

Tzav 5778
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“The Space Between Us”

As a vegetarian, I should, by all accounts, be free to skip the book of Leviticus in its entirety. Animal sacrifices, blood and guts, livers and entrails, no thank you very much. And yet, it’s in our sacred text, and so year after year I pore through the minute details of our archaic sacrificial cult, searching for what rings true.

I have to admit that this year, this week, I was distracted. Pulled out of the text to the frightening reality of our own time, to the reminder that this Shabbat while we read the portion of Tzav, this second one of Leviticus, children and adults across the country will be marching in protest of one of our contemporary ten plagues, the scourge of gun violence.

This week, I read Leviticus, and I read the news, and I thought of the following poem:

what the window said to the black boy by Clint Smith

when someone breaks me they call it a crime
they call it property damage
they call it breaking the social contract

when someone breaks you they call it inevitable
they call it your fault
they call it wednesday

they say that it’s you who came cracked
came shattered right out the box
but they don’t know that this is just something you do

to show how many of you there are
that none of you are the same
that the more shards there are

the more ways there are
to refract this light
that envelops us each day

On Sunday evening, twenty-two year-old Stephon Clark, father of two young boys, was shot twenty times by police in pursuit of a suspect who had been breaking windows. He was standing in his grandmother’s backyard holding a cell phone which the officers mistook for a weapon.

It breaks my heart that his name joins the list of unarmed black men, women, and children who have been killed because the fear that the color of their skin elicits collapses the space which keeps finger away from trigger.

I have seen pictures of his grandmother's anguish, and I have thought of my own grandmother. I looked at the sweet smiling faces of his sons in his arms, and I thought of losing my own father, and that pain is immediate and unfathomable. I watched and rewatched the body cam footage of that night, because this is our Torah too, this world we live in, the blood and the guts, and we are obligated not to turn away.

And from that torah, called this Torah. The eighth chapter of Leviticus offers us the details for the anointing of Aaron and his sons as priests. They are to become the spiritual leaders of the nascent Israelite society, the ones responsible for the moral well-being of their people. Their sacrificial offerings seem to be of a piece with all the ones that have come before: a bull, and two rams, killed and burnt on the altar, an ancient attempt at closeness with the Eternal One. On closer inspection, there is something very special about these sacrifices, the ones that elevate Aaron and his sons. Each time they offer an animal, as with any others, the priests are tasked with placing their hands on its head before it is killed. Usually those actions flow seamlessly, the bringing, the holding, the killing, all in the span of one verse. Yet here, in this ritual, there is a gap, a syntactic hiccup. Verse 14: "*vayismoch Aharon u'vanav et y'deihem al rosh par ha'chatat.*" "Aaron and his sons laid their hands upon the head of the bull of purgation offering." Verse 15: "*vayishchat*" "and it was slaughtered." That space, which appears for each of the three sacrifices of this ritual, is everything. It is the moment when Aaron and his sons, elevated to the highest moral leadership of their community, the ones who are often arbiters of life and death, hold the head of a living being in their hands and pause. The space allows them to hold life and see it, truly see it, before they take it.

Fear, whether born out of the racism that permeates our society, or out of our own hurts or misjudgments, erodes that space. We see the way it operates in our own Passover story, when it leads Pharaoh to the oppression and enslavement of our people. Fear leaves no time for holding anything, for thinking straight, for the acknowledgement of the sacredness of the life in front of us. If the Torah calls our moral leaders to preserve that gap between life and death while they hold the fate of a sacrificial animal in their hands, *how much the more so* should we reclaim it, in our day, for human beings—grandsons, and sons, and fathers. How much the more so should we confront our own fears that we might leave the space to hold the holiness of others. So that we might start the next verse in a new way. Not "*vayischat*" and he was killed, but "*vayechi*", and he lived.

It's not easy to name our fears, or to name the systems of prejudice in our society that create them. And having named them, it is even harder to build that sacred pause in spite of them.

I had a recent and unanticipated encounter with fear, myself. Two weeks ago, I coerced a friend into climbing Camelback Mountain with me. I've climbed plenty of peaks in my time in Arizona, and though I approached this one with a little trepidation, especially after seeing a helicopter rescue the night before, I felt pretty confident we would reach the top. Fast forward to standing next to my friend Eva on the saddle staring at the tiny bodies scaling the peak ahead of us, absolutely certain that my own body would not, and could not, do the same. My fear,

unwelcome and unexpected, grabbed my brain and would not let go. The space around me, the incredible expanse of sky, collapsed into the cold, certain truth that I would be spending the rest of my life paralyzed on this mountain. I was irrational. I could see how fear so easily drives us to madness, to inhumanity.

“You need a mantra,” said my friend Eva. “My feet can hold me up. The mountain is my friend.” I breathed. A small pause. My feet can hold me up. The space expanded. The mountain is my friend. Still more. Enough to put one leg in front of the other and climb. The mountain is my friend. The mountain is my friend. Enough space to carry me to the exhilaration of the summit, to the knowledge that fear, though we may believe its grip is unending, can be released. I made for myself the space between two verses.

In the Torah, the mantra is wordless. We have only to imagine the look that passes from Aaron to that bull, or that sheep. The quiet acknowledgement of the beating heart. In our own day, we must ask ourselves: having named our fears, how do we speak that sacred space back into being? What are our mantras? What will stop us before we do irreparable harm? What words will help us hold each other’s humanity in our hands?

This Shabbat, I pray that we are given the courage to face the fears of our society, and to name them within ourselves. I pray that we find a way to change the second verse. That he might have lived. That we all might live.