

Tragic Optimism

A sermon on Acharei Mot – Kedoshim (April 24, 2026)

Rachel Goldberg-Pollin, you know the name, you know the face, you know the tape taped on her chest counting the days. This week her memoir *When We See You Again* came out. And she sat down for interviews, Anderson Cooper with 60 Minutes, and this past Monday night with Romamu member Dan Sinor at the Stryker Center.

And in those interviews she describes a moment, small almost mundane, that I think holds something enormous for all of us. She Googled a question. It wasn't a political question, it wasn't a theological question, it was a human question.

She asked Google what is the opposite of toxic positivity? And the answer came back, tragic optimism. And then she asked who coined that phrase? And the answer, Viktor Frankl. And she said, and I want you to hear this, I want you to hear this, she said out loud, thank you Hirsch.

I mean come on, Hirsch just sprinkled that right onto me. Hirsch just sprinkled that right onto me. Because Hirsch, her son 23 years old, in a tunnel under Gaza for 328 days, had been quoting Viktor Frankl to his fellow captives throughout the captivity over and over.

The line from *A Man's Search for Meaning* was his refrain, his mantra. He who has a why to live for can bear anyhow. He who has a why to live for can bear anyhow.

And there was another hostage there who survived, Orr Levy. Orr. Orr.

Light. Orr Levy told Rachel what Hirsch's why was that he lived for. She had asked him.

And Orr, whose name is Light, pointed a finger at Rachel and said, you. You. You were Hirsch's why.

And she said, Rachel said when told this, it was this shocking life-affirming CPR from beyond. That was Rachel's language, CPR from beyond. Her dead son, through Orr's testimony, still breathing life into her from beyond, still saying to her, mom you can bear this too.

Even this. Even losing me. I want to sit with that phrase.

That phrase tonight, tragic optimism. Because I think it's not just Rachel's story. I think it's the Torah's story this week.

And I think it might be the story of Jewish time itself. There's a double portion this week. It's read frequently together.

Most weeks when we treat a double portion like this, like two separate teachings, there's and there's. But this week the sequence is itself the teaching as it often is. The three words, after death, holiness.

The Torah is making a claim about the order of things. Holiness comes after death, after loss, after the worst thing. Acharei Mot opens with Aaron, his two sons, Nadav and Avihu have just died.

Consumed by a fire they brought too close to the sacred and God says to Moshe, tell your brother, speak to your brother Aaron. He may not enter the Holy of Holies whenever he wants. He can only enter it with incense, with a cloud, with a blood offering on Yom Kippur.

Kodesh Kaddoshim. The Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was the darkest room in the sanctuary.

There were no windows in the Holy of Holies. It was covered and when Aaron would go in, it was covered with a cloud. Aaron would enter that darkness carrying the grief of his two children.

He didn't leave the grief at the door. He didn't decide now's not the moment. He walked in with it.

The Torah says to him and to us every year, grieve and even while you grieve, for you will never stop grieving, Aaron. Pursue holiness. Grief itself will be your burden to carry and you will carry it into the Holy of Holies.

The Torah says, God says because I am going to appear in that cloud, in that space, in your uncertainty, in your doubt, in your loss, in your brokenness, in your shock, in that which doesn't make sense and then immediately the Torah will pivot from instructions on how to be in the aftermath of walking in with grief to Kaddoshim. No chapter break. There's no space for us to orient ourselves.

After the death of your two children, Aaron walks into the Holy of Holies, the Kodesh Kaddoshim and then the Torah will immediately begin with what is known as the holiness code, the Kaddoshim imperative. Be holy. Kaddoshim to you.

You shall be holy. God says, be holy because I am holy. And then we have the most ornate and detail-oriented of ethical and moral precepts.

The most embodied holiness. It isn't mystical. It isn't be holy and go to a cave, be holy and go on retreat, be holy and go do psychedelics.

Not bad. Maybe. Who knows? Be holy, not as a state of consciousness, but as a behavior in the world.

Not about a mood, not about an atmosphere. Kaddoshim to you. What will you do with your grief? What will you do with your loss? What will you do with your shattering? What will you do with your deconstruction? What will you do with your paradigms that are lying on the floor? What will you do with it? How will you rebuild it? Feed the poor.

Leave a corner of your field. Make sure you pay your workers on time. Unbelievable.

Don't put a stumbling block before the blind. Don't curse the deaf. Do not deceive.

Be humble. And then, of course, one that we all know because it's so popular, but it doesn't really have content, love your neighbor as you would love yourself, the golden rule, all in the aftermath of the death of Aaron's children. Holiness in our tradition is never pristine.

It is never untouched by death. It is what you build on the other side of devastation. It is what you build even as you hold devastation.

In other words, the Torah says, be holy. That's a promise. You will be holy.

You will do holy. Let it fuel you. Hold that grief and that tragedy with your imperative.

In other words, tragic optimism. Tragic optimism. A refusal to leave the room of your grief and of your disillusionment through any of the doorways that are available.

You can leave the doorway of grief through the door that's marked cynicism. It will always be this way. That's one way to leave.

Another way will be to leave, it's all good. It's for a higher plan. I know it.

