

Tzav, Leviticus 6:1-8:36

SUMMARY

There are five "named" *shabbatot* that precede the holiday of Passover. Although their names refer to their corresponding Torah portions, they also prepare us to celebrate Passover, the holiday that commemorates our exodus from Egypt. While we continue to read the Torah, we are sensitized to the fact that centuries ago at this exact same time of year our ancestors were about to experience their birth as a nation of free people. Shabbat *Sh'kalim* tells us about the census or counting of every Israelite and their obligation to give a half-shekel for the maintenance of the Temple. Shabbat *Zachor* is the Sabbath of Remembrance immediately before Purim when we recall *Amalek*, an ancestor of Haman, who attacked the Israelites as they were beginning their journey in the desert. Shabbat *Parah* (the sabbath of the cow) describes the ceremony of purification using the ashes of a red heifer. Shabbat *Hachodesh* precedes the month of Nisan, which is the first month of the Jewish year according to the Torah. On Shabbat *Hachodesh*, there is a special Torah reading containing the laws of Pesach. This week is the last of the named *shabbatot*, Shabbat *HaGadol* or the Great Sabbath. Traditionally, sections of the Haggadah are added to the Shabbat service, including *avadeem hayeenu*, "we were slaves in Egypt". This series of special *shabbatot* allow us to prepare spiritually for Passover... by reminding us that God counts on us, that we are obligated to remember our past, that we must prepare our homes for Pesach and that now is the time.

Parashat Tzav (literally "command") reiterates of the system of sacrifices used by the Israelites to worship God. It begins with explicit directions to Aaron and his sons, the *kohanim* (priests), about how to dispose of the ashes from the *olah* (burnt offering) and what to wear when removing them from the altar every morning. The *mincha* (meal offering), the *chatat* (sin offering), the *asham* (guilt offering), and *zevach shelamim* (the offering of well being or peace expressing gratitude to God) are described in detail. This *parashah* teaches about the meaning of holiness in that if something is deemed holy, anything touching it shall also become holy. Similarly, if something is deemed unclean, anyone who touches it is also considered unclean. There are prohibitions against eating the fat of any animal, against eating animals that have not been ritually slaughtered, and against consuming blood.

SHARING BY COMMAND, SHARING BY CHOICE

Garry Loeb

Parashat Tzav (Leviticus 6:1-7:37) continues the instructions to Aaron and his sons concerning different types of sacrifice. We hear of the *olah*, burnt offering; the *minchah*, meal offering; and the *chatat*, sin offering. The incredibly specific details of the *zevach sh'lamim*, sacrifice of well-being, are also included. Finally we are told about the anointing of Aaron and the other *Kohanim* with blood. This is Leviticus at its most Levitical!

In reading the *parashah*, I cannot get past the word for which it is named, *tzav*. The verse containing this word seems to be so simple: "Command Aaron and his sons thus: 'This is the ritual of the burnt offering.'" (Leviticus 6:2) I wonder: Why does the Torah use the word *tzav*, "command"? Why not another verb? Why doesn't God just continue to speak in the same way as before, for example, "When a person presents an offering?" (Leviticus 2:1) or "If you bring a meal offering..." (Leviticus 2:14)? Or, alternatively, why does the Torah not simply state, as the *parashah* does elsewhere, "This is the offering that Aaron and his sons shall offer..." (Leviticus 6:13)? Why is *tzav* used here? Why is it "commanded"?

The sacrificial rituals of our ancient ancestors and the various types of actual sacrifices seem to have been a way of linking us with God by asking us to share what we possess with God. Our God was, after all, not a typical Mesopotamian deity, who was mostly unconcerned with humankind. Ours is a God whose reality is intimately bound up with us, the people of Israel, whose Torah is an instruction on how we are to live a God-filled existence. Thus offering sacrifices was a method of connecting us in an intimate and physical way with this God who is unseen. But having to share one's crops or the best of one's herd doesn't come easily or naturally. Hence, perhaps doing these acts must be "commanded."

