

2021 Acharei Mot and Kedoshim by David Flitter

The double portion today is Acharei Mot (after the death, of Nadiv and Avihu) and Kedoshim. Acharei starts out with a description of what Aaron has to do to atone for himself and his household. Several pages are devoted to description of the sacrifice of a goat, a bull, what is done with the blood, and what is done with the fat of the animal. Incense is also used in the service, the quietness of the incense is thought to be an atonement for the noise of lashon hara. Aaron places all the sins of the children of Israel on the heads of the two goats; one is sacrificed and the other is sent with Azazel to the desert. Finally in chapter 16 verse 29, Hashem says that this atonement will remain an eternal decree. The day chosen was the date when, after the Israelites had been worshipping the golden calf, Moses came back with the second tablets. This was the 10th day of the seventh month, Tishri, which in perpetuity has been the day of Yom Kippur. It's remarkable to think that Yom Kippur has existed for over 2 millennia. The next chapter discusses the proscription against eating blood, be it a sacrificial animal, or even a nonconsecrated animal. "Soul of the flesh is in the blood, and the blood atones for your souls". This proscription against eating blood is mentioned as well in Parsha Re'eh. Whenever I think of the blood libel, I am struck by the irony that Jews don't eat blood, as well as the ignorance, from a biblical as well as a secular sense, of the promoters of this libel. Chapter 18 goes into detail about a host of sexual activities that we consider as incestuous relationships, but the word "abomination", is not used quite yet. And then, a verse that I first remember becoming aware of 27 years ago during my nephew's bar mitzvah, verse 22: "You shall not lie with a man as one lies with a woman, it is an abomination". The Hebrew word is "Toiaiva", found over 100 times in the bible. although some see this word as a contraction for 3 words, "to'eh atah bah", meaning "being led astray". I will come back to look into this verse in more detail. Acharei closes with the warning "if anyone commits any of these abominations, the people doing so will be cut off from among their people". The abominations refer to adultery, bestiality, and homosexuality. Kedoshim talks about keeping the Sabbath holy, avoiding idol worship, and describing indirect charity. i.e. "Do not gather the fallen fruit in your vineyard, leave them for the poor". Verse 13 "You shall not curse the deaf, and You shall not place a stumbling block before the blind", a commandment which, like several throughout the Torah, falls into, in least in my mind, the "we hold these truths to be self evident" category. And yet, the very next verse is so profound, "You shall not favor the poor nor honor the great, judge your fellow with righteousness". In essence, this is the foundation of our modern judicial system (or at least the way it should be). Another proscription I find intriguing is verse 19, "You shall not plant your field with mixed seed." I suspect then that like organic farmers who are not allowed to do so, the Orthodox take a dim view of GMO products. Then there are several very modern commands, such as rising and honoring the presence of an elderly person, using correct scales, weight, etc. Chapter 20: 10-20 A recounting of the various permutations of what in Hebrew is called "arayot" or "illicit sexual contacts" For the "Giluy arayot", i.e. the more severe illicit contacts, such as bestiality and homosexuality, death is the punishment (though rarely, if ever, meted out). Incestuous relationships were not to be punishable by death, for reasons I will discuss shortly. The parsha closes with God saying "Ani Hivdalti etchem min ha amim", I have separated you from the peoples. Jews, as the Separated and thus the Chosen People. And finally, another brief mention of Kashrut, with the admonition to "not render your souls abominable" with unclean birds or animals. These are quite action packed double parshas, and one could choose many of the verses contained within these parshot upon which to interpret their meaning, and their relevance to modern day life. Nevertheless, I have chosen the somewhat infamous Leviticus 18-22 "You shall not lie with a man as one lies with a woman it is an abomination". For those of you familiar with the layout of the Stone

