

## Aharei Mot: After the Holocaust

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In the Jewish tradition names are given by parents to perpetuate the memory of a loved one, or to convey some kind of meaning and connection to loved ones. But the name for each week's Torah portion is somewhat happenstance. It is derived from the first significant words of the *parasha*. Our ancient rabbis did not sit down, read the portion and then decide what to call the chapter headings. Rather, they simply chose the opening words of the section to be the name of the weekly sidra.

This week's parasha is known by the dramatic words "Aharei Mot", which literally means, "after the death". That is because this week's reading opens, "*Vayedaber Adonai el Moshe acharei mot shenei bnai Aharon: And the Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they drew too close to the presence of the Lord.*" It is referring to the mysterious incident that is described several chapters earlier about the death of Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Moses' brother Aaron, the Kohen HaGadol, the High Priest, at the time of the ceremony dedicating the Tabernacle.

Since the reason for the sudden death of Aaron's sons at the time of the ceremony is not explained, it is left to the realm of speculation. Consequently the rabbis suggest numerous conjectures as to the possible reason for the loss of their lives. I think not about the circumstances, but about the title in the context of the all too frequent times when there is a traumatic experience and tragic loss of life in this country. Just yesterday there was another random shooting, this time a few miles from here resulting in more senseless murders.

And I wonder, what happens afterwards, aharei mot? When armed men commit acts of violence in schools, at work, or in other public places, news sources often inform the public that grief counsellors are made available to help people, especially young people deal with their feelings and emotions, their fears and anxieties, their concerns and worries when something terrible like this occurs. They are then to allow for support and catharsis, to offer comfort and convey compassion and empathy. This is the pattern. It is what happens Aharei Mot, after the death. These dedicated grief counsellors are there to help the survivors deal with the aftermath of death and destruction, and perform the mitzvah of helping the living cope with life, helping them to put back the pieces, helping them to carry on.

I think about Aharei Mot, in the context of the day set aside on the Jewish calendar this past Thursday, the day before yesterday, known as Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Day. It is the day we set aside to pause and remember the victims of the Holocaust, the attempt to annihilate and eradicate the Jewish people. It is a time to reflect on what happened, how and why it happened, and to hear the stories of those who lived through the experience. It is a time to remember.

But again, I am compelled to return to those two simple words, Aharei Mot, after the death, and I often compare how we deal with tragedy today and what happened in the aftermath of the tragedy of the Holocaust. When the war finally ended, when the concentration camps were liberated, when people held in labor camps were set free, when the doors of ghettos confining people against their will were opened, when all of this happened --- there were no grief counsellors. No psychologists were made

available to the victims. No one was there to help them cope with what they had experienced, to try to make sense of the inconceivable experience they had just lived through.

When Jews came out of the shackles of the Holocaust, and left behind the malnutrition and lack of food, the lack of any health care at all, the absence of normalcy, the squalid conditions, the stench of death, and everything else that they had lived through, they were left alone. They had been deprived of their livelihood, their homes, property and possessions, all stolen from them by the Nazis. They were deported and forcibly taken from their homes where they had lived for generations. Their lives were uprooted. Relatives had been taken from their embrace and murdered, often before their very eyes, or sometimes they did not know the fate of loved ones taken from them. The world they knew was shattered. Jewish culture and life was decimated. Yeshivot and shtetls destroyed. Those who survived were witnesses to death and destruction. Yet there were no grief counsellors made available to them.

They were never told why this happened, why innocent people were subjected to such brutality. There was no one to help them make sense of what happened. No one sought to explain to them why they were singled out for persecution. There was no one to give them advice as to how to proceed to cope with all they experienced, to put back the pieces of their lives.

What was true for individuals, was also true for us as a people as well. Yet somehow, these individuals resumed living. They did so without bitterness or rancor or vindictiveness. Many went on to make significant contributions to our world.

And somehow, this people, the Jewish people, the people of Israel persevered as well. We persevered and survived, and built a homeland. We created a nation so that never again would Jews not have a place of refuge, so that there would be a place where Jewish life and culture, and the Jewish language and people could be revived.

Although there were no grief counsellors or empathetic individuals offering sympathy or support then, I want you to know -- it is not too late. So I have a simple request to ask of you: offer it now. Offer them comfort and support. While there still are survivors among us, seek them out and listen to their stories. We are the last who will be able to hear their testimony first hand.

And I have another simple request to ask of the world, and of my Jewish brethren as well, take the message of the Holocaust to heart. Speak out against hatred. Stand up to voices of bigotry and hate and prejudice wherever it may surface, including in the political realm. Oppose those who lump groups together and make broad generalizations to single out, isolate and ostracize others.

Do it when this is done to others. But, I also ask -- do it when it is done to us as well.

When UNESCO passes an absurd resolution that ignores the historical connection of the Jewish people to Jerusalem, speak out and object. When there are those who seek to deny our history, our connection to the land of Israel, or to deny or who want to wipe out our identity, to oppose our right to be a people, our right to a homeland, take what happened during the Holocaust to heart, and stand up and do not be silent.

When policies of the government of Israel are singled out, while ignoring more serious infractions and violations of human and civil rights and atrocities committed by others, point out that this is anti-Semitism. When English politicians and others hide behind the mask of criticizing Israel and try to cover

up their blatant anti-Semitism by claiming that it is not anti-Semitism, and say they are not opposed to Zionism, but claim that they are merely criticizing Israel, speak out and object and point it out for what it is.

When Hamas builds tunnels whose sole purpose to terrorize and to take the lives of innocent Israelis, do not be silent and allow this to happen, as if it is normal and acceptable to single out and target Jews for death.

And so, aharai mot, after the death of so many of our people, let us do what we can to offer comfort and support. Let us do what we can to see to it that the world of the survivors shall survive and thrive. Am Yisrael Chai! The people of Israel lives.

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