

Acharai Mot-parsha Hashavua  
Leah Slivko  
May 7, 2016

Shabbat Shalom Everyone.

It is a real privilege for me to be here and share my reflections on today's Parsha, and Torah reading. When the schedule for volunteering to do a D'var Torah came out, I chose this week because I knew I would be in town and would be able to come to the synagogue. It wasn't until right after Purim, that I got an email telling me that it was the Shabbat that coincided with Pride Weekend and Amitai Cammy's Bar Mitzvah. Mazel Tov to both Amitai on reaching this stage of life, and Mazel Tov to the LGBT community for also reaching this stage of life where identity can be celebrated.

This week's Parsha was also the Bar Mitzvah Parsha for Rabbi Steven Greenberg, an orthodox Rabbi in Boston, founder of Eshel, an organization that supports gay youth in the Orthodox community. He was the first Rabbi ordained by Yeshiva University to come out as gay. When he was in his early twenties he had consulted with Rav Yosef Shalom Elishiv, a respected elder Rabbi in Jerusalem about his sexuality. The Rav's response was, 'Now you have twice the power to love, use it carefully.'

Acharai Mot, this week's Parsha setting takes place in the desert, after the Israelites flee from Egypt. It can be implied that it is in response to the death of Aaron's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, who attempted to abuse their power by entering the sanctuary without instructions, or permission, or it can also refer to the death of how life was lived in Egypt. Just last week, over Passover, we reflected on the 10 plagues and how The land of Egypt was left completely destroyed and it entered a dark and deadly chapter. The Israelites though, found a way out and we're finally free. Freedom, does have a price. They were depleted physically, emotionally, and spiritually. And they were in the desert, wandering, little food supply and fighting to survive. With so much loss, it would be easy to despair, to isolate, to cling to the familiar, to mistrust, to act desparately to protect their own self and families, to violently react when feeling threatened. The Parsha begins with instructions of how to create holiness in the temple and then proceeds to define forbidden sexual relationships.

Moses and Aaron are instructed on how to help the Israelites hold onto the desire to live and embrace life. This portion is also read on Yom Kippur as it underlines the importance of atonement, reminds us that we are all human. As humans we have a power and responsibility to care and protect living forms of all kinds, even the animals that are sacrificed. Even the bread we eat, once was a living form, and we bless that it can feed us. We are made literally of blood, sweat and tears and beyond our physical presence, we have an internal presence that makes us each individuals who seek connection with others, in order to survive and thrive.

Chapter 18 ויקרה, addresses 16 forbidden sexual relationships, the first 13 being incestuous relationships. I wonder, why the Torah focuses on sexual behavior at this time?

The pasuk ואת זכר לא תשכב לשכבת אשה תועבה הוא, 'You shall not cohabit with a man like one cohabits with a woman, it's an abomination', is quite a strong homophobic statement that has throughout time caused great soul-searching, angst, and violence. We revisit it twice a year, to ponder as to how do we incorporate this sentence in our lives today?

I challenge that the intent of this pasuk is homophobic. The context of history is vital here. Let's look at how relationships were defined in Egypt. There were no human rights! There was a hierarchy of power. Men were men. Women and children were property of men. There was no pro-choice or pro-life. Women and men didn't mingle in public. Most often, if you were a woman or child, you only interacted with immediate family. Once a child reached puberty, they could be bought or sold for marriage or slavery. It was quite common in Egypt for slaves to be forced into humiliating relationships. Where the powerless were abused by those in power, where forced sexual relationships were the norm. Men could treat other men as property and could abuse them in every which way. Intimidation, hostility, and violence were the norm. Life evolved around constant abuse of power, where choice of who related to whom and how one treated another, was determined by instinctual gratification, narcissistic needs and fear.

Acharyai Mot symbolizes the death of this kind of culture. I would like to believe that the intent here, in this Parsha, is to reeducate and instill a sense of separateness, of individuality and respect for equal relationships. To build on trust and mutuality.

G-d is not commanding the children of Israel but telling Moses to 'speak' וידבר to them about these relationships. He is guiding the Israelites to go beyond the natural physical instincts and develop respectful means of relating to one another in a fuller, meaningful way. In Exodus, the 10 Commandments are spoken through Moses to the Children of Israel and the 10th commandment refers to his relationships. "You shall not covet your neighbor's house, not covet your neighbor's wife, not covet your neighbor's male servant or female servant or his ox or donkey or anything that is in your neighbor's house or field'.

God wants the children of Israel to trust that He did not bring them out to the desert to die, but to be free and embrace life fully, to know life itself is precious and that mutual respect and caring allows for growth and development. When people are traumatized, they tend to regress to basic needs. They physically want to feel alive again. Feed the body first, to get the blood flowing again and then have renewed energy to reignite the spirit and soul. In their desperate hunger for freedom and life, the Israelites at that time in history, may have instinctively responded to bodily needs for survival. In responding instinctually, they could have a tendency to not treat the other as other but merely as a vehicle for self-gratification. To move forward, they needed direction in establishing boundaries, and laws so there would be civilization instead of chaos. It was necessary first, for the Israelites to unify with an understanding that life itself is holy. That to be human is to be imperfect. To acknowledge our imperfections, and to reflect on our actions, to take responsibility for our actions and to understand the consequences of our actions. Thus the need for atonement. To become holy. Once the community has a shared understanding of purpose, it is only natural that the community attempts to establish standards of living that apply to all.

One of our commentaries, the Ebin Ezra, hypothesizes, that all the relationships that are reviewed in this chapter, were common place behavior in Egypt. Violent and oppressive behavior was rampant. Taking advantage of one's power over another was common. People did not respect one another. And the Israelites, both men and women were slaves to all of Egyptians whims; if they were now free, there was fear that they would identify with their aggressors and turn on one another, violating each other's personal rights. When depleted, people act instinctively towards survival, perhaps at the expense of the other. Rav Samuel Rafael Hirsch and Maimonides comment on how the relationships that are mentioned in this chapter, have always existed and it was time for the Israelites not to maintain the same but to

expand and stretch their ability to love, create and learn from new experiences. In this chapter, the Israelites were told to take pause, be respectful, know oneself and know the other. The body of a man, is different than the body of a woman. As bodies are different, so, too, are relationships. What is desired in all relationships, is the respect and love of the other, the acceptance for who the person actually is, physically, and spiritually; we all have equal rights to express individuality without fear of oppression or shame. The abomination, is the shaming and the violence between people, not the loving and acceptance. The Laws of Atonement for Yom Kippur and today are those that ask us to reflect, respect and accept our humanness.

Thousands of years have transpired since those days in the desert, and yet we continue to struggle with how to define holiness, how we express love, how we embrace differences and how we create an environment where individual rights and communal needs need not be at odds but instead intertwine. We reflect on the past, and we apply what we learn from one another in the present, and continue forward into the future.

We continue to celebrate with pride when we join together with a life force that is beyond definition. When we share our life force with others, in all its forms, we all can appreciate its gift.