One need not be an ancient Israelite to realize that an individual could have made good use of the possessions that were commanded to be given away in sacrifice: The prize ram could have sired many lambs to add to the flock. The choice flour and fine oil could have helped feed a hungry family. We can all easily find other use for the things we own! On *Erev Shabbat* (and other times), our tradition commands that we give *zedakah*, often in the form of cash inserted into a *zedakah* box. Couldn't we have put that money to personal use? Couldn't we have used it to buy the new

Tzav, Leviticus 6:1-8:36

CD we want or pay for a much-needed vacation? Who doesn't have such a list?! Perhaps this is precisely why giving and sharing what we have is not just an option, or a nice altruistic suggestion, or a "random act of kindness." It is, rather, as this week's *parashah* reminds us, a *mitzvah*, a noun that is, after all, derived from the verb *tzav*.

Questions for Discussion

1. Since we can easily rationalize *not* giving *tzedakah*, why do we still perform that *mitzvah*? Can you suggest five reasons for giving *tzedakah*?
2. Do you think that people are naturally selfish, or do you think that there is such a trait as a "natural" inclination to share with others?
3. Why do you think that it is Aaron and his sons who are commanded here? Does the text provide any reasons for this? Can you suggest any other reasons?

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MUSINGS ON OPPOSABLE THUMBS AND OTHER BODY PARTS

Sorel Goldberg Loeb

In our family we have a standing joke: Our cat, Mazal, is excused from helping around the house because she doesn't have an opposable thumb! I am reminded of this whenever I read that the near-final acts by which Aaron and his sons were consecrated as priests involved smearing blood on their right ears, thumbs, and big toes. Our commentaries speculate that citing these extremities of the body serves to underscore the requirement that priests must be pure in both words and actions. But when I think of the work of the priests--the regular acts of ritual slaughter, with the cries of animals and the spraying of blood that they surely entailed--I'm not convinced.

In the beginning of this week's portion, *Parashat Tzav*, it is evident that the details of sacrificial procedures, rites that could become routine, are intended to alert the priests to beware of casual or careless approaches to their duties. During the

ordination itself, the drama involves both the priests and the people, as participants and spectators respectively, in the repeated solemn acts of preparation--public washing, dressing, and the appropriate laying of hands upon sacrificial animals. Initially Moses dashes the animals' blood against the altar. He then applies the blood of the second ram that is slaughtered, the ram of ordination, to the priests themselves. Later in *Parashat Acharei Mot*, the Torah describes blood as containing "the life of the flesh." (Leviticus 17:11) Thus the priests and the altar are consecrated through the use of the symbol of life itself--blood--even though the sources of that blood meet their death through ritual slaughter. And I wonder: Finding himself in this situation in which the blood and entrails and fat and meat of animals are used to help him "draw close" (the meaning of the Hebrew word *korban*, "sacrifice") to God, how does the priest--a creature of blood himself--keep his balance? How does he preserve his distance from the animals he is commanded to slaughter?

Laying aside for the moment the question of modern sensibilities about animals, I come back to my cat. What is it that distinguishes her, an animal, from me, a human being? Certainly she hears as well--perhaps better--than I do, but her understanding is minimal. To our eternal frustration, she can't even follow directions, for example, "Bring me your dish." She doesn't have an opposable thumb and therefore can't make or manipulate tools. And while my big toe helps me balance and stand upright, she walks on all fours. I wonder if such musings might not inform our understanding of the ordination ritual: The priest is smeared with blood to remind him of his bond with all of life. But the parts of his body that are marked are those that distinguish him from and elevate him above the animals. Thus the ordination ritual both connects the priest to and distances him from the creatures that are to be sacrificed. The same body parts might also connect him to the past, present, and future in a way that is unique to human beings. Can you think how? How can our paying attention to the details of preparation, repetition, and symbolic acts inform our worship?

