



D'var Torah – Acharei Mot. May 4, 2024

By Erica Silverman

Shabbat Shalom. I'm Erica Silverman.

I agreed to deliver this d'var Torah as my mother's 10th yahrzeit is this coming Monday night/Tuesday, 29 Nisan so I do this to honor her. She was a committed Conservative Jew who was very involved in our synagogue and was determined that her family be a part of the Jewish community despite living 10 miles from the nearest shul. Let's just say there was a lot of time shlepping and she never complained about it!

Professionally, Mom was a registered dietician and during my childhood worked in The Benedictine Hospital, run by the Carmelite priests and nuns, and a place called Ferncliff, a nursing home run by another set of priests and nuns. Father Nagle and/or Sister Luke were frequent guests at our Pesach seder or Shabbos table. The conversation was often about how much we had in common through "the Old Testament". Mom taught me the importance of belonging to a Jewish community and of shared values and at the same time, I learned about tolerance and respect for other faiths and opinions from the conversations with our guests at our dining room table. I appreciate my mom sincerely for exposing me to people who observed religion differently than we did and providing the opportunity for real discussion on a variety of religious issues.

When I choose this week to give a drash, I did so because of mom's yartzeit. To paraphrase Arnie Zar-Kessler's comment from a few weeks ago, perhaps I should have looked at the parasha first! I read several commentaries, resources about the parasha hashavuah and re-read the text in several translations of the chumash. After all of this, and as with many parashot, I have many questions and very few answers. None of the themes of this week resonated with me as something I wanted to investigate further. Nothing seemed particularly relevant for me today.

In the left-hand column of the ArtScroll Chumash, 14 themes are given throughout the parasha. The highlights are:

1. The Death of Aaron's Sons and the Yom Kippur Service
2. Confession
3. The Lots
4. The Incense Service
5. The He-Goat to Azazel
6. Removal of the Shovel and Ladle
7. Conclusion of the Service
8. The Eternal Commandment of Yom Kippur
9. Service Outside the Tabernacle
10. Prohibition against eating blood and the commandment to cover it
11. Immortality/Forbidden relationships – that one goes on for a while!
12. Molech
13. Sodomy and Bestiality
14. The Holiness of the Land

Included in the forbidden relationships is the mention of homosexuality. This leads me to what I do want to speak about today. Not whether homosexuality is an abomination – I don't believe it is- or the idea that homosexuality is a choice – I don't believe that either - but the idea of choice in general. I have wondered for a long time why so many people choose to quote this chapter and verse while ignoring so many others.

This may reflect poorly on me, but the first reference I thought of is a brilliant scene from the TV series “The West Wing”. The mid-terms are coming up and the team is trying to stop hate groups from protesting. President Bartlett walks into a reception at the White House and sees an ultra-right wing talk show host seated in the room. He asks if she is Dr. Jenna Jacobs then goes on to qualify that she is a PhD in English Literature, completely unrelated to psychology, theology, or health care – all areas that she is particularly vocal about. I’m paraphrasing a bit but he says to her... “You call homosexuality an abomination.” She replies that she doesn’t say it’s an abomination, the Bible does and President Bartlett says, “Yes, Leviticus 18:22. Chapter and verse.” He goes on to say, “I’m interested in selling my youngest daughter into slavery as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7, ... what would a good price for her be? ... My chief of staff, Leo McGarry insists on working on the Sabbath, Exodus 52:2 clearly says he should be put to death. Am I obligated to kill him myself or is it OK to call the police? ... Does the whole town really have to be together to stone my brother John for planting different crops side by side? Can I burn my mother in a small family gathering for wearing garments made from two different threads?”

Of the 613 mitzvot, how do we choose which ones to observe and include in our lives and which ones not? How do we make choices that allow us to maintain our community, our faith and our uniqueness while living in the current world?

Today we are often making different choices than were made in the past. Who decides and how it is determined which commandments are strictly adhered to and which are not? How do we encourage others to tolerate and perhaps even respect choices that are different from their own? How do we assure everyone is comfortable in the public spaces and are not judged for their choices in their private spaces?

Which laws and mitzvot are needed to maintain our Judaism and our belonging to a Jewish community? Some would say observance of Shabbat and Kashrut yet there are many committed Jews who are not shomer Shabbat or who do not keep Kosher. These personal choices do not, in my opinion, make them any less Jewish. Personally, I chose to stop going to shul on Shabbat for several years when we lived in Teaneck because I didn’t find it meaningful in that community.

When I went down the rabbit hole to Google “sources on making choices in life”, there were over 7 million links!

The first one referred to community decisions and listed four types:

- **Autonomous** – Leader makes the decision alone but may ask for information or consult with others beforehand.
- **Consultative** – Leader involves others in the decision-making process. People can weigh in with opinions and wield influence, but the final decision will be what the leader thinks is best.
- **Joint** – Leader shares the problem and decision is made by consensus. Everyone has a say and works toward a solution all can support, even if it’s not their first choice.
- **Delegative** – Leader delegates decision to an individual or group, often with parameters.

For each decision, we must consider: Who are the leaders? Who are the delegates? Who is consulted?

Another was more individual based and claimed there are 7 steps to make good choices:

- Step 1: Identify the decision. You realize that you need to make a decision. ...
- Step 2: Gather relevant information. ...
- Step 3: Identify the alternatives. ...
- Step 4: Weigh the evidence. ...
- Step 5: Choose among alternatives. ...
- Step 6: Take action. ...
- Step 7: Review your decision & its consequences.

- Good decisions positively impact others, are replicable, foster opportunity, include others, are executable, are accountable.

One final, and I hope entertaining, story about choices. When I was a young adult, my father told me he didn't believe in Gd. I was surprised to hear him say that as he was a Kohen and was very committed to show up to duchen every holiday. He took this responsibility seriously and seemed proud to carry on the tradition. I asked him if he didn't believe in Gd, why did he choose to go to shul and why did he duchen. He replied, without hesitation, "just in case I'm wrong."

Ultimately, we are all "Jews by Choice". We each choose to observe what is meaningful to our lives. It may be due to strict adherence to the written law, it may be due to parental rules, it may be a comfortable tradition, it may be a meaningful ritual or a just a habit we can't break. The possibilities are endless.

I believe I am preaching to the choir as they say with Minyan Ma'or. I have found this to be a tolerant, welcoming, and respectful community for over 30 years. I hope that each and every one of us is able to influence others to make choices that foster more tolerance, more respect and more acceptance.

May we all make choices that support our own well-being, our families, the community, and the world at large.

Shabbat Shalom.