This week, we find Aaron, the High Priest, in the very lowest of places. And Aaron has seen low. He's seen slavery in Mitzrayim. He's been threatened by Pharaoh. He's built the Golden Calf and felt God's own disappointment in him. He has seen low before. But not like this. For this week's double Torah portion, Achrei Mot-Kedoshim, is named after his deepest grief. Achrei Mot means after the death of, and it refers to Aaron's own sons, Nadav and Avihu, who died three Torah portions ago. And Aaron is barely surviving this moment.

While the Torah doesn't say that outright, we know it because of how the parsha begins: *Vayidaber Adonai el Moshe achrei mot shnei b'nei Aharon* . . . God spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons who drew too close to the presence of God. Moses then turns to Aaron and apparently repeats all of this. And then goes on to share the next series of laws that Aaron needs to know to be High Priest.

But the thing is, and many Medieval commentators ask - why is God, and then Moses, bringing up Nadav and Avihu's death now? Three Torah portions ago, Aaron's sons, the Kohanim, Nadav and Avihu, brought an "*eish zarah*," a strange fire, as an offering to God. And God killed them immediately for it. It's over and it's not really relevant to this conversation. Why bring it up again now?

Well, when it happened - as the reader, we don't ever learn exactly why God punishes them with death. But the commentators wax long and poetic about Nadav and Avihu's nefariousness, their malevolence, their hubris! They make their guesses, saying: God killed them because they were clumsy in their ritual, disrespectful. Even that they were drunk.

And as for Aaron, the Torah only tells us: *va'yidom Aharon*, and Aaron was silent. And his brother, Moses, trying to protect Aaron from God's wrath, warns him against rending his clothing or weeping, and so Aaron utters no cry of agony. Doesn't even say his own sons' names. Just a silent despair.

Then we read the rest of the parsha. Then parshat Tazria and Metzora. And now finally, here we are at Achrei Mot. And Moses is talking to his brother again, for the first time since his loss.

And it begins with the phrase "*achrei mot,*" after the death of Aaron's sons. Perhaps it is in this moment, with that recall, that it has become apparent to Moses that his brother is still deep in grief. He hasn't been able to move forward, to mourn, to begin to heal, for not one kind word has been spoken to him, not one condolence, not one empathic hand extended or a meal shared or a gentle question - how are you doing? Instead, through time and space, he's heard only critique and blame and harshness. And he is stuck.

Until now. Until Moses is compelled to do something. The commentator Or Hachayim teaches that the reason that the death of Aaron's sons is referenced here, is because Moses wants to communicate to him that Nadav and Avihu did not deserve this punishment, that they were, in fact, Or Hachayim says: "men of greater stature than either Aaron or Moses himself." Looking into God's own words, Moses seems to have learned that Nadav and Avihu were closer with

God than Moses and Aaron themselves, and so he rushes, out of context, to tell his brother this truth.

Finally. A kind word. A chance to remember his sons as **he** knew them - as good boys who he misses terribly. And in this moment, there is a *tikkun*, a repair. And the text signals to us that something is profoundly different now. The words flow. Moses continues speaking and Aaron is finally able to hear the laws of how to make a sacrifice of expiation for his family and for his people, a sacrifice of forgiveness, of becoming unstuck. That is the power of *chesed*, of kindness, when we are living through tragedy. It's as if in this moment, his world can begin to move forward again.

There's an old saying that draws from this double Torah portion and the one that follows it: Achrei Mot Kedoshim Emor. Parshat Emor comes next week. But these three parsha titles, cleverly put together, are spoken as if they're a sentence, which means "After death, say only holy words," or some version of "don't speak ill of the dead."

But I want to suggest that tonight, we use just these first two in **our** sentence, here on this Shabbat where we honor all those in our community who participate in the CBE Chesed Team - all those who bring words and actions of kindness when someone is living through a loss or a grief or a sickness, or even when someone is going through a joyful transition or time. And a night which honors also all those who are willing to open their worlds up to receive these acts of kindness from CBE Chesed Team members.

In honor of Chesed Shabbat, I offer this sentence built on our double Torah portion: Achrei Mot, Kedoshim. After a death, comes a chance for holiness. Kedoshim means holiness. And not a magical holiness of bringing someone back or immediately fixing pain, but a communal holiness of helping each other move through and stand up from tragedy, move through and make meaning of grief or fear, move through and find community during joyful transition, move through and be lifted into holiness instead of feeling alone or unseen or silenced, or untethered. Or we might expand the sentence to say something like this: Achrei Mot, we at CBE, through our Chesed Team's work, try to practice, Kedoshim.

