

Drawing Close

Student Rabbi Aaron Torop, guest sermon at Congregation B'nai Israel, Little Rock, AK

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Shabbat Shalom. First, I want to offer a hearty *mazal tov* to John Austin and the entire Levin family who has gathered from near and...also near...to celebrate John Austin becoming *Bar Mitzvah* this Shabbat. John Austin, teaching you in religious school this year has been such a wonderful experience. One of the things I admire most about you is your active participation in our community, even though you are the oldest student. Whether it is painting rocks, cooking latkes, or participating in the Purim spiel, you step up and contribute, helping us create a meaningful experience for everyone at Temple.

I also wanted to say thank you to Rabbi Block for inviting me to be here to celebrate Shabbat. Rabbi Block has been friends with my parents since their first year of rabbinical school - just a couple years back. I remember when I was working at the Religious Action Center (the RAC) during the 2019 Consultation on Conscience when you introduced Senator Chris Coons, and you spoke sincerely about your friendship, your shared commitment to justice, and the importance of engaging in conversation even when people might disagree.¹ I've also loved reading *The Social Justice Torah Commentary* over the past several months; it is a great work that brings so many diverse voices together to speak about the wide range of social justice issues present in our Torah.² I have learned much from you and hope to emulate your commitment to your community and your pursuit of justice in the work I will hopefully do as a rabbi.

In thinking about our shared commitment to social justice, I wanted to share a story from my year working as a Legislative Assistant at the RAC, where my portfolio included international issues, including human rights. A man named Ferkat emailed me out of the blue one day that fall, asking if he could share his story. Ferkat is Uyghur, a member of a group of Turkic ethnic Muslims living in Xinjiang Autonomous Region in northwest China, also called East Turkestan. Over the past 20 years, China has increased

¹ May 21: Tuesday Morning Plenary – Part 1 , <https://rac.org/2019-consultation-conscience-livestream-recordings>

² *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, ed. Rabbi Barry H. Block, CCAR Press, 2021.

its surveillance, oppression, and mass arrest of the 11 million Uyghurs in China.³ The denial of basic human rights and torturing of Uyghurs was declared a genocide by the United States last year.⁴ In the Fall of 2019, before the U.S. Government had expressed its concerns, I met Ferkat for coffee and he shared with me the horrors his family has faced and the plight of Uyghurs in China and around the world. He connected me with Uyghur human rights groups and asked me for my help.

Except, this wasn't the first time I had heard about the oppression of Uyghurs. As a college student, I was a volunteer coach and judge for a middle and high school debate league in Washington, D.C. One year, the topic was surveillance, and one of the key areas of focus was the genocide of the Uyghur people. Despite all my research, teaching, and talking about the oppression of Uyghurs, I had no idea that a large Uyghur community lived a couple miles away from me. I took no further action – I remained at a distance from these issues.

When I met Ferkat, however, he drew me into his story and his world. He asked me for my help, and together we got to work. We wrote blog posts, organized Uyghur community members and activists, and lobbied Congress. We even got Democrats and Republicans to sit in the same room, joining together to hear Ferkat's story and then pass legislation to support Uyghurs around the world.

Drawing close is the catalyzing action for the first part of our Torah portion this week, *Acharei Mot*. It opens by resuming the narrative of the death of Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's sons, which occurred six chapters earlier. Leviticus 16:1, reads "And God spoke to Moses after the death of the sons of Aaron – בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה, when they got close to Adonai." According to the JPS translation of this verse, Nadav and Avihu died "when they drew *too* close to Adonai."⁵ Bible scholar Robert Alter says this has the implication

³ "Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots": China's Crimes against Humanity Targeting Uyghurs and Other Turkic Muslims," Human Rights Watch, April 19, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/19/break-their-lineage-break-their-roots/chinas-crimes-against-humanity-targeting#>

⁴ "Determination of the Secretary of State on Atrocities in Xinjian," Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, January 19, 2021, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/determination-of-the-secretary-of-state-on-atrocities-in-xinjiang/index.html>

⁵ The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaption of the JPS Translation, David E.S. Stein, et al, 2006.

of encroaching into God's space.⁶ Drawing close for Nadav and Avihu was wrong. Indeed, much of our textual tradition chastises Nadav and Avihu, blaming their deaths on the violation of God's boundaries, attempting to be nearer to God than God wanted. Nadav and Avihu were arrogant. They expressed an irreverent familiarity with the *mishkan* and God and were punished for creating an intimate playfulness with God that was not proper.⁷

I struggle with this understanding of their deaths. While Nadav and Avihu's sin was getting close to God, my sin was *not* getting close to the oppression of Uyghur people when I first learned about what was happening. Ferkat had to compel me to draw near, dragging me across the emotional boundaries which prevented me from acting. When I got close, I did not know where it would lead, if I could help – all I knew was that I had to take the risk to find out. Nadav and Avihu teach us that drawing close is a risky act – a risk we should we be willing to take.

To get near to someone, to their dreams and challenges, their hopes and fears, their love and pain, requires us to give up something from ourselves. When we draw close, we open ourselves up to being sucked in, intertwined with their life. We venture losing ourselves and becoming subsumed by the other, just like Nadav and Avihu lost themselves in their zealous, and perhaps overly prideful, actions as God's priests. We push people, organizations, and issues away because we are fearful of what happens when we let them in. We say no to important work because it will become all encompassing. We quickly sign a petition or toss someone some change but avoid the personal interaction, being drawn into their story.

However, I believe we risk even more when we fail to draw close. Drawing close is one of the strongest motivators for engaging in acts of social justice. We experienced poverty and now work to create more affordable housing and a stronger social safety net. We met someone who was a victim of gun violence and became motivated to work on the

⁶ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 421.

⁷ Dena Weiss, "Entry and Entitlement: Parashat Aharei Mot" *Hadar*. <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/entry-and-entitlement#source-7225>

issue. We heard stories of voter disenfranchisement and are now passionate about ensuring that everyone has a voice. We experienced instances of discrimination and oppression and refuse to stay silent about what happened to us. To engage in acts of tikkun, of repair, we must first witness brokenness in its totality. Without these moments of being drawn in, we may never have engaged in the sacred task of finishing the creation of world in wholeness, justice, and peace. When we draw close, we bind ourselves together, committing to Emma Lazarus' words "Until we are all free, we are none of us free."⁸

When we draw close, we truly see the face of the other person. An ancient midrash says this is what Nadav and Avihu did: they gazed at God, taking in the totality of God's presence.⁹ I think their mistake was not their desire to draw near to God, but their failure to recognize the importance, and risks of that act. They brazenly witnessed God, becoming intimately familiar with God but they were not changed. They were not open to being changed. Nadav and Avihu challenge us to let others in and be moved by what we experience.

John Austin, this is my hope for you - sometimes it feels risky to draw close, unsure of what will happen to us if we let the world in. And yet, being guided by your sense of justice and fairness to closely examine our world is an important first step in fixing it. I pray that we all find moments and opportunities, both small and large, to draw near and be moved by what we see. Amen.

⁸ A Quote from Epistle to the Hebrews, Jewish Women's Archive, <https://jwa.org/media/quote-from-epistle-to-hebrews>

⁹ Vayikra Rabbah Achrei Mot 20