

Sh'mini 5779
Holey Holy
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The same week when we began reading the Book of Vayikra, and I spoke to you about the Book's goal of laying out methodologies for achieving holiness, I read the book *Being Mortal* by Atul Gawande, and also learned that I needed surgery for my broken wrist. As the Torah described the unblemished animals we were to offer as proxy for ourselves, I was taken up with the essential imperfection and inevitable blemishment all human beings face, and my own, maimed condition.

And reading today of Aharon's being forced to carry on his sacred service without pause, when two of his children are burned alive, gave *me* pause, as *your* religious leader who just missed both Purim and last Shabbat due to my injury.

With that as background, today's *parashah* has me thinking about perfection versus imperfection, purity versus impurity, and holiness versus the condition of being *not* holy, and how those different tensions overlap and sometimes merge in the working out of a theology around holiness, specifically: What does it mean for human beings to be holy?

We are taught that we are created in God's image, that our bodies are holy vessels, and that we carry God's holy spirit within us. Yet holiness seems to be more of a quality to which the Book of Vayikra asks us to aspire than a general state of being.

Let's see if exploring the tensions in today's *parashah* a bit can advance a useful theory of human holiness, beginning with perfection versus imperfection. We will never be perfect like that unblemished animal offered to God as a symbol of the perfection we wish we could offer to our Creator.

The Torah itself makes that clear by ordering the first sacrifice, of which we read today. Our first sacrifices a purification offering and a sin offering. Those offerings introduce *t'shuvah*, the process of self-reflection and return, as a practice that God expects as an ongoing part of human life. Our sages teach in a midrash that the first offering comes to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf and, and that, in fact, the only reason that the Israelites felt called to worship that calf was to provide an opportunity to learn that holiness involves humble submission and desire to change. *T'shuvah* is to be welcomed as an awesome gift and ongoing means of returning to closeness with God. We are not expected to act perfectly, but we are expected to reflect on our deeds and use the as opportunities to re-align and experience the holiness atonement affords.

We are not expected to be pure, either. Purity is a prerequisite for sacred encounter in the place where sacrifices are offered and eaten, but it is not a condition expected of people on a day-to-day basis. Real human living involves contact with the forces of life and death--sex, birth, blood, illness, and burial. And bugs, and mice! Real life is full of impurity. Purity is short-lived. To live properly, we *must* defile ourselves. Maimonides writes of the reason purity is a condition for access to the sacred shrine:

“The object of the sanctuary was to create in the hearts of those who enter [sic] it certain feelings of awe and reverence,,.when we continually see an object, however sublime it may be, our regard for that object will be lessened, and the impression we have received of it will be weakened. Our sages, considering this fact, said that we should not enter the Temple whenever we liked...For this reason the ritually impure were not allowed to enter the Sanctuary, although there are so many kinds of ritual impurity that [at any given time], only a few people are ritually pure” (Guide 3:47).

Moreover, impurity is not caused by sin, and it is not sinful to remain in an impure state. Maimonides writes, “Whoever desires to remain in his state of

impurity and not enter the camp of the Divine Presence is permitted to do so” (ShM, Pos. 109).

Since the destruction of the Temple, all of us carry *tum'at met*, the most severe type of impurity, and long ago our sages determined that although that status lingers, we make up for it through acts of loving kindness and compassion. Today, caring for those in need steps around the problem of impurity, in the pursuit of holiness.

In the Levitical mind, the web of permitted and not permitted reduces to a desire to cultivate and nurture holiness--*K'dushah*. Now, we are ready to attempt an understanding of what that means.

I believe that holiness is an abiding quality of the Divine that we can effect for ourselves, through our experiences in ritual, relational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal realms. There are moments when our experience takes on a quality of existentialism, when one's sense of self blends in harmony into something bigger. At such moments one may access a glimmer of abiding and absolute truth, love, and Presence. I believe we can cultivate our capacity for *k'dushah*, and as such it bears a linear aspect, although we experience *k'dushah* in different ways, to different degrees, and at different times--and its perceived effects on an individual can wear off quickly.

You may ask: Is holiness the same as transcendence, or does the religious urge motivate a person of faith to distinguish between the two? In light of today's *parashah*, I would like to offer the possibility of a particular, religious distinction and suggest that holiness, *k'dushah*, stands on its own. It seems to me that in pursuing holiness, we enact a combination of intention and submission. We seek intimacy with the Divine Presence while acknowledging our human limitations. It may be that Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's sons who offer "strange fire" which God answers by consuming them by fire, exercise intention without submission. Aharon, on the other

hand, by remaining silent in the face of tragedy, models submission without losing his intention.

But Aharon does, in fact, *speak*. His deafening silence at the moment of tragedy finds voice shortly thereafter in a rhetorical question that leaves Moshe silent and having learned something about the kind of holiness God wants from human beings. Here's what happens: Moshe is going over the instructions for eating the sacrificial meat when suddenly he realizes that the goat that had been sacrificed earlier as a sin offering on behalf of the people had been burned, rather than eaten, as it should have been, by Aharon and his two remaining sons, at the conclusion of the rituals. The Torah says: "And Moshe was furious with Elazar and Itamar, the remaining sons of Aharon, saying, 'Why did you not eat the sin offering in the holy place? For it is the most holy thing and it was given to you, to bear the sin of the people and to atone for them before God'" (Lev. 21:16-17)!?

And Aharon says, essentially, this: "*Can you be serious?* Do you really think I should have enjoyed a steak dinner today? All day I have carried out sacrifices, for my own house and for all of the people, and my sons Nadav and Avihu, who worked by my side, were killed bringing a spontaneous offering. And you think God wanted me to put aside my grief and to eat the sin offering? And you, my brother, do you really think you should be angry at me because I did not eat it?"

Rabbinic legend holds that Moshe admits his mistake. He insisted on stringency, overlooking a more important truth. "Rabbi Yehudah said: Chananya taught throughout his life that insistence on stringency is something to be wary about; indeed, it caused Moshe to err" (Sifra Sh'mini 1:2,12).

We can miss the point when we strive too hard for perfection. The Torah text quotes God as saying: "I will be sanctified by those close to me." One of my teachers, Rav Avital Hochstein, suggests that Moshe misinterprets

God's words: Moshe thinks that God wants stringency, to the extent of pushing aside human needs. Aharon correctly sees that stringency is not always appropriate. Rav Avital writes: "He [Aharon] offers a different interpretation, according to which whatever the value of adherence and insistence on routine, when done in a way that pushes aside basic dimensions of human existence, one must ask: 'Would it be good in God's eyes?' Aharon claimed that "sanctification through those who are close" is expressed at moments when people serve in integrity, fully attuned to the holiness called for, and step forward in their fullness as human beings, creatures who are sad, happy, and at times in mourning. According to Aharon, dismissing these human dimensions is not good in the eyes of God" ("Regarding Mistaken Stringencies and Humanity that is Good in the Eyes of God." Mechon Hadar, 5777).

When it comes to holiness, there is something more important than getting everything right, than following prescribed routines, even when they come from God. We must bring ourselves with full intention that comes from being present to our own experience and seeking to unite our reality with the Source of Truth. And in those moments we must offer the humility of our own humanity, in all of our imperfection.

It is not easy to blend intention, so rooted in personal agency, and submission, so grounded in humility. Perhaps that is why "holiness" remains elusive so much of the time. May we strive to cultivate both intention and submission, so that we can build and sustain an altar in our hearts on which we can place our most earnest, human, yearnings and offer our purest service.