Emor, Leviticus 21-24

And the Lord said to Moses: Speak to the kohanim, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: Let none [of you] defile himself

What follows for four chapters is a detailed list of ways the priests could defile themselves. The list contains points of view of holy men who see in many things around them sources of defilement, of impurity. I don’t know how others feel about this, but it is perhaps the worst side of Judaism for me, the side I wish either to mock or to disavow. I can’t think of a worse idea than to embrace purity, and to hold it over others. And what makes it worse is the repulsive gender relations built into the list, so that it is written from the point of view of men who consider women sources of defilement, be they menstruating, widows, non-virgins or the like.

Someone would have to explain to me why I should see in the orthodox or ultra-orthodox, or simply believers in this cult of purity, any consanguinity through religious identification with those who accept these injunctions as divine or legitimate.

Further, I would apply this same refusal to fundamentalists of all religions who adhere to similar notions.

Is this different from other claims of identitarian purity? If I say that I am 100% Jewish, that my ancestors were Jewish, that my blood is Jewish, that I am the descendant of Jews back to the beginning; if I were to want to support this claim based on my genealogy, on my DNA, supposing it made sense, what would be the ethical standing of such a claim?

All of my fundamental ethical beliefs are grounded in the rejection of Nazi beliefs and practices. So when I say that Nazi racist beliefs in Aryan purity are evil, it isn’t because they were wrong about it being Aryans or Germans, it isn’t because we are pure and they are not, but because the purity code, the code of identities to be guarded, with sacred borders to be protected, and beliefs in our superiority over others, always leads to the expulsion of them from our own territory.

[21:8 “You shall sanctify him, for he offers up the food offering of your God; he shall be holy to you

10 “And the kohen who is elevated above his brothers, upon whose head the anointment oil has been poured, …shall, shall not…. He shall not defile himself…he shall not desecrate his offspring….for I am the Lord who sanctifies him]

22.2 Speak to Aaron and his sons, so that they will separate themselves…., so as not to desecrate My Holy Name. I am the Lord. … I am the Lord who sanctifies them.

The Leviticus priestly listing is punctuated by a story intended to bring home the difference between the pure and the mixed, when a mixed race man fought against one who was pure:

24: 10 Now, the son of an Israelite woman and he was the son of an Egyptian man went out among the children of Israel, and they quarreled in the camp this son of the Israelite woman, and an Israelite man.

11And the son of the Israelite woman pronounced the [Divine] Name and cursed. So they brought him to Moses. His mother's name was Shelomith the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan.

12They placed him in the guardhouse, [until his sentence would] be specified to them by the word of the Lord.

13Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

14Take the blasphemer outside the camp, and all who heard [his blasphemy] shall lean their hands on his head. And the entire community shall stone him.

…

23And Moses told [all this] to the children of Israel. So they took the blasphemer outside the camp and stoned him, and the children of Israel did just as the Lord had commanded Moses.

In my last dvar, I alluded to the text by Judith Butler, the theorist, who argued against purification on several grounds. One was that in seeing the face, looking at the face of the other, an imperative obligation is placed upon us. We become responsible for the other, and especially responsible not to carry out a murderous act upon the other. The other calls to us, simply by our recognizing them in looking at their face: their being human imposes itself on us, and if we were to kill them we could only do so by refusing that call to us not to do so. That view is the position of the Jewish philosopher Levinas, who spent the war in a German prisoner of war camp, in a barracks for French Jewish prisoners.