Moses' act of chesed when Aaron was at his most vulnerable, when everything seemed cruel and unfair and his world was shattered, helped tie Aaron back into his community, helped him grieve and also move toward healing. That is the power of *chesed*.

Our Chesed Team does this as best they can, too. They bring a meal, they show up for shiva, they deliver a challah, they sit and ask about the ones that we lose along our way. They ask - who were they? Tell me their story. Not unlike Moses did, they make space for their memory. They bring a hug. Some of our members also enact *chesed* for our deceased ones themselves. As part of a chevra kaddisha - and note there's that word again, kedoshim and kadisha, all mean holiness - our chevra kaddisha members lovingly wash the deceased's body, reciting Psalms and accompanying them gently through their transition. This is the power of *chesed*, to reweave us to one another when we are shattered by loss.

And we at CBE, you, have learned along the way, that actually, to be in sacred community, it's not just Achrei **Mot** Kedoshim, but Achrei everything, Kedoshim. Achrei sickness, achrei pregnancy loss, achrei also joys, achrei a new baby, achrei children leaving for college, achrei and also during loneliness - kedoshim, kedoshim, kedoshim. Acts of kindness, of *chesed*, from one to the other, creates a holy place and a holy time when otherwise we might feel as disconnected and as low as Aaron did, or full of joy, depending on our life stage, but a thin joy that goes uncelebrated. So we grieve together. We dance together. We wear tiny CBE onesies, kind of together.

As many of you might know, my Uncle Lou died recently, and way too young. He was such a character, he was so smart, had a big laugh. He loved scavenger hunts and gambling. He was stubborn and grumpy, but also loyal and loving. I had the honor of officiating his funeral here in this chapel. And my cousin, who is our member, misses him all the time. And during shiva, the Chesed team hauled all the way out to Queens to bring her a challah and a hug, and she said to me: and this is why I'm a member of CBE. It was a stranger, with bread, on a bike. But it meant everything. To me, too. To be not alone when we feel so suddenly alone. This is holiness. And it is the wisdom of our tradition.

And it doesn't happen by accident and it doesn't happen all by itself. Our Chesed Team is a logistical machine of love. Every act of kindness is built on an infrastructure that can hold up our community when the harshest winds are blowing or when life is changing in ways that reshape our whole beings. That is when our Chesed Team shows up - led ably by Cara Raich and our new co-chair Nicole Nemetz, guided and supported with so much heart, up until January by Rabbi Rachel Timoner and since January by Rabbi Evan Traylor, who is joining us virtually as his own family moves closer to a big change. And all the co-chairs of each sub-team who go into action as soon as you hear that someone needs something, that someone is aching, that someone would benefit from a kindness, a transformational act of chesed. You are there, and we are all so grateful.

So permit me, please, to offer you blessing for the sacred and foundational work that you do - whether you give or receive support from Chesed - you are part of an equation that changes the DNA of CBE toward ever greater holiness. If you are a member of the CBE Chesed Team or if you are a person who has received care from the CBE Chesed Team, and of course if you are both of those, we invite you to please rise by your seats if you are able:

BLESSING:

You, who have been like Moses and answered the call when your neighbor is stuck or struggling, in need of connection, kindness, and loving support, blessed is the work of your hands.

You, who have been like Aaron, and opened yourself to receive the loving care of a fellow member in your time of need, blessed is the work of your heart.

Blessed are each of you for every email sent, for every phone call made, for every logistical infrastructure figured out and executed with loving precision. Blessed are you for every ingredient you added to a bowl of soup that would feed someone else's family, and for every time you carefully made sure it was gluten free. For every doctor's appointment you escorted to, errand that you ran, and walk that you went on. Blessed are you for every shiva minyan you attended, every hug you gave, every challah you delivered. Blessed are you for every body that you washed with *kavod* in their transition from life to death. Blessed are you through your kind voices, and your gentle hands. How you have cared for the sick and the grieving, friend and stranger and made this community more connected and more whole.

And blessed are you who opened your home to strangers when your heart was longing for your loved one. Blessed are you for saying yes to the soup, yes to the meal, yes to the accompaniment to doctor, grocery, or pharmacy. Blessed are you who have taught us in this place how to ask for help and receive it with dignity and beauty and honor. Blessed are you who have taught us how to soften to each other's offers of care. Blessed are you for each time you let someone walk with you through your or your loved ones transitions and unknowns. How you have cared for the soul of our community, by allowing friend and stranger in, and so making this community more connected and more whole.

May we all follow your leads, you who are Moses and you who are Aaron. May we learn from your commitments. May we raise our hands like yours, may we embrace and be embraced like you have. May our community continue to be strengthened by your deeds and made holy by your healing. And may you continue to be strong and be strengthened through this work as we move forward, in it, together. Amen