

## *Leviticus*

By Rabbi SaraLeya Schley

Last time we were together, we were preparing for Purim – the time for us to so become intoxicated by Spirit so that we understand in our “kishkes” that good and evil are two faces of the One Reality. Of course, as I first learned in 12 step programs, it is no accident that alcohol is called “spirits”. We became drunk with Spirit, drunk with Essence until we were able to glimpse a non- dual view of Reality.

And, now, back in our ordinary non-ordinary Shabbat, we read the book of Leviticus. A book that is dedicated to the proposition that holiness and meaning comes to our lives not through contemplating the mystical Unity of All but through distinctions: between light and dark, earth and water, holy and not so holy. All is not light in this, perhaps more limited consciousness, but nevertheless one who provides human existence with purpose. Our free choice universe contains illness and meanness and insensitivity and events that just don’t make sense. Paradoxically, is it the contrast between the good and the ugly, that make incarnate human life, the soul’s learning experiences. <sup>1</sup>

Leviticus is a book about distinctions. This week we read about the states of tahorah and tumah – one often (poorly) translated as clean or pure and the other as unclean or impure. There is a distinction between a

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<sup>1</sup> Last week we learned about the danger of the inner sanctuary, the danger of spiritual intoxication – no less dangerous than intoxications with spirits. Nadav and Avihu were Aaron’s eldest sons. They had been invited on a journey up the mountain where they experienced a vision of Divinity enthroned on a firmament of sapphire bricks. They prepared for 7 days for the dedication of the Mishkan and they witnessed the fire coming down from on High to consume the sacrifice on the altar. What was their response? To rush in with their own spontaneous offerings, offerings that were not requested by Divinity. And, they became the sacrifice. Their souls were evaporated, leaving the shells of their body and clothing. We spoke at our last Shabbat morning service about the importance of preparation for ecstatic or contemplative spiritual work where the boundaries around ego can be dissolved.

time when we shine with outward focus, able to do the work of the Tabernacle sacrificial service in the old way of describing this state, a state of clarity and purity – tahorah. And there are times of illness, discomfort, injury, dying, post-childbirth, when we are separated from the community and we focus on our inner work – tumah – that leads ultimately to rituals for healing and reintegration.

All of the distinctions are to teach us about another word in Hebrew: Kedushah – holiness, sanctity. Holiness is the awareness of these distinctions and the choosing to act in a way that serves the evolution of consciousness.

We are enjoined to live a holy life and so to be god-like. Certain acts are permitted and certain acts are prohibited. In fact, the Torah code was expanded by the rabbis into an edifice of what is permitted and what is prohibited. We, for the most part in our liberal world, have given up on defining our lives in this way. We have taken upon ourselves, the right and the honor of looking at the rules and regulations of Torah and discerning and choosing which mitzvot can bring meaning to our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives.<sup>2</sup>

How might we do this discernment? **We take our core values and re-interpret the texts.** This is oh so relevant in the sphere of relationship and sexuality. Leviticus is very specific about prohibited relationships, many of which we honor, such as forbidding incest, but some are just not true any longer. Our task is not to be distracted by those patriarchal and heterosexual biases in the ancient text, but to extract the underlying value which, I believe, is that of not allowing imbalance of power to

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<sup>2</sup> Kadesh et atzmekha b'mutar lakh.... We have so expanded the boundaries of what is permitted, we have moved out of the world view of the rabbis, the world where there are just things that are not just done. Once that gate of choice is opened up, it is actually a lot more work. It is a lot easier to say no to what supposed to say no to, than to say no to what we can say yes to....

harm, to honor partners essence in relationship, to accept appropriate boundaries, to realize that relationship is a spiritual path. Just as there is a boundary between what is tahor and what is tamei, what is pure and what is not, so there are just some behaviors which are not acceptable.

In this book of Distinctions, we also learn of the deep interconnectedness between human consciousness and Gaia, the earth – for she actually vibrates with revulsion and vomits-up those who cross sexual boundaries. Leviticus reminds of the ease with which abusive relationships can happen within intimate partnerships and families and brings the earth into resonance with our behavior.

And, so, this week, I honor the work of a very important organization in the Bay Area, Shalom Bayit which literally means peace in the home, or wholeness of the home. This organization brings aid to battered partners and abused family members, provides counseling and shelter. I have not before spoken about Domestic Violence from the bimah, mainly because Shalom Bayit's outreach program has been centered around Sukkot with the image of Sukkat Shalom – a refuge of peace. Since being with Chochmat Ha Lev, I have barely caught up with myself at Sukkot. When I attended the Rabbinic cabinet meeting last week, I realized that I could no longer stay silent about this issue especially as we read Leviticus.

I want our community to be a place of safety. To do this, we must all increase our awareness of the subtlety of abuse and the challenges that come when abuse surfaces. We must not avoid seeing situations that are uncomfortable to see and confront. We hold each other as we shine the light of truth upon ourselves. We are sensitive and aware to what is happening with each other. We don't stand idly by and grapple with the subtle balance between not standing by while our brothers or sisters are suffering at the hands of another and the desire to respect each other's autonomy. We can be a place where we know that, while we cannot fix

the situation, we know what the resources are. we can support, and hold, and refer. We can attend seminars with our friends and children like those Shalom Bayit gives:” Love should not hurt”.

I was presented an even deeper challenge by one of our members: can we be a place not only where the harmed and violated can feel safe, but also a place where the batterer can come for healing? This request nearly pushed me backwards onto the floor! Leviticus teaches us that when we are in the place of tumah – impurity – we go outside the camp for an extended period of time.<sup>3</sup> Without the ritual of doves’ blood and hyssop, how can the one who has done wrong, but has also done sincere t’shuvah be accepted back into the community without creating a lack of safety for those still healing from having their boundaries violated?

Whew! This is a tall order for a community – to have such a heart that is such a wide and strong vessel.

What an opportunity we have to become- even more- the place of the heart! When we realize that we are all One – that the abuser was once abused, but perhaps didn’t have the support to break the cycle of violence. If I can let go of my attachment to my victimhood, I may be less likely to be a perpetrator toward someone else. A lesson for us in our families and circles of friends as well as on the level of nations. Let us be that place of heart! We start small, with ourselves and our relationships

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<sup>3</sup> Compassion for the abusers – they must be supported in their healing from they own abuse and we must – while judging enough to prevent harm, we can (?) be a container that a battered partner can find a refuge and so the batterer too can find support in our community to change and be accepted. Do we believe in the power of t’shuvah to create us anew – as a b’riah hadasha? – Can we act on this belief? How do we update the Levitical ritual and allow a way back in to the camp? Both the injured and the one who injured are healing on the fringes and need to be reintegrated. In our parasha, tzara’at symbolizes a major blemish on the soul - lashon ha-ra, abusing, sexual indiscretion. How do we facilitate a way of healing for both the injured and the one who has brought harm, how do we integrate this with our desire to support the victim and create a place of safety for the victim of violence or abuse? How do we not be attached to our own victimhood and thereby perpetuate the cycle of violence on societal level as well as home.

– intimate partners, friends, study-buddies – and, with experience, learn how to hold the container for larger groups.

Here are my questions tonight: What can I do to bring more awareness and kedushah into my relationships? How are my relationships a sukkah sh'leima or a sukkah she lo sh'leima? How can I best serve this community of heart as together we strive to be a community of heart so powerful that our collective becomes the vessel that holds the polarities and thus allows healing?