

AHAREI MOT-KEDOSHIM SELECTED SHORTS

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ויקרא ט"ז:א

(א) וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן בְּקָרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵיהֶ' וַיִּמְתּוּ:

Leviticus 16:1

(1) *The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they drew too close to the presence of the LORD.* It's hard not to read Moses and Aaron's relationship into this verse. We recall that Moses reproached Aaron after Aaron's sons were consumed by fire. Here, God instructs Moses to "speak to Aaron your brother," (16:2) concerning the rules of entry into the sacred area and also the atonement rituals. In commanding Moses to speak to Aaron, "your brother" God is, in effect, nudging the two brothers together and helping them heal their wounded relationship.

ויקרא ט"ז:כ"א

(כא) וְסִמְךָ אֶהְרֹן אֶת־שָׁתֵי יָדָיו [יָדָיו] עַל רֹאשׁ הַשְּׂעִיר הַחַי וְהִתְנַדָּה עָלָיו אֶת־כָּל־עֲוֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־כָּל־פְּשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכֹל־חַטָּאתָם וְנָתַן אֹתָם עַל־רֹאשׁ הַשְּׂעִיר וְשָׁלַח בְּיַד־אִישׁ עֲתִי הַמְדַבֵּר:

Leviticus 16:21

(21) *Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated man.* The rabbis of the Mishnah elaborate on this ritual and the liturgists of the Mahzor embellish it, placing it at the core of the Yom Kippur service. Placing a single hand on the head of a sacrificial animal was a statement of "ownership." Here, when Aaron places both hands on the head of the goat and confessing the sins of Israel, he is not engaged in an act of "transfer" (since they were not transferred to him in the first place) rather, by gesture and declaration, he is designating the place where the confessed sins of Israel will reside and be exported out of the camp. No doubt this ritual challenges the sensibilities of modern readers, but in the context of the surrounding religions, it is important to note the extent to which magical elements have been quashed. In the Second Temple, a crimson thread was attached to the head of the goat. One scholar theorizes that the banishment of the crimson-threaded goat to the

wilderness serves as an ironic counterpoint to the entrance of the Kohen Gadol into the Holy of Holies: the KG entered the HH in the holiest state to achieve atonement and purification for Israel; the goat, burdened with Israel's sins, was sent with an attendant to die in the desert. The KG wears a diadem of gold, spectacular to behold, incised with God's name; the goat, thrown into a moat, wears a crimson thread, a symbol of dread, sin and pollution. The goat, vessel of Israel's sins, is consumed by scavengers and disappears. The Kohen Gadol, the people's ambassador to God, emerges in splendor from the Holy of Holies with the promise of atonement and renewal.

ויקרא י"ז:י"ד

(י"ד) כִּי־יִגָּפֶשׂ כָּל־בֶּשֶׂר דָּמוֹ בְּנִפְשׁוֹ הוּא וְאָמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵם כָּל־בֶּשֶׂר לֹא תֹאכְלוּ כִּי גִפְשׁ כָּל־בֶּשֶׂר דָּמוֹ הוּא כָּל־אֲכָלְיוֹ יִכְרֹת:

Leviticus 17:14

(14) *For the life of all flesh—its blood is its life. Therefore I say to the Israelite people: You shall not partake of the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood. Anyone who partakes of it shall be cut off.* Here we have the basis of another major element of kashrut, namely the removal of blood. Blood is life, and life is God's. Eating animal flesh is a concession to human appetites, but blood belongs to God alone, and cannot be consumed.

ויקרא י"ז:ג-ה'

(ג) כִּמְעַשְׂהָ אֶרֶץ־מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבְּתֶם־בָּהּ לֹא תִעָשׂוּ וְכִמְעַשְׂהָ אֶרֶץ־כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְבִיא אֹתְכֶם שָׁמָּה לֹא תִעָשׂוּ וּבְחֻקֵּיהֶם לֹא תֵלְכוּ:

(ד) אֶת־מִשְׁפָּטֵי תִעָשׂוּ וְאֶת־חֻקֵּי תִשְׁמְרוּ לְלֶכֶת בְּהֶם אָנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

(ה) וְשִׁמְרֶתֶם אֶת־חֻקֵּי וְאֶת־מִשְׁפָּטֵי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם הָאֲדָמָה וְתִי בְהֶם אָנֹכִי ה':

