

Yom Kippur: Our Brothers – Ourselves

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By Richard Stein

Shabbat Shalom, and L'shana tova!

The Yom Kippur reading comes from Leviticus, a book (as the Latin word suggests) about Levites, priestly matters. It is a book of commandments, 27 chapters of them, most presenting God speaking in his own voice, giving Moses the laws he must teach the Children of Israel.

The sixteenth chapter, today's Torah portion, is the same—and different. Again God addresses Moses, enumerating more rules. They are, in fact, the mitzvot for the ritual of atonement on which today's *Avodah* service is based: the origin of Yom Kippur. But it is important to notice that God is speaking after the death of two sons of Aaron, Moses' brother—young men who ventured too close to the Divine presence. Their transgression led to their deaths. It probably also led to Aaron's grief, although his state of mind is never described. Instead, the text focuses on Moses, starting with God's simple words: "Speak unto your brother, Aaron."

No other chapter begins this way. Speak unto your brother: that's the phrase I wish to discuss today. But it's more than just a phrase, more than a casual introduction to the details of ritual practice that follow. In many ways these four simple words—speak to your brother—remain the most challenging of all the Leviticus *mitzvot*.

I'd like to resist the midrashic temptation to make mountains of molehills. These are, after all, only four words. For that matter, they represent an exception within Leviticus. They don't tell us how to dress, what to eat, what religious practices to follow. In fact, this injunction doesn't seem to concern 'us' at all. It is directed only at Moses, not the Children of Israel. Or is it?

Traditionally we read Leviticus as a body of law. In these four words the emphasis falls on its transmission, imparting the law to a particular person under special circumstances. The language leaves essential questions unasked. Is it possible to explain divine commandments to someone in a state of grief? Is it even right? Can a mourner really hear such lessons, or learn from them? And remember, Moses is a mourner, too; yet God expects him to carry on. Does mourning bring him closer to or farther from his brother? Can we speak to one another across the gulf of grief?

As you have noticed, I can't resist the pull of midrash: these four words are powerfully suggestive. And pondering them leads to a second interpretative temptation, to which I also will yield. I'm not usually inclined to read contemporary events in light of the Torah, let alone read the Torah as a prophecy of contemporary events. Yet there is modern relevance in an ancient text that asks—no, *requires*—that we speak to one another at precisely those moments of greatest stress. Speak to your brother—in spite of everything, or perhaps because of everything. What could be more difficult, what could be more urgent, especially now?

I say ‘now’ because we live in a time of extreme polarization—global, national, and local. How can we speak across our differences now, when American political factions are so sharply divided? How can we speak to other members of our community now, in Eugene and Oregon, when there are so many disagreements on the nature of that community and its goals? How can we speak now among the different groups in TBI, amid diverging ideas about Jewish beliefs and moral imperatives? And how can we speak with fellow Jews in or about Israel now, at a moment when figures on the Jewish right and left seem intent on demonizing one another—or else pretending those other points of view don’t exist?

I want to say more about that issue: the past six months produced some notable examples. One centers on an article by a journalist named Peter Beinart, himself an observant Zionist, describing the widening gap between young American Jews and the State of Israel. Not an earth-shaking point, perhaps, hardly the sort that usually unsettles the Jewish world. But Beinart’s conservative credentials made Jews across the political spectrum take notice. The essay was widely read, hotly debated. *The Portland Jewish Journal* summarized the main response. Even when arguing with some of Beinart’s claims, many readers acknowledged a truth in his essay they never might have admitted before: the relation of young American Jews to Israel is in danger of being lost. The alienation Beinart portrays represents a real crisis.

