

**Rabbi Noa Kushner**

**Yom Kippur AM 5784**

**Parashat Achrei Mot**

***How to Return Where You Don't Want to Go: Aaron and the Holy of Holies***

1.

What do you pack to go into the holy of holies?

I don't mean what do you will find when you get in there,

I mean, what do you bring? Do you bring anything?

2.

It's a topical question b/c this week because Aaron, *is going in*

He is the high priest after all

And it's Yom Kippur

Someone's got to go in and he's the guy

Sure he's made his mistakes

There was that little dalliance with the golden calf

Okay he was largely responsible

But we all make our mistakes, don't we?

And Aaron's mistakes, as impressive as they are,

– this is a drasha for another time, who knows, could be tomorrow –

Aaron's past mistakes, as impressive as they are, don't change anything:

Yom Kippur requires a high priest to go into the holy of holies and Aaron is still the high priest

"So," we say, "Aaron, get going! Go in there! We have sacrifices to sacrifice, we have to atonements to atone, it is Yom Kippur and the clock is ticking."

But there's another big problem, see

And I never really thought about it until this year

And the problem is that the very place where Aaron must go  
The holy of holies  
The innermost chamber where God is waiting  
The very place only he [as high priest] can go  
To make the world right again  
To forgive all the sins –

The very place where only Aaron can go  
Is the *same place* where his sons just tragically died.

It's true  
To move us all forward Aaron has to go back to *that* place.  
Arguably the place he would *least* like to go  
That's where Aaron has to go

And I never thought about it before but this idea of returning to the place  
where something difficult, excruciating, unresolved happened, *the place  
where it all went down*

This is the perfect analogy for what we're trying to do on Yom Kippur,  
That is return, to begin our *t'shuva*  
And returning to *the place where it all went down* is also the perfect  
analogy,  
a starting point for a healing from any kind of pain, trauma  
Going back there  
Gotta go in

At least now we understand why Aaron does not run inside  
Why, in the minds of the rabbis, he hesitates

3.

I never want to teach about Nadav and Abihu  
The two sons of Aaron who

Maybe out of sheer enthusiasm, maybe youth, maybe disregard for authority, lack of boundaries

It is really not clear

Run into the holy sanctuary with an *eish zara* / "strange fire"

And are killed right there in the sanctuary, instantly

I don't have a quick answer on this story, I don't have an answer at all  
And the rabbis who go the route of trying to figure out exactly why these boys were punished

(You'll forgive me) but I think they miss the boat entirely

However there are other *midrash*, and there are more than you might imagine

Which take a markedly different position that sometimes there are tragedies in this world

And they strike us all

And we are never ready

And we can never be ready

But this is a part of being alive

There are *midrash* which instead of looking for answers say,

אֶף־לִזְאוֹת יִחַרְדַּ לְבִי

Because of [things like] this, my heart quakes

וַיִּתֵּר מִמְּקוֹמוֹ

And leaps from its place<sup>1</sup>

The verse is from Job, it's not a comforting book overall

But at least, I think, these rabbis are more on track

Because, if we are honest

Life is often a great and terrifying mystery.

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<sup>1</sup> Job 37:1

"Fine," I hear you say.

"We can't always understand. Fine!"

"But how does any of this help Aaron ?!

Aaron who made mistakes but was willing to keep trying anyway

He didn't give up

Aaron who, right now, has to go back to the very place where he *lost his sons*

Go through that room, in fact, to get to the holy of holies

In order to help us all make atonement and enter the new year?

How is he supposed to stay intact?!"

"How does any of this 'hands off,' cold theology help our Aaron who, in the loss of his children, has suffered more than anyone should suffer!?"

"Our god of miracles couldn't make one miracle for Aaron?"

4.

You know, it's funny

I told you that some rabbis look for answers while others admit that what is happening to Aaron right now is actually impossible

They admit his life is impossible

But there is a third kind of *midrash* / teaching, that just talks about the sadness and confusion and seemingly unlimited pain when something like this happens

A pandemic

A war

A death

Any loss which, in turn, redefines a person's life

And you know, it is probably a dissertation for another time but the rabbis describe this uncontainable grief, sadness, in these midrash through the voices of women.

In other words, when they want to talk about this fractured moment in Aaron's life, his children gone,  
They talk about Sarah  
Why?