Leviticus 18:3-5

(3) *What is done in the land of Egypt, wherein you were settled, you are not to do; what is done in the land of Canaan to which I am bringing you, you are not to do; by their laws you are not to walk. (4) My rules you are to do, my laws you are to keep, walking by them, I am the LORD your God. (5) You shall keep My laws and My rules, which when a human does them, he lives by (means of) them, I am the LORD.* This is the preamble to the laws defining prohibited sexual

relations, in effect constructing the boundaries of the family. The poetics of the passage deserve close attention and emphasize the disdain Israel had sexual depravity of those cultures. As opposed to “what is done” in Egypt or Canaan (ie. sibling marriage, incest, bestiality and sexual promiscuity) Israel has rules and laws to order the most intimate of human relations. The dissolution of sexual boundaries is dangerous to life itself; it will result in the land rejecting you. Despite their narrow meaning in this context, the words וְתִי בָהֶם and you shall live by them, are the foundation for the concept of *pikuah nefesh*, suspending the commandments for the greater sake of saving a life. As the rabbis say, “You shall live by them, the commandments, and not die by them.”

ויקרא י"ט:ב'

(ב) דַּבֵּר אֶל-כָּל-עֵדוּת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדוֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Leviticus 19:2

(2) *Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy.* Found at the core of the Torah, it is the Torah's core principle and the mission of Judaism. Holiness is not simply about behaving ethically, it is about being close to God. Israel is being instructed to be close to God because God, reciprocally, is close to Israel. Holiness is the core of the relationship.

ויקרא י"ט:טו'

(טו) לֹא-תַעֲשׂוּ עֹלָל בְּמִשְׁפָּט לֹא-תִשָּׂא פְנֵי-דָל וְלֹא תִהְדָּר פְּנֵי גָדוֹל בְּצַדִּיק תִּשְׁפֹּט עַמִּיתְךָ:

Leviticus 19:15

(15) *You are not to commit corruption in justice; you are not to lift-up-in-favor the face of the poor, you are not to overly-honor the face of the great; with equity you are to judge your fellow!* What constitutes corruption in justice, and what happens in a society where the judicial system is corrupt? At this moment, Alexander Navalny's life is in danger in Russia because of a corrupt judicial system that has kowtowed to its leader. In China, two Canadians have been imprisoned on bogus charges awaiting their “trials” as a reprisal for the arrest of a Chinese executive suspected of bank fraud. In Iran, the duplicitous nation with which the US has now re-entered negotiations, bribery of judges is legion, not to mention the arrest, detention and execution of journalists, dissidents, and people who express opposition to the regime. עֹלָל is translated as “corruption.” But the

midrash waxes lexicologically here, providing a thesaurus of other synonyms: A judge who distorts the law is called *avel* (unjust, corrupt); despised, despicable, putrid, and disgusting. When courts and judges that are not trusted by the populations they serve, societies disintegrate and are governed by thugs and despots.

ויקרא י"ז-י"ח

(יז) לֹא-תִשְׂנֵא אֶת-אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הִוָּכַח תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת-עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חָטָא: (יח) לֹא-תִקָּם וְלֹא-תִטַּר אֶת-בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְאֶהְבֵּת לְרַעַתָּה כְּמִוֶד אָנֹכִי ה':

Leviticus 19:17-18

(17) *You are not to hate your brother in your heart; rebuke, yes, rebuke your fellow, that you not bear sin because of him!* (18) *You are not to take-vengeance, you are not to retain-anger against the sons of your kinspeople- but be loving to your neighbor (as one) like yourself, I am the Lord.* Fascinating that the Torah's most essential verse, the one Rabbi Akiva called, “the general basic principle of the Torah,” and the idea that undergirds Hillel's dictum, “what is hateful to you, do not do unto your neighbor...” is located in a cluster of verses concerned with creating a just society. Society depends on relationships, but conflict is unavoidable. Brothers, neighbors, kinfolk, will always look for ways to adjudicate their disputes. (Recall that this was Moses' first major problem following the Exodus, one that his father-in-law Yitro helped to resolve). While justice requires impartiality, adversarial disputes lead to enmity, which in turn foments vengeance. The Torah assumes that even the closest sibling relationships can erupt in hatred. Recall Joseph and his brothers. Here the Torah offers a remedy for hate: “rebuke” means “work out your differences.” “Be loving” means “be committed” to your counterpart as you share a common destiny. Justice begets mutuality which begets justice.

ויקרא כ:כ"ו

(כו) וְהִיָּתֶם לִי קְדוֹשִׁים כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה' וְאַבְדַּל אֶתְכֶם מִן-הָעַמִּים לְהִיּוֹת לִי:

Leviticus 20:26

(26) *You are to be holy to Me, for holy am I, the LORD; I have separated you from the (other) people to be mine.* Note the presence of הַבְּדִלָה, the concept of separation which last appeared in the Creation story. The world consists of diverse zones, and humanity consists of diverse peoples. Holy to God, Israel's unique role is to be God's agent in the world. Shabbat Shalom!