

*Shira Hadasha*

*Shabbat Vayikra, 5780*

*“And the priest shall wear his linen garb and linen breeches he shall wear on his body, and he shall take away the ashes that the fire consumes from the burnt offering on the altar and put them besides the altar. And he shall take off his clothes and wear other clothes and take out the ashes beyond the camp to a clean place.” [Vayikra 6:3-4]*

My oldest niece is an intensive care nurse. A few weeks ago we were exchanging WhatsApps about bridesmaid dresses for her wedding, then planned for June. Our most recent conversation was very different—she was explaining what she will do with the clothes she will wear under her protective gear once she starts treating Covid19 patients—as she doesn’t want to wear her potentially infective clothes home and there is nowhere to shower and fully disinfect at work. So when reading this week’s parsha, the verse I have set out above struck me for its currency in her life and in all our lives right now, notwithstanding the very different context.

Separation is second only to illness as the trauma of this moment, and is also central to the book of Vayikra (Leviticus) which we begin to read this week. Separation is the key organising theme of the book’s ritual, sexual and dietary laws. And right now separation permeates our thoughts and hearts as we disinfect, wash and try to separate between Covid19 and health. Between outside and our homes; between (in my home as in many) a family member isolated in one room for two weeks following a return from overseas or because they have been exposed to the virus, or truly awful, reports we are reading from the US of the battle to maintain separation between healthy family members and a sick loved one who needs serious nursing and care, but who has been told by an overburdened hospital system to stay at home unless they need interventionist treatments. People separating from parents and grandparents to try to protect beloved more vulnerable elders, couples separating because one or both are health workers, and the rest of us facing into separation from extended family, friends, and community, with terrible emotional and physical costs and crippling economic impact.

And so it is that the book of the Torah that is most foreign and discomfiting to many people, with its focus on the rituals of sacrifice, on purification and with elaborate procedures for cleansing people and substances of impurities, is shockingly resonant at this moment. The anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote two very influential works on Leviticus—*Leviticus as Literature* and *Purity and Danger*—and a core idea in her writing is that the rituals of sacrifice provide a way of conceptually ordering the world—of making sense of our experience of life’s chaos and unpredictability—so that every detail of the rituals has meaning and finds a role for each of humans, the Creator and the priestly caste that serves as intermediary.

Sacrifices have long been replaced in Jewish life by other rituals which provide calm and order—primarily prayer. If prayer and ritual are helpful, that’s a good thing, but for many of us it is hard to find order anywhere right now and even the prospect of seder (which actually means order) feels disordered and just so very sad as we contemplate the festival at small tables or, for

some, alone and lonely. These are brutally chaotic times. I want to be positive but like everyone I am heartbroken about everything that we have already lost, and about how much worse it is for some and in some places. And I am really scared about what lies ahead.

I love the rhythm of Torah reading and it is a sorrow to have no public reading for many weeks, so it feels right and helpful to me that this week's parsha offers some narrative of separation and attempts to establish order against chaos. But the Torah verse I am focussing on right now comes later in the cycle, in the book of Devarim, as Moshe prepares the people to enter the promised land: "I call to witness for you today the heavens and the earth. Life and death I set before you the blessings and the curse and you shall choose life so that you may live, you and your seed". [*Devarim 30:19*]

My niece and her partner have put their wedding plans on hold for the foreseeable future. For us all, plans have fallen away as we surrender into a state of separation. In many ways, as the severity of the crisis became clear, the lost trips, simchas and festivals, footy, shul, time with friends and all the things that usually give life richness and meaning became less important in the face of the absolute need to save lives. And yet the losses and grief are real, and have to be felt and mourned. And the suffering through lost jobs and businesses, and of people who are sheltering in unsafe places or without enough food and with poor sanitation, is catastrophic. But we had no choice but to take this path because it is the only way anyone has been able to identify of saving lives. Governments all over the world have put the value of human life above everything. Some are doing much better than others and some are better resourced than others to do anything. But we have chosen life.

There have been very few times when it has been harder to be a leader than right now. Making people to do what is needed requires a degree of coercion which hits against all out 21<sup>st</sup> century instincts—for good reason. The actions required are devastating for economies and we still don't quite know how it can end. I'm thankful for our collective ability to get behind choices that are being made to try to save lives, even as I fear deeply that in many places poor execution may mean that the choice was hollow.

It is difficult to see separation between today's blessing and curse. Staying away from others—if your circumstances allow you to do it—is a blessing, and it is of course also a curse. Laws which cause businesses to close and jobs to be lost feel much more like curse than blessing. But it's all we have right now; there is no better plan than each doing everything we can to choose life.

I remind myself that there will be life again, we will sit at full seder tables, and we will dance at weddings. But right now we can only hold onto the dignity and rightness of the choice that each of us makes to value all lives. We can hold onto the understanding that how we respond to this struggle personally—in our inner lives, in our relationships, in our communities, and in response to people suffering more than ourselves—will define us.

It is a dark Shabbat but we will light candles as we always do, for the calm and order of ritual as well as for the light brought by hope and belief in something bigger than ourselves.

Shabbat shalom, stay at home and zeyt gezunt.

*Mandi Katz*