Because Sarah, according the rabbis, when she finds out that her husband Abraham took their child to the mountaintop and risked his son's life in a very serious way

And I am sorry to bring up another very difficult story but the rabbis do it so I will try to be brave –

When Sarah finds out that her husband Abraham took their child to the mountaintop and risked his son's life in a very serious way

While Abraham seems stoic, strangely detached

When Sarah finds out

The rabbis say she was like a person out of her mind with grief  
Someone in a fully altered state

That the pain was so profound nothing made sense any longer

That the shofar blasts are mimicking her cries

As if she was crying for Isaac, on behalf of Abraham

As if she was crying for us all

And in addition to Sarah's cries, in the same teaching

The rabbis bring up

Elisheva bat Amminadad

A woman who marries Aaron and that's all we know about her, that's all the torah says

One verse

The rabbis bring her up in *this* moment

And as soon as they do I'm ashamed to admit

I never thought of it myself

For Nadav and Abihu (of course!) they did not just have a father who grieved them

*They had a mother, too*

And so the rabbis put her here in the scene, where she most undoubtedly was

And they imagine her mourning

Giving words to her outrage and grief

And it doesn't take a lot of imagination to extend the scene:

Her anger at a god who could let this happen

Not to mention her anger at her husband, her husband's strange line of work which put their children in such danger

Her undoing at considering the cruelty of the world

Yes, if Aaron is famously stoic and silent

Its inconceivable that Elisheva would do anything else than cry

And while her grief is hard to bear

Unlike the teachings about Nadav and Abihu that try to explain it all away or that leave us silenced, in awe at the complex workings of the world

This grief of Sarah and Elisheva is welcome, it is a relief, it feels right

*Someone* should cry over these boys

*Someone* should mark tragedy with signs of despair

*Someone* should make heaven pay attention

5.

So perhaps now, maybe now we are getting closer to what it is that Aaron must bring

if he is to return to the place where his children once ran free?

You see, when Moses, is telling Aaron what he has to do

There is a little added word:

An extraneous word:

בְּזֹאת יָבֵא אֶהָרֶן אֶל־הַקֹּדֶשׁ

With THIS Aaron shall enter the holy place.

בְּזֹאת / With THIS

As if to say, through the rabbinic understanding  
Aaron was never intended to return to that fraught place all by himself  
Without anything to guard him  
He was supposed to *bring something*

בְּזֹאת / With THIS Aaron shall enter the holy place  
With THIS  
But what is the zot? We are back where we started  
Mah zot?  
What is the “this”?  
With *what* should Aaron enter?

Maybe it is the grief that the mothers articulate  
Maybe Aaron has cry his way inside  
Because we know, without feeling pain, there will be no forgiveness, no  
return to life

Or maybe the “zot” is his guilt  
Maybe Aaron was still caught wondering why he couldn’t have stopped  
what happened  
Maybe he had to bring his guilt so he could watch it burn on the alter

Or maybe  
The “zot” is related to some of the other places that “zot” is used in Torah  
Each one representing a merit of Israel  
Every major good thing we have ever done – it seems there is a “zot”  
attached to it

So

זֹאת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר־שָׂם מֹשֶׁה לְפָנַי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

*This* is the Teaching that Moses set before the Israel

This "zot" is for the merit of Torah says R. Judan<sup>2</sup>

He finds examples with "zot" in verses regarding the merit of the tribes and of Israel and of Judah and of the gifts we gave, our sacrifices, our keeping shabbat  
In other words heaps and heaps of merit

And maybe *that's* what Aaron had to take in the holy of holies with him  
Merit upon merit, stuffing his fists with merit, clutching on to it

As if to remind himself, and God, that the world still has goodness,  
That our merits and the merits of the world can still be a balm, a protection when the days seem unbearable  
Merits to remind us that forgiveness is eternal and waits for each of us to reach for it  
Maybe that's the "zot": the goodness  
Maybe that's what Aaron had to bring

7.

But there is one last interpretation, and it is my favorite  
One last interpretation of what Aaron brought in,  
The "zot" he held in his hands and heart when he went inside the holy of holies

You see, there's a teaching that on every day of the year  
Our *yetzer harah* / the "accuser" our evil inclination  
the evil force in the world that tries to stop us from forgiving or being whole or growing or reaching  
The *yetzer harah* / the "accuser" can accuse us every day, all the time  
Every day we have to put up with arguing with that which would hold us down and away from who we want to be

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<sup>2</sup> Leviticus Rabbah 21:6



That is, the accuser can accuse us every day but one (at least one)  
And that day is, you guessed it, Yom Kippur, today  
And what do you know?  
It turns out Yom Kippur was the very day Aaron was required to go to *the place*  
*As if a quiet chamber of a day was established around this most fraught place in his life*  
*Making it safe*  
*And allowing him to enter*

*You see, it was this idea that there are places the accuser cannot go*  
*It was the idea that, in the end, the accuser is not stronger than God, and so could not reach Aaron*  
That forgiveness is waiting for each of us  
*This is the "zot" that Aaron held close, saying,*  
*"God is my light, who shall I fear?"*