

Parashat Acharei Mot
Drawing Close and Keeping Distance:
A Spiritual Dance
Neesa Berezin-Bahr - Class of 2025

I am writing this in the aftermath of the murder of two young Israeli men who were enjoying an evening out in Tel Aviv on Thursday night April 7, 2022, becoming *korbanot* we never wanted to offer. I am at a particular moment of feeling the divide between distance and closeness, as my home in Tel Aviv is just a 10 minute *korkinet* ride from the scene of the terrorist attack, but I am currently sitting in a Starbucks in New York City. There is something that feels unique to tragedies that happen near our home, or, perhaps for many of us, ones that happen in Israel, where the distance from it only amplifies the sadness and helplessness. There is a strong pull to draw closer to the point of pain out of deep love.

Parashat Acharei Mot explores the spatio-temporal boundaries in the *mishkan* and describes the interaction between distance and closeness.

In the first verse, as Moshe is about to instruct Aharon regarding the *Seder HaAvoda*, the Yom Kippur service or sacrificial order, the Torah tells us:

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי מוֹת שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי-ה' וַיָּמָתוּ:

HaShem spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they drew too close to the presence of Hashem. (Vayikra 16:1)

The *passuk* here tells us that Aharon's sons died “בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי ה'”, when they drew too near to the presence of Gd. They desired closeness to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. The Shem Mishmuel, the 20th Century Hasidic thinker, describes Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's aforementioned sons, as possessing a love so great that it was beyond logic or reason and a desire to awaken the love that is mirrored above from Gd to the people. But a love like that has a special time and place and cannot always be accessed.

HaShem tells Moshe to warn Aharon:

וְאֵל-יָבֵא בְּכָל-עֵת אֶל-הַקֹּדֶשׁ מִבַּיִת לְפָרֹכֶת אֶל-פְּנֵי הַכַּפֹּת אֲשֶׁר עַל-הָאָרֶן וְלֹא יָמוּת כִּי בְעֵנַן אֲרָאָה עַל-הַכַּפֹּת: ..he is not to come **at any time (at will)** into the Shrine behind the curtain, in front of the cover that is upon the ark, lest he die; for I appear in the cloud over the cover. (Vayikra 16:2)

Gd gifts us Yom Kippur, the day that the *Kohen Gadol* can enter the *Kodesh Kodashim*, the Holy of Holies, and a day of elevated joy, love, and closeness to Gd that knows no bounds. The Sfas Emes, the 19th Century Hasidic Torah commentator, beautifully understands the *inuy* (ענוי) of Yom Kippur, the refraining from eating, drinking, and other bodily needs, from the language of לענות (*la'anot*), a day that responds to the needs of our soul when all physical barriers are removed and we can draw close to the *Aibishter*, to Gd.

This drawing near, from the root קרב, is found throughout the *parasha* in different forms. To illustrate a few examples-

...בְּקִרְבָּתְכֶם לְפָנַי ה'

...when they **drew near** to the presence of Gd (Vayikra 16:1)

וְאֵל-פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֹא הֵבִיאוּ לְהִקְרִיב קִרְבָּן לָהּ לְפָנַי מִשְׁכַּן ה' דָּם יִחָשֵׁב לְאִישׁ הֵוא דָּם שִׁפְךָ וְנִכְרַת הָאִישׁ הֵוא מִקְרָב עִמוּ.

and does not bring it to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting to **present it** as an **offering** to Gd, before Gd's Tabernacle, bloodguilt shall be imputed to that party: having shed blood, that person shall be cut off from **among** his people. (Vayikra 17:4)

אִישׁ אִישׁ אֶל-כָּל-שָׂאֵר בְּשָׂרוֹ לֹא תִקְרְבוּ לְגִלוֹת עֶרְוָה אֲנִי ה'.

None of you men shall **come near** anyone of his own flesh to uncover nakedness: I am Hashem. (Vayikra 18:6)

There is a dance woven throughout this *parasha* of drawing close and keeping a distance, establishing boundaries and forming intimacy. The *arayot*, the illicit sexual practices listed later in the parasha, protect an individual's sexual boundaries; the inside/outside divide with personal sacrifices keeps us connected to the Divine presence. The *parochet* (curtain) and other barriers in the *mishkan* keep us safe from harm, but there are special times when we are called to cross the boundary and come close.

We live in a world now where we are all too familiar with distance; we need to navigate how to draw close to one another and come together in community while simultaneously maintaining our personal boundaries. Our *parasha* reminds us that while distance can provide protection from harm, there are times to draw near, as distance too can be very painful. When we create too much space from one another, we fragment our community and we often forget about those who need to be drawn close. The Torah lays a blueprint for us to navigate this balance delicately.

"The creative arts are subjective and they reach people at a point in their lives when they need it most ... A song or an album is made and it almost has a radar to find the person when they need it the most."

-Jon Batiste

I find our living Torah to move through the world like this, as well. The *daf* we are learning, or the *vort* we hear finds us at moments when we need it most. And for me, right now, in this moment, I feel held by the interplay in our *parasha* between proximity and distance and a love that drives us to want to be so close to something even when it is dangerous.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches us that a broken heart is, in its essence, a distance from Gd and the desire to draw closer, like a child who cries out of longing for their parent. We were gifted *tefilaas* a means to draw close to Gd. Our prayer service with its own order is our modern sacrificial service. בלבבי משכן אבנה, we build a *mishkan* in our hearts, as a way to



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integrate our broken pieces and create order. As individuals, we contain multitudes within ourselves – our contradictions, our conflicting emotions. Life is full of love and joy and also pain and sadness. Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib-Smokler teaches that just as the broken *luchot* (tablets) lay alongside the whole ones in the *aron*, we hold our broken parts with our whole parts inside ourselves, in our internal *mishkan*. Rabbi David Silber paints a beautiful image of the *mishkan*: the various rooms and partitions not only serving as boundaries but also as pathways of integration. I invite all of us to find those moments when barriers can transform into a maze of pathways that draw us closer to one another, to ourselves, and to Gd.

Shabbat Shalom



Neesa Berezin-Bahr is a student in the Core Semikha Program. She was a 2020-2021 Masa Teaching Fellow in Jerusalem. She worked for Dorshei Torah v'Tzion, the slate spearheaded by Rabbi Avi Weiss in the World Zionist Congress. Neesa worked at Drisha for nearly a decade, where she was the Director of Student Engagement. She created and implemented educational programming for hundreds of college students, young professionals and rabbinical students. Neesa also worked for the OU's Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus. She holds a BA in Linguistics and Anthropology from New York University. Neesa studied in the Drisha Kollel in New York City and at Midreshet Lindenbaum in Jerusalem. Neesa has co-organized women's megila readings in NYC (and on Zoom) since 2013. She taught her nephews the leining for their bnei mitzvah, experiences that were rewarding and forged a unique bond. Neesa also enjoys thinking about ways Torah can speak to everyday matters and issues that she is passionate about and has given shiurim on topics including body image, yoga, and even shoes. Originally from New York City, Neesa currently lives in Florentin, a vibrant neighborhood in South Tel Aviv.