

Shabbat 05 03 19 Sermon

This is the Shabbat of Acharei, the Hebrew word for after, Acharei. Of course it's the week after Acharei, Passover, that great, of course, Jewish but also universal celebration of freedom, an annual reminder that though we human beings experience hardship and suffering, indignity and degradation, we are not defined exclusively by those experiences. It's an annual celebration that reminds us that though we human beings inflict others and afflict others in so many ways, we are not destined inevitably and inexorably to the lowest and most base human elements of our nature, no, we have freedom. Freedom is possible, freedom is our birthright, freedom is our shared longing. It is the Shabbat Acharei, the Sabbath after, the Hebrew word for what comes behind, what we move through and put past us.

The Hebrew word after Acharei is from having put something at your back as you walk forward, Acharei. We walk forward after Passover, after San Diego, after Pittsburgh. But before we leave, before we pass over, we learned a couple of weeks ago that we have to pass through, that Passover is not over until we pass through. Our own Seder, that ritualized telling of the story, holds the future and the past in a delicate balance. It understands, as many of us know, that history repeats itself, repetition, the same Seder over and over and over again. We say the same things, one repetition of course, and one phrase that appears over and over again in the tradition and certainly in the Haggadah. In every generation history will repeat itself, there will be those who get up to destroy us.

In a Seder that will repeat itself we are told about historical necessity, historical repetition, and then the Seder will tell us something else. That in every generation not only will people arise that want to kill us, but in every generation each and every one of us is enjoined to renew the tradition. The same phrase in every generation once about history's repetition and another Bechol Dov Ador in every generation, we can make it new. To paraphrase Heraclitus, we never step into the same Haggadah the same way twice.

This repetition and this importance on the cyclical nature of both storytelling and of course history, with a slight twist, has us thinking of course about Sigmund Freud. Freud would love this, right? Freud's understanding about repetition, he argued that repetition can be a sign that something, right, is being worked through, something incomplete needs completion. Repetition is a compulsion, Freud wrote, not because we have a compulsion, but because healing is compulsory. There must be a finishing of what has not yet been finished. And so Freud said, yes, we are destined to repeat history over and over and over again individually until we realize that in each and every repetition there is an Ahare, there's an afterwards that you can look back and say, hmm, if that keeps coming up again, over and over again, maybe I should choose differently this time. Might I decide to be free? And how I play out the pattern that seems to be a pattern that has a mind of its own. Here we go again. How many people say that in the middle of a pattern? Here I go again, here it goes again, here we go again. Been there, done that, there's Big Ben and there's Parliament. Groundhog's Day. We go around and around in a circle, and here we are.

But that little moment Freud introduced, the Ahare, the afterwards, has me thinking, of course, about a repetition compulsion in the Torah itself. Tomorrow morning, in shuls and

synagogues around the world, we will read about Nadav and Avihu, two children of the High Priest Aaron, the older brother of Moses. These two children, Nadav and Avihu, his name Nadav meaning generous. Avihu means he's my dad. These two brothers that deigned to bring an offering in Parshat Shemini and inexplicably were killed. These two brothers, their story appears no fewer than four times in the Torah. As if the Torah is trying to work something out itself within this story. As if the Torah, our own sacred literature, is trying itself to say history will repeat itself over and over again until you stop at each one of these repetitions and ask, what is the nature of this particular time that Nadav and Avihu's story is repeated?

So tomorrow morning, the repetition of the story of Nadav and Avihu, the name of the Parsha, of course, is Acharei Mot, after death. A look at this unique repetition might give us some insight also into the unique experience that all of us, to some degree, are experiencing this week in the after death of last Saturday, in the after death of so many targeted minorities and targeted humans. Tomorrow morning's reading, the unique repetition of the story, is the context for the entire Yom Kippurim, the Yom Kippur, Day of Atonement, Day of Forgiveness ritual.

As the Torah tomorrow morning, in the beginning of Leviticus, Acharei Mot, Leviticus 14, will tell us, after the death of Nadav and Avihu and God came to Aaron and gave Aaron the ritual for the purification and the atonement of the entirety of the Jewish people. On this, the Jerusalem Talmud will tell us something remarkable and troubling. Tanya says, the Jerusalem Talmud, we taught, Why does Nadav and Avihu's repetition now, in this unique instance, times that they are being repeated, why does it couple their death? To teach us the same way that the Day of Atonement atones for the sins of Israel.

