



Parashat Acharei Mot
Journeys with Acharei Mot

by Lev Raphael on Friday May 01, 2009

7 Iyar 5769

Leviticus 16:1 - 18:30

I grew up in a very secular Jewish household where the Torah did not exist and had no apparent relevance to our lives, not even as a set of historical documents. My parents were Holocaust survivors and my Bundist mother had no use for religious observance. My father had grown up in a *shtetl* in the Carpatho-Ukraine living a life something like the one Eli Wiesel describes in various works of his, but after the war, he and religion were strangers.

My knowledge of Torah – which I thought of as The Old Testament – was filtered and distorted through the wider Christian culture, and just as I internalized anti-Semitism in myriad ways, I also learned some basics about Jewish scripture. While Martin Luther King, Jr. may have been a childhood idol of mine, and he was inspired by the Hebrew prophets, all of that was in some separate universe. The Christian God was the God of Love, the Jewish God was the God of Hate. Much as I might have squirmed at this dichotomy, I had no idea what a gross distortion it was of Hebrew scripture. But I did know that at the heart of this hatred was a gleaming core that had a very specific message for me as a boy slowly understanding that he was different from his peers.

The radioactive text that I found constantly evoked – primarily but not exclusively by non-Jews – was *Vayikra* 18:22. The text is really ground zero for homo-haters, whether they believe in the Bible as literal truth or not. And even though *Vayikra* was also the source of what's commonly called The Golden Rule, that timeless evocation of humanity was always eclipsed by the terrible injunction that seemed to point a sword directly at me. It made me ashamed to be gay and it made me ashamed to be Jewish, for in my ignorance, I thought that Judaism was the fount of homophobia.

In my twenties I started on the path that made me something of a *baal tshuvah*. But in my growing closeness to a faith and tradition that had always been alien to me, it troubled me whenever I was present at a service where that passage was chanted aloud. At a moment when I should have felt one with my fellow worshipers and with my fellow Jews wherever they were in the world, I was suddenly thrust into the outer darkness, branded as irrevocably as Cain was.



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Those words were a wound in my Judaism that healed in stages. It helped me to learn from a Torah historian at Brown University that the passage contained an “unattested idiom” and so, one couldn’t be 100% sure what it referred to. It helped me to study the textual context of Moloch worship in which this particular prohibition is embedded. It helped me to understand the purpose of the Holiness Code and how it’s likely to have been compiled in the Babylonian Exile and soon after, and so was meant to re-forged the identity of the Hebrew people who had been defeated and demoralized in every sense of the word, their separate identity crushed. It helped me to join a gay Jewish group in the Detroit area and eventually join a synagogue that was entirely open and accepting. It helped me to do a Talmud study class in Israel where we were all gay and read the very homoerotic story of the burly robber Reish Lakeesh and the beautiful scholar Rev Yokannan. All these were steps along the way, as was studying Torah intensively for several years with my life partner.

Last year I came to a new awareness about *Acharei Mot*, perhaps because I had also been letting go of my lifelong rage against the Germans and Germany (which is the subject of my newest book [My Germany](#)) and this was affecting me in other ways, some of which I have yet to discover.

At a *shabbaton* in a Michigan synagogue, I was discussing gays and the Torah, and *Acharei Mot*. I paused at one point to ask my audience if anyone believed the Torah was the actual word of God. One man raised his hand. I couldn’t resist quipping that I wish God had used a better copy editor, but after that I asked something that had occurred to me many times over as a complaint. Now, however, it came out as a simple, non-confrontative question: “Of all the prohibitions in Torah, of all the things that are *toevah*, of all the actions that demand the death penalty, why is this one so important to you? Why focus on this one?” He couldn’t answer, and in that moment of doubt, I wondered if there might not be hope, a kind of beginning.

For myself, I realized that I hadn’t just been angry at the text and its use over the years as a club to bash gay people, I’ve also been angry at any and all Jews who dare to hold it up as proof that there’s something wrong with me. I pushed them away, dismissed them, without trying to enter their world and at least discuss things from a different point of view. Standing in that synagogue, I felt remarkably calm. I was speaking in a still, small voice about a passage that has been the source of endless shouting. I don’t know if I changed that man’s mind in the slightest, but I felt changed, more able to go on turning this problematic text over in my hand like a Rubik’s Cube, waiting for everything to click into place.



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