Chumash, almost every page has more commentary (Rashi, Ramban, Sanhedrin, etc) than Torah itself. However, footnotes for verse 22 have no reference to any rabbinic commentary, hence, they were presumably written by the editors of the Stone Chumash, and are as follows, and I quote: "The chapter of immorality ends with two forms of sexual perversion: homosexuality and bestiality." The footnote goes on to say "none of the relationships given above, the arayot, are described with this term of disgust ("Toaiva") because they involve normal activity, though with prohibited mates. Homosexuality, however, is unnatural and therefore Toaiva, i.e. abominable". The Stone edition I have was published in 1994; apparently, the editors were not aware of or ignored the fact that the American Psychiatric Association removed the diagnosis of homosexuality from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual back in 1973) Turning back the clock to the early years of the 20th century, there was a Rav Abraham Itzhak Kook, who died in 1935, and was the first chief Rabbi of what was then Mandatory Palestine. According to the Jewish Virtual Library, he was a man of Halakha in the strictest sense yet at the same time possessing an unusual openness to new ideas. This drew many religious and non religious Jews to him, but also led to widespread misunderstanding of his ideas. Perhaps the following quote, attributed to him, is why: "The love of God's creatures must include all humankind, regardless of religion and race. The narrowmindedness that sees whatever is outside our people as impure and contaminated is one of those terrible blights that is destructive". A glimmer of progressive Orthodox thinking some 100 years ago. Contrast the spirit of Rav Kook, with a speech in 1986 by the Lubavitch Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, whose words included "If an individual who expresses an inclination towards a particular form of physical relationship in which the libidinal gratification is sought with members of one's own gender, that society and government must offer a helping hand to those who are afflicted with this problem". Well, that did occur. The now defunct organization JONAH (Jews offering new alternatives to homosexuality) was a discredited group offering conversion therapy, despite the APA saying in 1997 that conversion therapy was ineffective and potentially dangerous. Rabbi Chaim Rapoport, member of London Beit Din and author of the controversial 2004 book "Judaism and Homosexuality", wrote a scathing rebuttal in 2012 to the purported efficacy of conversion therapy as espoused by JONAH. Currently, the organizations "Nefesh" and "GLYDSA" (Gay and Lesbian yeshiva day school alumni) are among several groups providing psychological support to Orthodox gays and lesbians. Meanwhile, Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism abolished discrimination against gay Jews back in 1977 and the conservative movement followed suit in 1991. However, only the Reform and Reconstructionist allowed gays into their rabbinic and cantorial schools. In fact, the world's first LGBT synagogue in the world, Beit Chaim Hadashim, opened in 1972 in Los Angeles. I logged on to their Friday night service last Shabbat, and it was touching to see 75 panels of observers, many being elderly gay couples together, participating in a very lovely service. Finally, the first known openly gay orthodox rabbi, Rabbi Steven Greenberg, came out in 1999. In Israel, Rabbi Ron Yosef became the first Orthodox Rabbi to come out in 2009. Additionally, he was a founder of "Hod" ("majesty") which among other things, held an advertising campaign against conversion therapies and for self acceptance of the Orthodox gay community in Israel. In a forward to Rabbi Rapoport's book "Judaism and Homosexuality", Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote "compassion, sympathy, empathy and understanding are the essential elements of Judaism, and they are what homosexual Jews need from us today." Rabbi Sacks, however, did not condone homosexuality, saying that neither Christianity nor Islam are accepting of it. Rabbi Shmuel Boteach, TV personality and influential Orthodox rabbi, has stated that although Judaism does not condone homosexuality, he feels that conferring civil benefits to committed gay couples should be viewed as a means of promoting family values. Writing in the WSJ in 2010, he does not deny the biblical

prohibition of same sex relationship, while acknowledging the commandment for men and women to marry and have children. When a gay couple seeks his advice, he says "There are 613 commandments in the Torah, - you have 611 left which should keep you busy, now go create a kosher home". Rabbi Jacobson of YU describes 2 elements of Torah. On the one hand, Torah represents the unwavering truth that is unchangeable, unbendable, not affected by the flux of time, space and history. Shabbat never changes, nor does matzah, mikvah, mezuzah, b'rit milah nor Leviticus 18:22. However, another element of Torah gives perspective and guidance to each generation, according to his or her needs, challenges, struggles and experience. There are dilemmas today that have never before been experienced in history. Rabbi Jacobson feels that "Torah can be a blueprint to the unique journeys of each generation, to the sensitivities of each age, and the yearning of every epoch". After all, to quote Isaiah "My lord has granted me a tongue for teaching, to understand the need of the times". Among the many needs of the current times is the lessening of the horrific stigma that Orthodox Jewish gays experience, which leads to depression/anxiety and often excommunication from their tightly knit communities. The issue was summed up nicely by Israeli rabbi Daniel Landes who in 2009 wrote "Leviticus 18:22 has not been erased from the Torah. But that Biblical commandment does not give us license to ignore or abuse the significant number of carefully observant Jews who are LGBT". How do we reconcile Halachic Law, originating centuries ago, with contemporary social mores? Are the Orthodox correct in following Leviticus 18:22 unwaveringly? Or is it the Reform and Reconstructionist Jews who are following the true "derek erez"?