

## Should We Have Known Better? 2020 Parashat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim

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With sixty thousand people in the United States having died in the last few months from Covid-19, and more than one million people infected in our country, we are asking the question: Should we have known better? And that's the question on many people's mind: Should we have known better? Who is to blame for this crisis in which we find ourselves?

The story is told of a little girl sitting and watching her mother do the dishes at the kitchen sink. She suddenly notices that her mother has several strands of white hair sticking out in contrast to her brunette hair. She looks at her mother and inquisitively asks: "Why are some of your hairs white, Mum?" Her mother replied: "Well, every time that you, my dear, do something wrong and make me unhappy, one of my hairs turns white." The little girl thought for a moment about this revelation, contemplating the stress and angst that children cause their parents, and then she asked her mother: "Is that, then, Mama, how come *all of grandma's* hairs are white?!"

It is human instinct to place blame and yes, we parents are often quick to blame our children. I even hear in some couples, one spouse is quick to blame the other spouse. Not in my home, of course. Though each of us is vastly imperfect, our society has devolved into one that seeks passionately to place blame on others for every problem large and small. If a person cuts his finger off while slicing salami at work, he blames the restaurant. If a woman smokes three packs a day for 40 years and dies of lung cancer, she blames the tobacco company. If a neighbor crashes into a tree while driving home drunk, he blames the bartender. And if the grandchildren are brats without manners, we blame television. Yes, sometimes there is true negligence; but every time?

And now, considering that in 2006, the Bush administration created a pandemic handbook, that in 2018 Bill Gates warned us of the impact of a global virus, and that already early in 2020 we knew of the danger of the novel coronavirus in China, we are looking at our governmental leaders and wondering if the suffering and the deaths were preventable. Are our politicians to blame for our situation today? Are the Chinese? Certainly the workplace, the tobacco company, the bartender, the television producers, the Chinese government and our American politicians on the local and national level bear some level of responsibility. But, unless there is real negligence on their part, I am wondering if the blame-game is at best time-wasted or, at worst, an abdication of some level of personal-responsibility on our parts.

So it is that we turn to our double Torah portion this week, Parashat Acharei Mot-Kedushim. In the first portion, Acharei Mot, God instructs us with the holiness of the Yom Kippur rituals. Then, God seemingly makes a hairpin turn to command the entire People Israel to be holy through rituals regulating our relationship with God, sure, but also in our relationships with others. In many ways, these two Torah portions are a carbon copy of the message we receive on Yom Kippur day itself, but delivered four months ahead of schedule.

The timing is not a coincidence. As Rashi teaches, in that Parashat Acharei Mot is read in the spring, God is giving us a warning that in just a few short months from now, the Day of Judgment will be upon us: that the final exam is almost here. Then, in

Parashat Kedoshim, God gives us the answers to that final exam. God tells us exactly upon what we will be judged on Yom Kippur with enough time for us to change our ways. Just as in our Yom Kippur haftarah we read of the prophet Jonah warning the people of Ninevah to repent in advance of destruction, so too is God warning us now in our Torah portion this week of a similar fate that might befall us just a few months from now if we fail to heed its commands.

With that in mind, I believe that Parashat Kedoshim is actually the thesis statement or perhaps even the climax of the entire Torah. As I've often repeated now, among my favorite teachings from the Shalom Hartman Institute is the wisdom of Rabbi Dani Segal who teaches that the entire Hebrew Bible is a commentary -- an answer -- to Cain's question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Parashat Kedoshim answers that explicitly: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" and, just a few verses later, "The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Then, to each statement God adds, "I am the LORD." A few months from now on our Day of Judgment, at our Final Exam, God will ask us three questions: 1. Did you love God with all your heart, your soul and your might? 2. Did you love your neighbor as yourself? And 3. Did you love the stranger as you love yourself?" That's it. End of story. Whether your brother is a fellow Jew or not, you are obligated toward him, and you are obligated toward God.

But without fail, each of us shows up on Yom Kippur day to receive a grade less than 100%. We do have faith in God but we could have shown more faith. We did love our neighbor but we could have shown her more love. And, well, our track record with the stranger is really just not so good. Now, four months away from Yom Kippur, God is telling us exactly what to expect on the Day of Judgment; nevertheless we are going to arrive on that day having done less than what we should have done and we will pray that God forgives us. We will hope that God might look ahead at what we can do rather than blame us for what we have done or what we have failed to do. Should we have known better? Yes, absolutely. Should we have done better? Yes, absolutely. But on Yom Kippur day all that we can do is promise to try harder in the months and years to come. On Yom Kippur day, we pray for God's mercy and forgiveness and we hope that God will give us a second chance.

So we come to the question of the day. Should we have known better? And the answer is a resounding yes. In anticipation of the novel coronavirus hitting American shores, we should have known better ... just as on Yom Kippur we will know that we will know that should have done better too. The warnings were given. The alarms were sounded. But attention was not paid. The predictions were not heeded. More than 60,000 people have died and more than 1,000,000 souls have suffered the virus's wrath. Jobs have been lost and bank accounts emptied. We are lonely, exhausted, frustrated and angry. We want to blame; we almost need to blame. We need to have someone to pin this on, like the Chinese, or the politicians, or, say, the journalists. Perhaps it is no coincidence that in the midst of the Yom Kippur ritual, we learn about the idea of a scapegoat. Most of us and society at large were underprepared in multiple ways for this crisis and most of us are responsible even on some small level for facilitating the climate of globalization, urbanization and industrialization that brings blessings for sure, but also which has allowed this pandemic to wreak such havoc. That

so many African-Americans were affected by Covid-19 is a systemic responsibility as just one example of the broader guilt each of us bears, not to mention the lack of supplies, resources and more from which we are suffering.

I might then suggest that, in this week of holiness, let us stop playing the blame game. We are better than that. We as individuals and as a society need to work harder to take personal responsibility and to improve ourselves rather than seeking always to fulfill our instinct to blame others. Should we have known better? Yes, absolutely. But that and \$2.00 will get you a cup of coffee ... at least when the coffee shops open back up. Rather, let us ask the question, "How can we do better now and going forward? How can we fix this situation so that when the next virus comes -- and it will surely come -- we will be better prepared to minimize its impact. That, by the way, is once again why we read about Yom Kippur and about the holiness code now, four months before the Day of Judgment: so that rather than cast blame after the fact, we can prepare ourselves for what is to come. There always is and ought to be a day of reckoning. "You shall not take vengeance," we read in our Torah portion this week, or "bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself. I am the LORD." We know the answers to the final exam, so let's stop blaming others ... and let's start studying.

This week of Parashat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim, let us heed the commands of the Torah to love God, to love our neighbor, and to love the strangers among us. This week of Parashat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim, let us stop counting the grey hairs others have caused us. And this week of Parashat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim, let us be strengthened in our resolve to look forward rather than backward, wise enough and brave enough to make the necessary difficult decisions today so that tomorrow can be bright, and beautiful, and blessed for us all. *Adonai oz l'amo yitein, Adonai y'varech et amo vashalom*: May God bless us with strength. May God bless us health. And may God bless us with peace." And let us say, Amen.