

Shabbat Acharei-Mot/Kedoshim 5780 - Looking Backward and Forward at Holiness and the Pandemic

Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

Imagine you're reading a book written by a famous coach, say the former Bulls coach Phil Jackson. Pretend he writes something like the following:

Don't assume the other team will quit; don't give up on yourself; don't give up on your teammates.

This is the key to winning.

Prepare for success; take practice as seriously as games; put the team's needs ahead of your own.

In this hypothetical example, exactly *what* is the key to winning?

There are three possibilities.

1. The advice that came *before* the phrase, "This is the key to winning." Read it like this: Don't assume the other team will quit, and don't give up on yourself or your teammates. *This is the key to winning. Period.*

2. The advice that came *after* the phrase "This is the key to winning." Read it like the following: *This is the key to winning* (colon): Prepare for success; take practice as seriously as games; put the team's needs ahead of your own.

And 3. The advice on both sides of the phrase "This is the key to winning." Read it like this: Don't assume the other team will quit; don't give up on yourself or your teammates. *This is the key to winning. Prepare for success; take practice as seriously as games; put the team's needs ahead of your own.*

How you read that quote makes all the difference. Whether you read the quote looking backward or forward - before or after the key phrase - determines what you understand the coach's wisdom to be.

From one set of wisdom to another, I believe this example gives us a timely new lens as we look at the timeless words of Parashat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim. The second Parsha, Kedoshim, begins "*Kdoshim Tihyu Ki Kadosh Ani Adonai Elohechim* - You shall be holy for I Hashem your G-d am holy" (Lv. 19:2). This is it, right? This is the essence. The Jewish People were called upon at Sinai to be a holy nation. Finally the Torah boils it

down for us...and the result is unclear, like the example of the coach's wisdom. For most readers, we see the Parsha begin with these illustrious words and we read forward in the Parsha: *You will be holy* when you (colon) honor parents, share food with the poor, are honest, and most famously, love your neighbor as yourself, etc. In other words, we are most like G-d when we treat others honestly and generously. Just as G-d was most generous when creating people G-d knew would later sin and disappoint.

But that's not how Rashi reads the verse. Here is his take on how Jews achieve holiness: "Separate yourselves from sexual immorality and from sin, for wherever one finds a barrier against sexual immorality, one finds holiness." Didn't see that coming, did you? Neither did I. Why is Rashi bringing up sexual morality when Kedoshim doesn't even mention the topic? Go back to the example of the coach's wisdom: Rashi reads backward. Guess what the previous topic was that immediately leads into our verse about holiness? Not committing incest. Sexual morality. He reads that chapter and concludes, "*This is how you will be holy.*" Period.

Readers of the Shabbat morning Torah readings often forget what happened at the end of the previous Parsha. There's no crime here; I do it too.

It's kind of like TV shows where viewers often forget how the previous episode ended. One of my favorite shows, *Fauda*, just loaded a new season on Netflix. I haven't seen it yet, but I know how it will end. Somehow Doron will end up in a tight spot about to be mauled! And with equal certainty, his Israeli team will somehow rescue him from annihilation! There's so much action and drama packed into each episode. Also, it can be many days between when I watch the show. For these reasons, there's often a brief clip on shows: "Previously on the show..." And it gives you highlights so you're caught up.

But the events of the Torah don't happen one week apart; that's just how we imagine them when we listen to it weekly. Rashi is totally in the right in that the end of the previous Parsha is as close to the verse "*You will be holy*" as the beginning of the next.

So here are possibilities one and two for mapping out holiness, reading what comes *next* and what comes *before*.

I want to suggest a third possibility: both. I see these instructions as actual AND metaphorical. We are holy when we think of G-d and ethics with our life partners and family (before) AND with strangers out in the world (after). We are holy when we *don't* take certain actions (before) AND when we *do* take certain actions (after). We are holy when we act honestly and ethically when we are indoors and out of sight (before) AND when we are outdoors and in view of others (after).

One can read the Torah backward AND forward. And one can look at life backward and forward as well.

I think first of the High Holidays. This actually fits well with the first of two Parshas we read this week. Acharei Mot describes in great detail the Yom Kippur rituals in the wilderness. Then and now the theme of the day is Teshuva, repentance. It's an introspective look that seeks to move us to emerge renewed for the new year.

Not surprisingly, there are three ways to approach this. One can look *backward* at the year that was: the mistakes and regrets, along with the successes and accomplishments. One can look *forward* to the year that will be: the goals, hopes and dreams that lie ahead. Or one can look both backward *and* forward. It is this third approach that positions people for success. For though we each have two eyes that look forward, it is best to live with one eye peeking behind with the other gazing forward. The present, then, is the meeting place of the past and future.

This lens brings me to the present pandemic moment. I think one of many Jewish responses to this crisis is to look both backward and forward at the same time. In a world and time with far more questions than answers, the most we can do is ask questions. But don't underestimate this powerful act.

Backward: what did we use to do before the pandemic and now miss so much? What is important for us to return to? What did we concern ourselves with before that we now realize we don't need? What did we learn about our past in light of the present situation?

And forward: Though nobody knows for sure, we're all asking, What will the new normal look like? When things improve, which aspects of the quarantine life do we want to extend? Which do we want to drop? How will our family life be different in the future as a result of all this time spent together? What does community look like if we can't ever be in the same room?

Some of these questions we can answer now, others we cannot. But this unique vantage point - looking backward and forward simultaneously - widens our view. It allows us to ask important questions so that when the future comes into focus, we are prepared with meaningful responses.

But when we *do* ask, we *can* answer and discover meaning and purpose in our lives then, now, and into the future.

Shabbat Shalom.