



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Acharei Mot 5774

By Andrew Scheer

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Sweating in the hot sun, my rabbinical student peers and I sat opposite a group of Senegalese villagers, most of whom were in their late teens and twenties. We were in Senegal for a 10-day AJWS service-learning program, and this meeting of American rabbinical students and Senegalese villagers was an opportunity for cultural exchange.

Our interpreter, Sharif, instructed us to ask questions. Our group made several inquiries about life in Senegal and the villagers responded—but each time, the oldest of the villagers, who was about 29 years old and held his infant child throughout the meeting, would provide the final definitive answer, perpetually concluding his remarks with a formidable stare toward his comrades, as if daring them to dispute his words.

I then asked, “Given the opportunity, would you leave Senegal and immigrate to America?” One boy, who was about 17 years old and wore a bright red Chicago Bulls jersey, was about to pipe up when the leader addressed us, saying: “Senegal is our country. We could never abandon it.”

At that point, a heated discussion broke out amongst the villagers. Sharif interpreted their argument for us into the following dichotomy: Ought we save face and allow these *tubap* (foreigners) seated before us to continue staring at the world through rose-tinted glasses? Or, as the boy in the red jersey evinced, was it more important to provide a realistic portrayal of our lives? In short, could we—the American students—handle the truth?

“I would move to America tomorrow,” the boy said. At that moment I realized that by exposing the uncomfortable truths about his community, the boy was encouraging us to look beneath our surface-level impressions about the lives of the villagers and to grapple with their difficult reality.

I recalled this incident as I read through *Parashat Acharei Mot*, and it helped me arrive at a new understanding of an apparent redundancy in the verses. Leviticus 18:4-5 states, “You shall fulfill My ordinances and observe My statutes,” and then, “You shall observe My statutes and My ordinances.” Why the repetition? What are the differences between ordinances and statutes—and furthermore, between fulfillment and observance?

Rashi, in elucidating these verses, acknowledges that some laws in the Torah are more intuitively understandable than others. He explains that “ordinances” are self-evident laws, such as the prohibitions against murder and stealing; concepts inherently found in even the most inchoate creatures. However, “statutes” serve as God’s decrees whose purpose we cannot divine and which cause us to ask, “Why keep a law if we cannot understand the benefit it provides to ourselves or society at large?” These are the laws that may bewilder us and prompt us to search for their meaning, such as the dietary laws or the prohibition against entwining wool and linen.¹

¹ Rashi on Leviticus 18:4.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Palestine, offers another distinction between God's laws. He interprets a beautiful *midrash* that describes the ink on the Torah scroll as 'black fire' and the holy parchment in between the letters as 'white fire.' According to Rav Kook, the 'black fire' represents God's explicit commands. The 'white fire' reveals a more esoteric Torah, God's implicit commands.²

Rashi's distinction between ordinances and statutes and Rav Kook's distinction between explicit and implicit commands both help to explain the repetition of fulfillment and observance in the verses in Leviticus. When I read God telling me to fulfill, observe—and observe again, I read the message that fulfillment—doing a *mitzvah* that's easily understood—occupies a very low bar on the hierarchy of demonstrating my commitment to God. In contrast, God's instruction to "observe" requires me to keep even the laws that I may not understand and that require deeper introspection. I interpret the additional "observe" as implying that keeping these commandments is so difficult that we need to be reminded multiple times to do so.

Recalling my experience in Senegal, I understand the redundancy in the verses in Leviticus as connected to our responsibility to confront and take action not only on issues to which we can easily relate but also on issues that are more difficult to understand. The young Senegalese villager who told us about his desire to move to America forced us to question our understanding of his community, to confront the challenges they were facing and to consider how we could respond to their needs. When we seek to support people in developing countries we must be willing to hear stories and perspectives that seem foreign to us and may challenge our assumptions. And just as we are obligated to fulfill and observe God's commandments, even those that are less intuitive or aren't explicitly articulated, we also must be willing to take the necessary action to support people in developing countries even if taking this action is difficult.

As we read *Parashat Acharei Mot* this year and encounter God's ordinances and statutes, let the black and white fire ignite in us the passion to fulfill and observing our responsibilities to those, like the villagers in Senegal, who invite us in to share in their struggles and their solutions.



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² Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot HaTorah* 4:1.

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