My second example, to which Rabbi Yitzhak referred in his Rosh Hashanah sermon, centers on legislation introduced in the Knesset this July to give the Orthodox rabbinate control of all conversions in Israel. Perhaps this is more non-news, since in Israel the Orthodox already have a strong voice in these matters. For that matter, legislative action has been suspended pending negotiations over the next six months—a delay prompted by a firestorm of global response. For instance, a *New York Times* op-ed by Alana Newhouse warned that the legislation would give [here I’m quoting] “a small group of ultra-Orthodox” rabbis “authority over all Jewish births, marriages and deaths — and, through them, the fundamental questions of Jewish identity.” And she added an even more dramatic prediction: “If this bill passes, future historians will inevitably wonder why, at a critical moment in its history, Israel chose to tell 85 percent of the Jewish diaspora that their rabbis weren’t rabbis and their religious practices were a sham, the conversions of their parents and spouses were invalid, their marriages weren’t legal under Jewish law, and their progeny were a tribe of bastards [illegitimates—she uses a different term] unfit to marry other Jews.” [“The Diaspora Need Not Apply,” July 15, 2010]

Strong words. Israelis were no less concerned. A few days earlier the newspaper Ha’aretz published a column provocatively titled, “Is Israel alienating the Jews of the world?” [12 July 2010] The writer, Carlos Strenger, downplays the potential impact of the bill. Yet he’s disturbed by the way it mirrors (in reverse) the gap described in Peter Beinart’s essay, to which he refers. “Israel’s lawmakers [Strenger says] are...completely blind and deaf to what Jews around the world (and a large proportion of Jews in Israel) feel, think and believe.” The consequences of this isolation, he suggests, are severe—for Jews in the diaspora and for Israel itself: as Strenger puts it, “Our politicians do not notice that while Israel is becoming more and more of a Jewish state, it is less and less the state of the Jewish people.”

These are, of course, only newspaper articles. Perhaps that is the real news, the real point—maybe even a reassuring one. Alienation is a perpetual threat. The necessary response may be as simple as words. Speak to your brother—even if you shatter his silence, his refusal to acknowledge your voice. Speak even in a time of crisis, even if you need to speak about the crisis itself.

What does this have to do with us? Many American Jewish communities erect barriers around the question of Israel. For decades it has been subject to a taboo—as if there is no question at all, as if Israel can be spoken of in only one way. This is, in fact, how some in TBI respond to organizations like J Street, to which Carole and I belong, a group that is trying to invigorate critical debate about Israel's policies. All too often we hear warnings: too much talk is dangerous; Israel needs unquestioning support. The Ha'aretz column reminds us that within Israel the situation is different: the most essential questions are subject to debate from multiple perspectives at all times. No wonder the country has so many political parties. What could be more Jewish than argument?

Peter Beinart claims that one reason a younger generation of American Jews feels alienated from Israel is that an older generation has tried to place it out of bounds for political debate. A topic that cannot be discussed falls off our mental radar. Something beyond question becomes a non question, or worse.

How much worse? I'll end with a personal anecdote. This Pesach Carole and I (along with our daughter, Sarah, and her family) visited Israel, where we attended a seder at the home of a cousin, 10 miles outside Jerusalem. The invitation came with a warning. "Make sure your cab driver avoids Orthodox neighborhoods: if he doesn't, you could be stoned."

Our memories of the evening are beautiful. But we think a lot about that warning. It seems like a parable for our times—in Israel and America, inside and outside the Jewish community. Refusing difference can lead to violence. But perhaps the antidote to violence is words. Isn't that what a seder is about?

Speech can be difficult, especially with those whose positions seem farthest from our own. I think that's also when speech is most essential. In spite of our differences and because of our differences, all the more in times of crisis, the phrase from Leviticus remains powerful. Speak unto your brother. Rabbi Maurice made a similar plea. And after his words and mine, if there's anything left to unlock in those four words, I think we have the midrashic key. Here's the remaining question: why does the Torah describe God, in these words, giving the *mitzvot* of atonement to Aaron *through Moses*? The answer by now may be self-evident. We need brotherhood no less than we need forgiveness.

Shabbat shalom. L'shana tova.

Notes for myself:

Beinart link:

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jun/10/failure-american-jewish-establishment/?pagination=false>

Portland Jewish Review on Beinart link:

<http://www.jewishreview.org/wire/Ardent-Zionist-finds-Israel-alienation-among-U-S-Jews>

Strenger link:

<http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/strenger-than-fiction/strenger-than-fiction-is-israel-alienating-the-jews-of-the-world-1.301515>

Newhouse/Diaspora link:

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/16/opinion/16newhouse.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=diaspora&st=Search