

Commentary: Leviticus 16 and Isaiah 57:14-58:12

Today we join together in one of our oldest and strangest rituals – a day of singing, afflicting our spirits, fasting. And of words. Amos demands that justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream – but today our rivers are of words and words and more words.

God is full of mercy, the poet says,

אל מלא רחמים,
אלמלא האל מלא רחמים,
היו הרחמים בעולם
ולא רק בו.

("God is full of mercy [the opening line of the memorial prayer]/if only God were not full of mercy/there might be mercy in this world/and not just in him" – Yehuda Amichai)

God is full of mercy, but in this world, He leaves us with words.

The words we read this morning are fittingly difficult additions to our difficult day.

Our Torah reading begins by reminding us that -- despite our repeated pleas that He answer us and the beautiful *y'ananu*¹ song we sang last night -- **to approach God is to die:**

The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons – they came near to God and died. Tell your brother Aaron never to come into the kodesh², and he shall not die.

And then it tells how Aaron may **come close – or sacrifice**, the root is the same, so the words are always punningly ambiguous – to God, once a year on Yom Kippur. Bathing and dressing in special holy linens, slaughtering a bull and a ram and a goat and bringing those blood close (sacrificing) and flinging it on the east side of the Parochet³ and sprinkling it with his finger seven times on its front, and then more bathing, and more clothing, and more blood on the horns of the altar.

Listen as our readers chant the *parasha*⁴: the repetition of *KAROV* (come close or sacrifice), *DAM* (blood), *KAPER* (atone or expiate) is almost as hypnotic as the repetition of bathe, dress, slaughter, sprinkle, undress, bathe, dress, slaughter must have been.

So, first we read that none may come close to God, except the high priest, and he only by sacrificing-bringing close - slaughtered animals and sprinkled blood. That the priest not die, many animals must.

And then, the scapegoat – the *seir l'azazel*. In a strange ritual, Aaron is to choose two goats by lot.

¹ "He shall answer us" or, possibly, "would that He would answer us"

² Literally, the Holy -- the inner sanctuary, Holy of Holies

³ The Curtain in the Tent of Meeting

⁴ The section of Torah read in the service, here Leviticus 16

One to be made close to God by death and slaughter and blood and sprinkling.

And the other exiled into the wilderness: first Aaron lays hands on it, as if to bless the children or anoint a priest, but instead confesses to, and onto it, *kol avonot bnai Israel v'et kol pshayhem, l-kol hatotehem* – all the infractions of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, for⁵ all their sins, and he gives⁶ them onto⁷ its head. Bearing this gift –whether with gratitude that it will not be made close to God like its slaughtered cohort, we are not told – it is led off to the wilderness, to take the sins to a land of the *gezerah*. (I'm not sure what that means; the word *gezerah* appears only this once in *Tana"kh*⁸. The root means cutting or deciding⁹, or, in modern Hebrew, carrots. In later Hebrew a *gezerah* is an evil decree, a governmental ruling that is too unjust to be graced by the usual terms judgment (*mishpat*) or *huk* (law). A bad place, in any event, far from God, near only to Azazel, whoever or whatever that is.)

So – our *parasha* describes the way to get close to God without dying. We cleanse our uncleanness, purify our pollution, by slaughter and scattering blood and sending scapegoats into exile.

Why? Perhaps to remind us of the irony of wanting to get close to God: as His chosen people (and all his creatures) know all too well -- to experience His mercy is to remember that in His mercy, He has made us like a *tsel ovair*, a passing shadow.

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And then Isaiah. If our Torah portion is frightening in its foreignness, its distant God who has given us a *huk olam*, an eternal law, to punish our souls and turn the fat of animals into incense for Him to smell – Isaiah is terrifying in his all too modern demands.

Ritual, he insists – this ritual that we practice, that gives our lives structure and meaning, that helps us to stave off the anomie of passing shadows – ritual is not enough.

Isaiah reports that the Jews of his day

seek Me daily,
Eager to learn My ways.
...They ask Me for the right way,
They are eager for the nearness of God:

⁵ Taking the word in its most common meaning. It could also be translated as “on behalf of,” “because of,” or “up to and including” – the preposition contains multitudes.

⁶ *Natan* in the Hebrew, which I translate literally; the standard translations usually take the word as metaphorically expressing “placed”.

⁷ Taking the Hebrew preposition in its usual meaning; “above” or “on top of” or “because” would also be possible.

⁸ Abbreviation for Torah, Neviim and Kituvim, i.e., Torah, Prophets and Writings, the Hebrew Bible.

⁹ The connection between cutting and deciding is less mysterious than it may seem in English. In Hebrew, the verb for making a covenants and contracts is “to cut” -- apparently a survival from a time when a covenant would be solemnized by cutting an animal or substitute. Cf. the Covenant (*brit*) that is cut into a male Jew's penis.

But they too complain, as our tradition so often does, that God is silent and distant. If He is our spouse, as the Song of Songs proclaims, the tradition seems to be piling up evidence for divorce on the grounds of abandonment.

What, then, is a passing shadow in this world created by a God full of mercy to do?

Isaiah tells us clearly: do NOT think it is to go to *shul*¹⁰ and fast or wear sackcloth and ashes. Punishing your soul is NOT the fast I want, he says in the name of God.

Instead:

No, this is the fast I desire:
To unlock the fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of the yoke
To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.
⁷ It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin.

Your kin, of course, including in our tradition not just *bnai*¹¹ Israel but the Children of Abraham and the Children of Adam and, perhaps, even our fellow creatures, like us made from dust and to dust to return.

In this City of unparalleled wealth, with levels of inequality that would shame third world countries we are delighted not to live in,

In this era where the great and partial victories of the Civil Rights movement and perhaps even democratic government itself, are threatened with reversal,

As we stand perhaps rescued from yet another war with no clear goal or purpose,

Isaiah's is an extraordinary demand:

The blood of the sacrifices called out from the altar and was heard, but God Himself, or so we teach, destroyed His House and ended the death that brought us close. The blood of our brothers we have killed or will kill in unnecessary war cries out from the ground and condemns us.

Isaiah calls on you to make God hear your voices in the only way our tradition still knows: we must pursue Justice until it, and not just words, pours down like a mighty stream. Only when we have made Messiah unnecessary will he come.

¹⁰ Synagogue (literally, "school") (Yiddish)

¹¹ Children of

In the meantime, in this world of a silent God too full of mercy, only in our communal efforts to improve our lives together can we find the individual comfort that Isaiah promises.

May you be inscribed and sealed for a healthy, happy, productive and communal year.