He had studied the philosophy of Heidegger, as had Hannah Arendt, who took a similar position toward the other, and applied it to the state of Israel. For Arendt the lesson of the genocide was that “nation-states should never be able to found themselves through the dispossession of whole populations who fail to fit for the purified idea of the nation. And for refugees who never again wished to see the dispossession of populations in the name of national or religious purity, Zionism and its forms of state violence were not the legitimate answer to the pressing needs of Jewish refugees.” She argued that the principles of justice derived from our having been subject to internment and dispossession was to “extend equality regardless of cultural background or formation…to those none of us ever chose…and with whom we have an enduring obligation to find a way to live” (24). None of this takes up the question of security, which I know you must be thinking about. But before we consider the question of security, we have to consider the implications of our actions on others who don’t have the power to prevent us from imposing our order on them, as is the case in Israel now. The model Butler chooses, to give definition to Jewish notions of ethics, is not the Leviticus code, but the reading of Moses as being both Egyptian and Jewish, impure due to his mixing with others, like the Israeli man with the Egyptian father, who wound up stoned to death. If the model for us, as Jews is Moses, or even the angry mixed race man who blasphemes, then when we are confronted with those who assert their purity as giving them the right to claims for holiness, we would be opposing them not simply on grounds of survival, but on the ground that we are meeting a higher ideal than purity by acknowledging an impurity with ourselves as the basis for accepting responsibility for the other.

So how then can we deal with our lament for having been forced into exile, having been persecuted for being different, for being Jews, for being different or other than the Germans, the Poles, the Hungarians, the Ukrainians, the Russians, the intolerant arrogant people of Europe who tried to exterminate us, some of whom would probably do it again if they could. How can we deal with those of the Muslim world who also hate us; or deal with ourselves in our hatred of them. Can we be with them and with ourselves? When the night of the broken glass arrived, and the angel of the lord looked to the doorposts for the sign of our blood, how did we deal with the cries of those next door whom we must have heard when their firstborn sons were slaughtered. Here is the answer:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion

We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.

For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song, and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?

If I forget thee o Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning, may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember thee, if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.

Jerusalem, what is that, but those of us who lived at peace before the Holocaust. And since everything was destroyed, in a sense totally, Jerusalem now exists only as a lost memory of a time I can never bring back.

How can I be Jewish without this psalm 137 of david, which brings the memory of exile exactly to me today.

And how can that not come back to me with the fear of the darkest night when the angel of death passed over us, and left the shadow of death to sit over our heads and the children of the others who were killed. I hum the words of psalm 137, then, that conclude with this: Remember o lord, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusaleml who said, rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof.

Those the children of Edom, weren’t they also the same as the Egyptian first born?

O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed, happy shall he be, that rewardest thee as thou has served us.

Who of us who were born of the time of the holocaust wouldn’t have wished this on the germans who served us up, our skin as lampshades?

Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth their little ones against the stones. (2x)

How can we start by lamenting our losses, and then rejoice in the slaughter of their little ones thrown against the stones.

We can’t.

So when Marjan adapted this psalm as a vocal piece in 2006, she brought to it all of the darkness of the night, and of the lamentation of the soul. She said that she had to sing, like the inmates at Theresienstadt when the Germans commanded them to perform for the Red Cross. She had to come through the darkest times she had known, even though, she said, “in the darkest times of my own life I couldn’t bear music. You know, some people put it on as background, and I couldn’t. The truly darkest moments of my life I could not stand music. Especially music that sounded like it was all together, like Mozart; I was like, don’t give me that.” She was asked, should exiles sing the Lord’s song? And she answered, I had a dream once where I was running at night in the face of a tornado, and it was like, the ugliest, darkest, scariest face of what He is. And I knew, somehow that that was, it represented the divine to me, and I was singing at the top of my lungs and I was singing the Hallelujah chorus. It was like daring God to be God. So I guess my most honest answer is that I would sing. I would hope that through music people would be able to – in the company of others—go where they wouldn’t go on their own, and get closer to that raw, horrible, horrible reality. How do you do something that is almost unbearable.”

Marjan then describes her conversion to Judaism, and ends by saying that when she finished composing the music for Psalm 137, “after I finished the piece, I felt finally that I had immersed myself enough in Jewish life and Jewish suffering that I could bear to convert to Judaism, and I did.”

Her composition is called, Voices of a Vanished World, and it was performed here, in a synagogue, in Michigan. However, in its conclusion it omitted the final lines about dashing little ones against the stones.

My friend David Stowe who wrote about Psalm 137, and Marjan’s Voices, concludes, generously, that it would be inappropriate for a children’s chorus to sing about killing little ones, especially in a work commemorating the horrors of the Holocaust. Stowe concludes, “perhaps what is unsung holds as much significance as what is sung.”

Shabbat shalom.