TORAH FROM JTS

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Holy Frustration

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The anthropologist Mary Douglas once called the Book of Leviticus "an elaborate intellectual structure of rules." The rules that fill Leviticus are utopian in nature—the book describes a perfectly ordered world, in which everything—each animal, each sacrifice, each ablution—is in its right place. When something is done wrong—like when the sons of Aaron offer "a strange fire" (Lev. 10:1–3)—God intervenes, and the system immediately corrects.

Like much of Leviticus, Parashat Emor opens with yet more of these rules. But now the Torah needs to acknowledge that even when everything is in the right place, there is still death. What's a priest to do when tragedy strikes? "Speak [*Emor*] to the priests, the sons of Aaron," God tells Moses, "and say to them: None shall defile himself for any [dead] person among his kin, except for the relatives that are closest to him" (Lev. 21:1). In order to stay pure, priests are limited in terms of when they can come near a dead body; even though they may mourn the death of another, the Torah says that they can only be near the corpse of a close relative. After a few terse verses about mourning practices, the Torah enumerates further rules that are meant to keep the priests and High Priest pure, with the upshot being that a priest is "holy to their God" (21:7).

As anyone following along in Leviticus until now knows—the priests are special. And in a ritual system in which impurity abounds and priests must remain on call to serve God, it is unsurprising to see the Torah set extra strictures to keep them pure. But what do we make of such passages today? While many of the practices listed at the opening of this week's parashah are still observed by Jews who maintain priestly lineage, they can feel remote to the rest of us—rules for a religious elite in a Temple-era world that no longer exists.

R. Mordechai Yosef Leiner (1801–1854), the founder of the Izhbitza-Radzyn line of Hasidic rabbis, read this passage in a way that allows it to speak not only to the priests, but to anyone. In his book the *Mei ha-Shiloach*, "the Izbicer" reads this passage allegorically. First, the word "priest" can be understood—based on a comment of Rashi—not merely as a descendant of Aaron, but as anyone "who seeks to serve God," an Oved Hashem.

Having made this first move, the Izbicer then reads the passage at the start of this week's parashah as speaking not just about the specifics of corpse impurities, but about the challenges that face a religious person when they encounter death or other tragedies. "A person like this," the Izbicer says of the *Oved Hashem*, "can become angry with God's actions." By contrast, someone who "thinks the world operates by chance" cannot be truly angry with God, "because they can say," when dealing with a tragedy, that "it's just happenstance."

The *Mei ha-Shiloach* explains that this capacity for anger—for frustration with the way things are—is not a failure of faith but is actually *an expression* of faith. This is a striking inversion of how religious anger is often perceived. We tend to think of protest as a sign of weakened faith. The Izbicer suggests the opposite: that the person who cannot be angry with God has simply stopped believing that God is responsible for anything.

The frustration of the *Oved Hashem* comes from a place of care. To challenge the order of things is to believe not

only that they *can* be different but that they *should be*, because ultimately there is an overarching ethics according to which the world should operate, that even God should be held to. Only someone who takes God seriously, who believes the world is ordered with intention and purpose, can be genuinely outraged when that order seems to fail. Indifference is the luxury of those who expect nothing.

As an educator teaching in a world full of ever more injustices, my greatest fear is not that my students will be upset with the order of things, but that they will stop caring at all. True faith carries with it the burden of expectation, and with expectation comes the possibility of disappointment. The Izbicer reminds us that we should hold on to that disappointment. Our disappointment—our own and that of our students—should inspire us to do good: to remain invested enough in the world to be troubled by it, and to fight and strive for something better.

Leviticus imagines a perfectly ordered world—one in which everything is in its right place. The Izbicer would say that the person of faith has internalized that vision. They know what the world should look like, and so when it doesn't, they cannot simply shrug. To be frustrated with the world as it is, is to believe in the world as it ought to be.

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