

In Torah study yesterday, the first thing participants noted was that this Torah portion is full of complaints. Incidentally, that is also what Ari noticed as he was exploring the Torah portion in preparation for his remarks tomorrow. So, if you are interested in the Israelites' complaints about food, God, or the internal complaints among their leaders, please come or tune in tomorrow, because Ari will be doing an almost exhaustive taxonomy and examination of the complaints and consequences of the Israelite people in Parashat Behaalotecha.

I say almost, because as I prepared Torah study this week, I realized that there was one episode of complaint that Ari will not be discussing tomorrow. It is not dramatic, and it comes near the beginning of the parashah, tucked between the installation of the Levites, and a description of the divine cloud that guided the Israelite encampment.

From the beginning of Chapter 9, as the Israelites begin their second year in the wilderness, with the new moon of Nisan, Hashem instructs Moshe about the Passover sacrifice this year and going forward; how and when the lamb should be slaughtered on the eve of the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, just as they did right before leaving Egypt, according to all the regulations given about it back in Exodus Chapter 12.

The Israelites do this, but as they do, a group of people comes forward to complain:

9:6-7 But there were some householders who were impure by reason of a corpse and could not offer the passover sacrifice on that day. Appearing that same day before Moses and Aaron, those householders said to them, "Impure though we are by reason of a corpse, why must we be debarred from presenting יהוה's offering at its set time with the rest of the Israelites?"

Now, because these people had been handling a dead body, they were ineligible and therefore exempt from participating in the Passover sacrifice. In fact, according to the Talmud, in Tractate Sukkah, 25a, we derive an important principle from this story:

That when one is engaged in the fulfillment of an urgent mitzvah, one is exempt from fulfilling other mitzvot that would usually apply at that time.

There is an argument in this Talmudic passage about what mitzvah these people were doing that made them *tamei*, ritually ineligible on account of a corpse. Rabbi Yosi HaGelili says that they were the people whose job it was to carry Joseph's bones. Joseph had died hundreds of years earlier in the land of Egypt, but his last command to his siblings was that they take his remains with them when they finally left Egypt. Rabbi Yosi thinks that our unnamed complainers were the ones fulfilling that sacred promise. Rabbi Aikiva, in contrast, thinks that it was the people who were carrying the bodies of Nadav and Abihu, the sons of Aaron who died in Leviticus 10, when they offered an unauthorized offering. According to Rabbi Akiva, their bodies were lovingly carried through the wilderness, as well.

But Rabbi Yitzhak rejects both of these ideas, saying that those people could have put down the bodies that they were carrying and purified themselves in time to participate in the Passover sacrifice. Instead, he says, the people who come forward with this complaint are ritually ineligible because they have been engaged in the great kindness of burying recently dead people who have no family to bury them.

I love all of the ideas in this Talmudic Passage, because they point to the fact that *tumah*, which is often translated as "impurity" is not a bad thing. Whichever of the three ideas is correct, they are people doing holy, helpful work, a sacred service to the community. And doing that work brings them into contact with death, puts them into some sort of altered state which makes it inappropriate to fully participate in the normal ritual life of the people.

And yet, they crave connection. Rabbah Dina Brawer writes on this Parashah: "While the individuals in question are technically *exempt* from taking part, they are sorely aware that they nonetheless are missing out on an experience fundamental to their core identity.

The men and women who challenged Moshe understood that circumstances exempted them on that particular occasion, but felt that they themselves would be diminished if they did not take part.”

And so they bring their complaint.

Moshe turns to divine guidance for the answer, which comes in verses 9-13.

And יהוה spoke to Moses, saying: (10) Speak to the Israelite people, saying: When any party—whether you or your posterity—who is defiled by a corpse or is on a long journey would offer a passover sacrifice to יהוה, they shall offer it in the second month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight. They shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, and they shall not leave any of it over until morning. They shall not break a bone of it. They shall offer it in strict accord with the law of the passover sacrifice. But if any party who is pure and not on a journey refrains from offering the passover sacrifice, that person shall be cut off from kin, for יהוה’s offering was not presented at its set time; that party shall bear the guilt.”

Notice the two answers Hashem does *not* give: Hashem does not say, “Too bad. You’re exempt. No Pesach sacrifice this year.” That would be the hard “no.” But Hashem also doesn’t say, “Oh, fine, good point. You can join in with the Pesach sacrifice just how you want, with all of the other people,” which would be full “yes.” Torah is firm that sometimes, we are not up for the full communal situation, even when crave it, and we have to wait.

Even though the idea of ritually ineligibility due to contact with death has basically been defunct since the destruction of the ancient Temple, vestiges remain, such as when we wash our hands before entering our homes after returning from a cemetery, a symbolic reminder that we have been touched by death. Or when mourners engage in the traditional practice of refraining from concerts and large celebrations during their year of mourning.

But in Torah study, we noticed yesterday that that the answer that Hashem gives is all too reflective of our world today, when a variety of factors make it challenging to provide equal access to our sacred spaces. As two years of pandemic have shown us, it is impossible to accommodate every need. Some of us are gathered joyfully in person, some of us are streaming from home, because it doesn't feel safe to be gathered with so many people. The more people gather, the more joyful for them, and the more nervous others become about their risk of exposure.

Sometimes, the best we can do is the incomplete yes: not the promise that everyone will be together all at once, but the invitation to come how you can and when you can, the less than ideal modification to try to bring in everyone, somehow. The commitment to keep trying, to keep noticing who needs a way in. And the reminder that even if you don't consider yourself *obligated* to show up – technically exempt – there is still value in gathering and celebrating together, however we can.

Shabbat shalom.