In fact, I don't even feel grief. My children are where they should be. That's toxic positivity, yeah? Rachel says something remarkable, and the Torah said it before Rachel, Aharei mos kidoshim.

Hold them together. In other words, stay in the room. Stay in the room with your grief.

Stay in the room with your pain. Stay in the room with what you don't yet understand. Stay in the room.

But everything is pulling you out of the room, and Rachel says, stay with it. And she could hear Hersh saying that from the tunnels. That's what he was saying.

What's your why to live for? And they said, what's your why? And Hersh said, she's my why to live for. And then after he's gone, he comes back in the form of a beautiful young man in ore light, great light, ore gadol, ore gadol, a great light, ore leaf. He says to her, this is what he said.

He was a light unto others. He showed them the way. He, without an arm, starved, tortured.

Aharei mos kidoshim. He's still, he's in death, and he's kadosh. He's in it.

He's in that tunnel. Are people like this born? Maybe. Let's hold out that option.

It could very well be some people are just born like this amazing human being. Some people are just born like Rachel. But then this great light comes to her and says, Viktor Frankl, he was reading Viktor Frankl, and then she Googled the opposite of toxic positivity, and Viktor Frankl just appears again, and she says, it's like CTR from beyond giving her life.

And she realizes, you know what I am? I'm tragically optimistic. I've got a name for myself. And I want you all to be tragically optimistic, she says.

I don't want you to be Pollyannish. I don't want you to be overly simplistic. I don't want you to write away your pain.

I don't want you to reduce it to problem and platitudes. I want you to hold aharei mot after death with kidoshim, with the tragedy and the disappointment, with the moral and ethical imperative to be holy, to build a holy world. So listen, friends, to the beauty of the Jewish calendar.

This past week, this past week, on Monday nights into Tuesday, there was a siren in Israel, a siren that goes off each and every year, and everything stops. An entire country stands still, and you hear names. And this year, the names, of course, not like here in America, friends.

Imagine if in America, on the day before July 4th, we had Memorial Day. On that day, we couldn't go into July 4th without July 3rd. And on July 3rd, we would know the price that freedom costs us.

And imagine a world where it wasn't the ones we sent, but everyone was one degree removed from somebody who was in Lebanon, or was in Gaza, or was in some war. And every house, every house has somebody, where it's always, so many young, young, young people. So many of them from October 7th, and from this past year.

And then with no pause, no breath, no day off from that, we move into Yom Hatzma'ut, into Israel's Independence Day. And we're told, Ha'fachta misb'di d'macholi, you have turned my mourning into dancing. This past Tuesday night, at the Ma'avar, at the transition ceremony, we read letters from a book that some of you are familiar with, that I read at Yom Kippur last year.

In Ma'atem Korim et Ham'ilim Ha'eleh, if you are reading these words, the last will, the last testimony of soldiers who wrote it in their WhatsApp, or in their notes on their phones that were discovered afterwards, it's so powerful to have this expression of Ha'arach Ha'arimot in the calendrical cycle. The calendar is doing what the parasha is doing. It's doing what Rachel was saying is part of the Jewish tradition.

After death, holiness. After Yom Hatzikaron, holiness. After grief, life.

Not because the grief is over, but because the grief is the ground that life grows from. And to me, that is what Israel means at its deepest level. It isn't a political argument.

It's a spiritual grammar. The insistence that you can hold the siren and the dancing in the same body on the same day, and that neither one cancels the other out, that's tragic optimism. That's Rachel.

That's us. And so here's what I want to name tonight, gently. There's another option.

There's always another option. We can check out. We can decide it's all too much.

Israel, the war, the hostages, the news, the grief, the complexity, our domestic politics, you name it. We always have the option to numb ourselves, and there are plenty of options. Choose your numbing device.

And I understand the impulse. We all feel it. I feel it.

But what the Torah is whispering us this Shabbos, and what Rachel, through that moment where that great light, or Levi, or said to her, you were his why. They're whispering for us to find our why. Rachel said to Anderson Cooper, grief is a badge of love that we wear because the love doesn't die.

The person can die. The love keeps growing. It's like bamboo.

It's like bamboo. So I want to ask you a question tonight, and you can take it with you, or you can leave it here, or you can put it down and pick it up again whenever. But what's, who is your why? Who is it that helps you keep going when you want to reach for that which numbs? Who is the one that helps you navigate the moment-to-moment, two-step dance of acharei mot kidoshim, of loss, love, loss, love, grief, gratitude, grief, gratitude? Who helps you hold those together? Who is, what is your why? Kidoshim to you.

The Sfas Emes says that it isn't, you will be holy as an imperative, but you will be holy as a promise. That if you keep showing up, he says, eventually kidoshim to you. It will touch you.

If you keep showing up, if you keep staying in the room, if you keep staying with the both and, then he says, you are promised, said the Sfas Emes, kidoshim to you. You will touch the holy. It will touch you.

To be tragically optimistic is to be attuned to the rhythms of our calendar and of our sacred story. May God bless us to believe in that promise, to have the strength to continue figuring out what it is that keeps us going day in and day out. And may we, we, all of us, bizocha, merit an orgadol, a great light, a great light that shines on all of us.

Please rise.

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