So too, the death of Tzaddikim, of righteous ones, also brings about atonement for the world. And on this, a 19th century commentator, the Torah Tamimah, Rabbi Epstein, Yechamiel Epstein writes, I don't understand how the death of someone can bring about forgiveness for the world. Clearly not a Christian thinker. He says, no, it's not that their death itself brings about a kapara, an atonement, but rather, When God sees all of the work that is done by all of those afterwards, in the aftermath, in the acharenes, who cry and who mourn and who hold, in that moment, says this Rabbi Epstein, the meaning of the Midrash is, then God says, I will atone because of the love and the kindness that is in the aftermath that raises up and honors the memory of those who died. The kavod zeh, who kavod Hashem, because the honoring of the life of the ones who were killed is itself the honoring of the Divine.

How would we, in the achare week, honor the memory of Laurie Gilbert Kay? How would we, in this after week, how would we, as Jews, as humans, how would we bring about atonement for the world through our recognition that achare, when it is achare, when it is after, it isn't behind us. It isn't behind us, it isn't, we've moved on. We can't move on until we have moved it in. We can't move on until we have moved it in to our hearts. What would it look like for each and every one of us to say, it is not achare, it's not behind. It's right now. It's right here, it's right here, it's right here. What would it look like to honor that this repetition, compulsion, this going around and around and around again in a circle is begging from us a moment to step outside of this story to say, how might we change this story?

Well, here's the first thing you can think about. If you are someone who thinks that anti-Semitism is only something that happened, I don't know, to your grandparents or your great-grandparents, or something that happens in Russia or in the Ukraine, or whomever, upgrade that software. That's not true. If you are someone who thinks that Jewish survival can happen without a recognition that you need to be Jewish and do Jewish, need to upgrade that software. If you are someone who thinks that the only way to respond to what's happening in the country is to get involved politically, and that coming to shul or doing mitzvot or engaging your Jewish identity firmly is not itself an act of radical defiance, that needs to change.

In the aftermath of the last year, we all have to take our Judaism seriously. Take our Judaism seriously. Another upgrade. If we think that anti-Semitism is not connected to racism and white supremacy and the ideologies of hate, if we think that it's only about the Jews and not about what is happening in the rhetoric of our country around Mexicans and people of color and every other, we need to fight as strongly for the rest of this country as we do for our brothers and sisters, that's clear, we need to cut the circle of inevitability. Because Ahareh afterwards is not only what is behind us, but how we turn to face it so that we might move not beyond, but towards a new future.

So tonight I ask you, when you leave the synagogue and you are on your way, and irrespective of whether or not you like this d'var, you hated this d'var, I was completely off base, I was right on target, I really spoke to you, I didn't speak to you at all, you're so happy you came tonight, you wished you had never set foot in here. One favor, in the middle of the joy of the Shabbat meal, in the middle of asking your friend to pass you this, or wherever you're going tonight, stop for a moment. Answer a couple of questions. If you remember one of them, great, maybe two, but somebody remember a question. What are the circles of inevitability? What are those cycles, those patterns that keep happening over and over again that you say, here we go again, and you can say, here we won't go again. Here we go again, here we go again, how are you going to stand in the breach right as the energy is there, and we said in Rosh Hashanah, stay in the room, here we go again, and you say, here we don't go again. So bring it up. And be courageous enough to talk about your own cycles, but then bring it a little bit more into the public sphere.

Couldn't believe what I read this afternoon when a friend was involved in the work in this city to bring about Vision Zero, to bring about streets that are safe. Talk about blind spots, and not seeing what's behind you. There are more deaths this year in New York City from accidents to pedestrians and to bikes than there were in the entirety of 2018, already until May, and there's going to be a big public protest down at City Hall on May 7th.

There are all kinds of cycles that we could talk about that need to be lifted up and seen so that we don't say, here we go again, with resignation. But with firm, courageous spirit, we put it in the ground and say, here we don't go again. Acharei mot, in the aftermath, in the putting behind, we have work to do, things to lift, memories to honor, and causes to march for. We're going to do a little fight in our spirit, a little conviction in our speech. Because these things won't happen without someone and hopefully all of us saying together, here we don't go again.

Please rise.