found in Europe and North Africa, in Spain and Turkey. This flame of anti-semitism burned all over the world, sometimes fanned into a greater fire by those who found it useful or those who had more of it in their hearts than most.

This poisonous flame of Jew-hatred manifests itself in strange ways. It affects the Jew who is embarrassed by the obvious Jewishness of our Chasidic brothers and sisters. It affects the New York Times, whose Jewish owners bent over backwards to show that they were not biased in favor of Judaism, coloring their reporting on the Holocaust and on the only Jewish state. It makes it a little bit harder to be a member of this community, as we ask people to help cover the cost of all of our extra security.

The embers of anti-semitism are still burning today. We saw them last week in Poway, we saw them six months ago in Pittsburgh, we see them every day in the words and actions of those who feel that Israel is an evil state.

People hate Jews partly because Jews are different, we are the ‘other.’ This aspect of Jew-hatred is related to the hatred that led to the terrible murders in Sri Lanka, to the attack on the mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, to the shooting in the Pulse nightclub in Orlando. But people also hate Jews because we dare to say ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’² Because we dare to say “You shall love the Eternal your Gd with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your essence.”³ Because we believe that all people are equally children of Gd, and because that affects how we treat others. And our very presence challenges others to to the same.

And so they hate us, because they believe that by hating us or humiliating us or killing us

2. Leviticus 19:18

3. Deuteronomy 6:5

they can prove that they are right and we are wrong. They hate us, in an attempt to drown out that corner of their own hearts that knows that we are right. And they are wrong. Gd will not prevent hate or violence. But Gd prefers love. Gd prefers peace. Gd prefers brotherhood.

In the 1930s German Jews believed that the rise in anti-semitism couldn't last. French Jews did not believe that anti-semitism would affect how the authorities would react to German demands. American Jews did not believe that anti-semitism would keep the government from lifting a finger to stop or slow the massacre of the innocents.

They were all wrong.

Today we know that every spark of that fire is an emergency. Today we refuse to accept or downplay or ignore anti-semitism, condemning it in our enemies and our allies alike. Today we double down, we recommit to being Jewish, to trying to be holy, to bringing love to the world. As Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein, who was shot in Poway, California last week, has written, "I am going to be even more proud about walking down the street wearing my tzitzit and kippah, acknowledging God's presence. And I'm going to use my voice until I am hoarse to urge my fellow Jews to do Jewish. To light candles before Shabbat. To put up mezuzas on their doorposts. To do acts of kindness. And to show up in synagogue..."⁴

In our parshah this week, Aaron is instructed in the ritual for Yom Kippur. He is to take two goats. One is killed, but the other is set free to go off into the wilderness. Gd spoke to Aaron after the death of two of his sons, but he had another two sons who lived and struggled and thrived. We are their descendants. And we will never, ever give up.

4. NY Times, 4/29/19