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Parsha Acharai Kedoshim
by Julie Zhuk on 2024-05-03

This parsha comes after the death of Aaron's sons. Going back to the story of Aaron's sons, they died for setting off a fire that was not necessary. They thought that G-d had already wanted them to be kohanim, but He wasn't ready for them to do this yet. Without asking for permission, they set off a sacrifice and that caused them to die. They were tzaddikim and G-d dealt strictly with tzaddikim. This week's parsha wants Jews to focus on not being judgemental towards others. There is a portion in Kedoshim with the Hebrew words that read, "Betzeked mishpot amitecha."

This translates to, "You shall judge your fellow with righteousness." The Jewish Court says, Jews have to be fair, just, and objective. We learn from Rashi, that Jews before judging others, we need to give them the benefit of the doubt. This is discussed in the Talmud and Ethics of the Fathers. There is a story going back to the early 1970's when a rabbi from South Africa took on a job in Hawaii. He was mostly greeting folks in a synagogue there that were older. These people who came to the synagogue were very set in their ways. The rabbi will never forget his first Yom Kippur, there was a young man who didn't seem to have been to a synagogue before. He had long frizzy hair and came in literally from the beach. This newcomer didn't visit Hawaii to check out a synagogue or celebrate Yom Kippur. He was minding his own business and came from catching waves at a beach. He walked into the synagogue wearing jeans and sandals.

People looked around and saw this man, they considered him to be the consummate hippie. The young rabbi from South Africa came up to the gabbai and asked him to greet this young man who was clearly not dressed for Yom Kippur services. The gabbai took one look and was bewildered by what he saw. Not only did the rabbi want for the gabbai to welcome this greeter, but to let this new person open the Holy Ark during the service. The rabbi wanted to honor this new man, but the gabbai didn't think the newcomer should have gotten in the first place. The rabbi knew what he was doing, giving the newcomer the honor to open the Holy Ark did wonders for him. It's been years since that newcomer came into the synagogue of Hawaii.

Now this man is a respected sofer living in America. Another story of a synagogue somewhere in America only had nine men for a minyan. It wasn't enough until one day a man came in to fill in the void. He was there, but he shocked the other people who were busy praying in the synagogue. This man sat in the very last row of the synagogue. He had a magazine or a book with him and he was reading it. The men who were praying were shocked that someone would come into a Jewish establishment and treat it like a library. After the service was over, the men complained to the rabbi. They didn't like that this man being the tenth man could have been part of the service, praying with them. Instead, he was minding his own business and reading.

The rabbi's response to the men praying was, they should see how special it is that even a Jew who can't read Hebrew came to the synagogue. The rabbi told the men that even if that one man wasn't praying or saying any of the words in Hebrew, it made a difference. He was there, he made up for being the tenth man and they had a minyan. What the rabbi taught the gabbai, the community of that shul in 1970's, and that man who became a respected sofer is that everyone should feel welcome. The most important part of this parsha and these stories is that one Jew should judge their fellow Jew favorably.

Aaron never had the space to mourn, to grieve, to feel the anger, hurt, or even the guilt he as a father had. The Parsha says that he being a priest had to right away perform for the community. This all happened in Yom Kippur. Aaron was too busy with his priestly tasks and he was carrying on and he enjoined for the sake of other people. His wife Elisheva, had her chance to grieve. After all, she was the mother of those boys Nadav and Avihu. She was also one of the midwives who spared the Jewish boys who were born to Hebrew slaves in Egypt.

Elisheva was not silent when grieving, not for her sons even for those that said they deserved to die for their actions. Unlike her husband who would busy himself in his work as a priest, Elisheva mourned for her sons. The Parsha tells us that when her sons gave the “alien sacrifice as a fire” they had come out burnt. In return, their mother's celebration was transformed into a form of mourning. We learn from the Parsha that in the days and weeks after anyone dies, it is common to go over what has happened to the person who has died. This way it may reframe the experience of how everything happened in the first place. In this Parsha, it has opened the door for Elisheva who was a grieving mother and we can only hope that she had a chance to give her husband a chance to express his feelings of grief as well.

Resources: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/parashat-achrei-mot-kedoshim-space-to-grieve/>