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Parsha Acharai and Kedoshim
by Julie Zhuk on 2024-05-04 and 2024-05-11

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.

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The term for the title of this week's Parsha is speaking about the death of Aaron's sons. The Parsha starts out going back a few weeks to an earlier Parsha in Shemini when we read about Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu who had passed away because of something that they had done. It was considered "The opening day for the Tabernacle." Meaning it was open for business. Everything was going well for the Jewish people, but there was one problem Nadav and Avihu decided it was in their best interest to prepare an incense and give it in front of G-d. G-d on the other hand did not want them to do this, G-d was very opposed to this idea. It was too late, for the brothers had already put their power to work and gone through with their idea. In return, G-d created a fire that consumed the brothers and they died. We know that Aaron had four sons, they were very righteous just as Aaron had been and they merited to be the first kohanim. Aaron had been the first kohanim who served in the Tabernacle. What we learn from the two sons of Nadav and Avihu is that they were too righteous for their own good. We learn this from the teachings of Kabbalah and Chassidism. We learn that the "sin" that led to them actually dying was among many commentaries, they had a lot of fervor for the G-dliness was so grand.

What they did in the Tabernacle by creating that fire which G-d did not ask them to do was really wrong. It is suggested that the brothers came into the Sanctuary being intoxicated in the first place when they were bringing forth that "foreign fire". The only person who was supposed to enter the Tabernacle to begin with was Moses. Another law that these brothers broke as they were never married so that was a big no-no on their part. They had remained single for no good reason and that was considered to not be a good thing. The whole time they were in the Tabernacle they were very self-assured and didn't seek advice from any elders who were there. These people consisted of Moses or Aaron. We learn that Nadav and Avihu didn't make the mistake in a literal sense.

It was more they had an internal desire to cling to G-d. This caused for their bodies to no longer be able to handle their own souls. They had such passion for G-d and that was why they died the way they did. Nadav and Avihu were enjoying their Judaism, their connection with G-d as if it was a piece of food like sushi. What they had with Judaism and with their connection with G-d

was not that. What we take away from this week's Parsha is when things get hard for us, don't feel discouraged. Keep going everything you have heard, learned, and practiced.

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This Parsha is about being holy... What does this mean? We are supposed to try and be like G-d, G-d's holiness transcends to the Jews holiness. There was once a great Rabbi by the name of Yisrael Friedman who said, that we can be holy and G-d like. Jews can train themselves to not think highly of themselves and not just do whatever they want. To not have the type of mindset where they care about whatever anyone wants. To always view themselves as having worthy of respect and dignity for themselves. Another person who is important in this Parsha that is mentioned named Mordechai Leipler was a great student of Chabad Rebbe. Mordechai once made a statement about traveling for business to St Petersburg and saw so many shiny objects there he had a lot of temptations get the best of him. He had to stop himself and say that he was a scholar and one of the greatest followers of the Rebbe. It wasn't worth it to get one of these shiny objects for himself. He had to remind himself that it wasn't going to be worth it to stoop so low to want to get one of these shiny objects for himself. Something we walk away from this Parsha is parents learn to raise children with a productive lifestyle. One way to do this is give them a lot of self-esteem. Parents want their young children to know they matter.

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