Parashah Commentary
This week’s commentary was written by Rabbi Abigail Treu, Director of Planned Giving and Rabbinic Fellow, JTS.

Getting out of Your Own Way

My friend Jen could never have known when she accepted her colleagues’ invitation to join them for an after-work party that she was the only one in the office who did not share their recreational drug habit. She could never have foretold that trying something just once to be social would turn out to be a thrill beyond her wildest imagination, or that the feeling of belonging it would engender would push her to regular use with her new friends. It was not until a few parties turned into a few months and then a few years that she realized she had become addicted, and that this addiction was ruining her life.

In the months that followed her detox and recovery, she began to wonder: To what had she been the most blind? Her growing addiction? The loneliness and need for acceptance that allowed it to flourish? The passage of time as she formed the habit? And, how many times had she ignored the pleading of family and friends to stop?

I found myself thinking of Jen—and of my own struggles and habits—when I read Leviticus 19:14: “You shall not... place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God. I am the Lord.” Taken literally, this is a verse about respecting the disabled. Taken figuratively—as the Rabbis give us ample precedent and license to do—it is about all of us.

Who is blind? Well, we all are. Rashi says it straight out, on his gloss to Leviticus: “hasuma badavar,” he writes; you shall not place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God. I am the Lord.” Taken literally, this is a verse about respecting the disabled. Taken figuratively—as the Rabbis give us ample precedent and license to do—it is about all of us.

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sins we committed knowingly and unknowingly, is a reference to this, too. We are all blind, and we all trip, and we have to work hard not to cause one another and ourselves too much damage or pain. By the time the Rabbis of the Talmud are done with this verse, they have applied it to offering wine to a nazir (who has taken a vow of abstention from alcohol), selling shatnez (the mixture of linen and wool forbidden in this week’s parashah) to an unsuspecting customer, and handing a weapon to one who is prone to violence. Each of these seems pertinent to the problems of our society, in which we worry about “rights versus responsibilities” when it comes to things like drugs, credit lending, and gun violence.

Read that broadly, the verse becomes a charge of social obligation. Nechama Leibowitz defines blind as one who is greedy, selfish, or morally callous to the extent that he or she is blinded from doing what is just. She writes from Israel in 1974:

The arms merchant cannot extenuate his act by claiming that he had not sold his death-dealing instruments for illicit uses, and that he left the decision on when to use them to the discretion of the purchasers . . . the Torah teaches us that even by sitting at home doing nothing, by complete passivity and divorcement from society, one cannot shake off responsibility for what is transpiring in the world at large . . . By not protesting . . . you have become responsible for any harm arising therefrom, and have violated the prohibition, “You shall not put a stumbling block before the blind.” (Studies in Vayikra/Leviticus, 1974)

By now we have been offered two definitions of blind: Rashi’s hasama badavar, one who is blind about a particular matter, and Leibowitz’s moral blindness of a lazy social conscience. Nachmanides offers a third, based on his reading of the final part of the verse, “You shall fear your God. I am the Lord.”

What is that last part of the verse doing here? In this double parashah, and indeed throughout the humash, we see it over and over again, and so it is tempting to read right through it. But if we slow down, we wonder: what is it teaching us here? Nachmanides writes that only God is the One who sees that which is hidden. In fact, he points out, unobserved crimes are more likely to be committed; it is human nature to try to get away with something when we think we will not be caught. And so, in a know-before-Whom-you-stand vein, he admonishes: fear the God who sees all. It will keep you from stepping into your own blind spot, or tripping up someone else who cannot see what they are doing.

Years ago, walking down an overcrowded Broadway sidewalk during rush hour, I witnessed the crowd jostle a blind man who was guiding himself with a red-tipped walking stick. “Excuse me,” he announced to all around him quite theatrically. “I didn’t see you.” It strikes me that, in fact, we are all that man, and we are all the crowd bumping into him, too. Walking down the crowded path of life we bump into one another with no malicious intent, but with plenty of ability to do harm. So, too, we guide ourselves with what means we have in order to navigate our own life’s path despite our own blind spots—be they physical, psychological, or moral. While our haftarah this week is Amos, who warns us against sin but also holds out hope for redemption, my own thoughts turn to Isaiah, who offers a different use of that same verb, fear. “Fear not, for I am with you, do not be dismayed, for I am your God: I will strengthen you, indeed, I will help you; moreover I will uphold you with the right hand of my righteousness.” (41:10). Somewhere between fearing God and trusting in God’s guidance, somewhere between the self-awareness that each of us is blind to in our way and the commitment that we will not place a stumbling block in another’s path, we gather the strength to overcome life’s challenges.

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A Taste of Torah
A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS

Embracing Life in the Face of Death

This past week, we commemorated State of Israel Memorial Day (Yom Hazikaron) and State of Israel Independence Day (Yom Ha’atzma’ut). The juxtaposition of these two observances is jarring. Living in Israel, one feels how mourning permeates every moment of Yom Hazikaron: from the piercing siren that sounds around the entire country at 8:00 p.m. to the mournful songs played on Israeli radio; from the Yizkor (memorial service) stickers with the Israeli flag known as dam hamakabim (the blood of the Maccabees) to the throngs of Israeli citizens flooding Mount Herzl Cemetery. At the close of this sobering day, transition ceremonies give way to the festivities of Yom Ha’atzma’ut: fireworks decorate the night sky and festive barbecues fill the landscape of every square meter of Israeli parks. Mourning gives way to joy and unbridled celebration. Rabbi Shmuel Avidor Hacohen, one of the best known and beloved rabbis of the modern State of Israel, points out how this week’s parashah, Aharei Mot, is almost always read in the same week as these commemorations. To what extent does the parashah reflect the dramatic opposites witnessed in the calendar?

We know well, the parashah opens, “after the death of the two sons of Aaron.” The deaths of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, remain inexplicable to this very day. Avidor Hacohen writes,

This week’s parashah has become an allusion to which that we experience in the calendar: such is the fate of this nation of Israel—every new accomplishment of the nation, every joy experienced seems to be inextricably connected to the fall of its children. It is also striking that the Torah reading is not solely occupied with death. Specifically, we read of new accomplishment of the nation, every joy experienced seems to be inextricably connected to the fall of its children. It is also striking that the Torah reading is not solely occupied with death. Specifically, we read of new accomplishment of the nation, every joy experienced seems to be inextricably connected to the fall of its children. It is also striking that the Torah reading is not solely occupied with death. Specifically, we read of deaths of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, remain inexplicable to this very day. Avidor Hacohen writes,

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Death and tears have too often been the painful refrain of Jewish history. But as Rav Shmuel Avidor Hacohen reminds us, the opposite side of the pain is life—choosing and embracing life with fervor, zest, and appreciation. The calendar reminds us that we must pause to reflect on these two aspects of the Jewish journey. More than that, Torah powerfully echoes such a message in this week’s parashah.

Happy 65th birthday to the State of Israel!

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