

Achrei Mot 5/4/24

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Achrei Mot is a familiar parsha in many ways as we read parts of it on Yom Kippur, and it features the “scapegoat.” But its rituals can still seem strange and its rules disconcerting, and it doesn’t always seem to have much to offer us. But I think it raises some important and timely questions.

Overall, the portion – like much of the Torah and certainly much of Leviticus – is about how to keep a community functioning through a mix of sanctioned collective ritual practices and behavioral strictures. These are probably not the specific rituals or some of the restrictions we would choose, but I think we can understand the effort to instill order in a community. And there are aspects of the ritual that can speak to us – like the notion that even the hereditary leader needs to atone.

But that’s not what struck me most reading the parsha this time.

As people here know, I am drawn to the tensions in Jewish thought, and this portion illustrates an important one – the tension between the imperative to remember and the need to forget.

On the one hand, the central aspect of this portion, the scapegoat ceremony, is, in effect, all about forgetting. The community’s sins are put on the scapegoat, and it sent into the wilderness. Aaron does this by putting his hands on the head of the goat – as if moving the recollection of our sins from our brains to the goat’s – and then the goat and our sins are sent (in the words of the JPS translation to “an inaccessible place.” We are to feel cleansed and pure.

It reminds me of Lincoln’s phrases about the U.S. having a “new birth of freedom” and of the need to end the Civil War “with malice toward none and charity toward all.” We are to start over without regret or acrimony.

But the scapegoat story is bracketed by verses that embody a very different attitude.

The parsha opens with a reference to the deaths of Nadib and Abihu – a clear warning about what can happen if rules are not observed, and an event that the Israelites cannot seem to expunge from memory, and that G\_d (or the writers of the Torah) want to keep alive.

And the parsha ends by telling us being told that the previous inhabitants of Canaan were removed from the land because of their sexual practices – sins we’re not supposed to forget. (Interestingly, this is a rare instance – or maybe the sole one, I don’t know – when we’re told that those peoples were expelled because of their behavior with each other. More often, it’s because they are idolators and could turn us into idolators.)

So the structure of the parsha leaves us with this paradox of forgetting and remembering. When are we supposed to do which? Remembering and forgetting are both needed for moving forward. This touches us on a personal, communal and national level.

On a personal level, how can we find the right place on a spectrum marked on one end by egotistical, carefree irresponsibility and on the other with wallowing in paralyzing guilt?

As a community, how do we, on the one hand, prevent resentments and dislikes from building and festering, and on the other, remember troubling situations and individuals to keep issues from recurring.

On a national level, when do we focus on past sins and when do we allow a fresh start, putting the past sins in an inaccessible place? What do we dwell on when we tell our history? This is obviously a question of some moment right now.

The Torah doesn't offer much direct guidance on these questions; on the surface, it's often most interested in what G\_d remembers. But the portion still illustrates this dilemma, even if inadvertently.

So how do we decide when to make a clean breast of things (to the extent possible) and when must we base our actions on the memory of past sins?