

Nancy Cahners -- D'var torah  
Acharai Mot/Kedushim  
April 20, 2013

Acharai Mot—Following death. That's the name of this Parasha. It refers to the sudden snuffing out of Aaron's 2 sons by a fire sent by God. The first line tells us they they were killed because "they drew too near to the Lord."

But how were they supposed to know how close was too close? As far as we can learn for the text, they were well intentioned, trying their best to serve. Sure --there have been numerous Midrashic guesses about what the boys did to **deserve** to be killed, but based on the text in front of us we can only surmise that it was just one of those awful random things that strikes--- out of the blue. Leaving everyone stunned and groping for answers.

I had started working on this D'var months ago. And I had decided to think hard about animal sacrifices—Why? Because I usually skip over those parts. They're long--much longer than my interest can endure. Apart from affirming that we Jews are indeed an ancient people, I don't find much relevance for my life. But I figured I owed it to myself to engage fully with the text. ...even the parts that I really don't like. So I did my research and discovered that I'm in good company. I'm not the only one who has found these sections hard to take.

It turns out that even Maimonides didn't put too much stock in these lengthy passages about ritual sacrifices. He thinks they were transitional elements. That God really didn't want sacrifices, but they were so embedded in the pagan traditions, the Torah had to include them with the intention of weaning worshippers off of the practice over time.

And that's exactly what we see in this text! Right away, right after the lengthy instructions on how to purify the sanctuary, and purify the Priests and to purify the Israelites—after all the business about slaughtering goats or pushing them off cliffs and splattering blood on the altars-- the text gives us laws about how to live. Together. About how we should treat each other, respect each other and protect each other. From the most intimate matters of sexual attraction to the most public business transactions.

I think I'm right, when I say blending service to God with ethical behavior is THE GREAT religious innovation of the ancient Jews. We were the **first** to worship our god by acting with compassion and supporting the vulnerable. The Canaanites thought that the reason humans were put on earth was to feed their gods through animal sacrifice. And from what I can surmise about the Ancient Greeks, Romans and Egyptians, their gods needed to be placated, but not through ethical behavior.

When we get to the Prophets, we see were downright contemptuous of ritual sacrifices. Here's what Amos says (5:22-24)

*"If you offer Me burnt offerings—or your grain offerings--  
I will not accept them;  
...Spare Me the sound of your hymns,  
And let Me not hear the music of your lutes.  
But let justice well up like water,*

*Righteousness like an unfailing stream.”*

Moving right along, the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE pulled the rug out from under the sacrificial system. The only legitimate site to make sacrifices was gone. The Rabbis managed to reconfigure the whole operation with immense creativity. Altars morphed into dining tables. Our prayers floated up to heaven replacing RAY-ACHNEE-CHOACH--the pleasing scent from the smoking animal sacrifices. Sure we sprinkle salt on our Shabbat challot and we put a roasted lamb shank on the seder plate to remind us of the old days. Thanks to the Rabbis, animals are not part of our worship services.

So I satisfied myself that I had done my homework and that my intuitions were on the right track—Over the years, step by step, smarter Jewish minds than mine had pulled animal sacrifices out of Jewish practice.

But before I gave myself permission to tune out whenever this material comes around-- I wanted to grapple with one more question—Was there any insight that could be gained by contemplating animal sacrifices. There’s usually so much wisdom embedded in this stuff—insights you can’t know until you try out a practice out and experience it for yourself. I couldn’t help but think that whoever “invented” or devised these rituals knew something important. Or was trying to accomplish something important.

So here’s what I’ve come up with, and I took my cue from my reactions to the part of the ritual I like least – the part the scholars call blood manipulation. The ritual blood wasn’t *wiped* on the altar—it wasn’t *painted* (like we did over our doorposts)--or *sprinkled* or *put*—it was DASHED. 7 times. Splattered. With careful instructions to cover all surfaces and sides of the altar.

The sight of the altar must have been gruesome—like the aftermath of an accident—or, sadly, as we’ve come to know--like after a terrorists’ bomb in a crowd.

Acharey Mot. Following Death.

Have you noticed how people act ACHAREY MOT? It’s as if we gain a special insight. An acute sense of our own vulnerability-- and we realize how much we love being alive. And have you noticed how nice people are to each other ACHAREY MOT—following death? Think about the way we gather over someone’s house with food and affection following a funeral. And the way people rush supplies and contributions to the Red Cross following disasters. I heard this morning about a man putting out a fire on another person **WITH HIS HANDS**.

I’m going to offer that the Ancients, by splattering blood and simulating a violent scene, were striving to induce these feelings, this mind set, this acute recognition that life is fragile and we’re in this together and we’d better be nice to each other.

I’m going to speculate that the Ancients realized that this mindset would make worshippers receptive to the message of the Holiness Code that defines holiness as acting with kindness and compassion and fairness in every single aspect of our lives.

My prayer for us is that after this terrifying time is over, we’ll hold onto the clarity we feel about life acharay mot—following death--our awareness of life’s preciousness-- and our duty to serve God through mutual aid and respect. And may this insight fortify our resolve to bring kindness and gentleness and justice into this world.