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Tzav, Leviticus 6:1-8:36 ON SACRIFICES AND STANDARDS

Renee Rubin

While educational standards are being hotly debated throughout our nation, our Jewish communities are confronting a similar issue. Simply put: Is there standard Jewish knowledge, a basic Jewish cultural literacy that one needs in order to function as a Jew today? How should one receive this knowledge, and what should it include?

This week's Torah portion, *Tzav*, sheds some light on this issue. Like last week's Torah portion, *Vayikra*, *Tzav* sets forth the procedures for five different kinds of sacrifices. However, as Nechama Leibowitz points out, the order of the sacrifices is different in the two *parshiyot*. *Parashat Vayikra*, which is addressed to the people of Israel, puts the sacrifices in the order that the people were most likely to bring them, with the sin offering and guilt offering, which represent an acknowledgment of the mistakes they have made, listed last. But *Parashat Tzav*, which is addressed to the *kohanim* (priests), lists the sacrifices in the order of their holiness.

The contrast in language between the two *parshiyot* is striking. *Vayikra* gently acknowledges each contribution the people bring and gives instructions. The text discusses what to do "when a person brings an offering to God" (Leviticus 1:2) and "when a person presents an offering to the Eternal." (Leviticus 2:1) *Tzav* is more serious, binding, and phrased in language relevant to the priests. God tells Moses to "command Aaron and his sons" (Leviticus 6:2) about the laws of the sacrifices, and these sacrifices are discussed in terms of *kodesh kodashim* (literally, "the holiest of the holy") five times throughout this portion, as compared to only twice in *Vayikra*.

The connection between sacrifices and Jewish cultural literacy is stronger than one might imagine. Remember that the word *korban*, "sacrifice," comes from the same Hebrew root as *l'hakriv*, "to draw near." These discussions focus on different methods of drawing people closer to God and the Torah, both in our day and in biblical times.

The *parshiyot* seem to establish two ways in which to transmit information. On the one hand (the *Vayikra* model), when people bring an important part of themselves to us, whether this be a sacrifice (in biblical terms) or an interest in learning or being part of the community, we should receive them

openly and channel their interest into a greater holiness and connection to God. On the other hand (the *Tzav* model), there are some people among us who, because of their role in the community, are literally commanded to sit down and learn the facts. This is their life's mission. These people have more work to do and should be held to a higher standard.

But there is one major problem with taking the *Tzav* model too literally: Since biblical times, we no longer have *kohanim* who perform rituals on our behalf. Instead, it is up to each of us to form our own connection with God and Jewish teachings through prayer, righteous acts, and study. In this sense, *Tzav* pushes each of us to move beyond the level of involvement and learning that we usually operate at, and not only when we find it convenient to do so. Like the *kohanim*, each one of us is commanded to draw closer to Jewish teachings and God in a deep way. The reward, this parashah suggests, will be experiencing a greater sense of *kodesh kodashim*, the holiest of the holy, in our lives.

Questions for Discussion

1. How do you feel connected to Judaism through learning and study? Through your life experiences?
2. How can we make Jewish learning and involvement central in our own lives? In our communities?
3. What are some of the other ways in which you feel yourself drawn closer to God?

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THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Jeffrey L. Ballon

I recently traveled to Israel with thirty-nine other members of the clergy who had been ordained at Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR). Our trip was organized by the American Reform Zionist Association (ARZA/WORLD UNION, North America). Our purpose was to affirm the solidarity of the Reform Movement with the people of Israel. The journey was in no small part a response to the obligations we had taken upon ourselves at the time of our ordination to dedicate ourselves to the

Tzav, Leviticus 6:1-8:36

welfare of the Jewish people. Each person we visited responded with gratitude in his or her own way. Right wing or left wing, statesman or student, layperson or clergy, each of them thanked us for coming to Israel at this difficult time. Some were direct in their response to our presence, some were effusive, and some quietly acknowledged that we belonged there at their sides. But without fail, each person expressed gratitude that we had come.

Similarly, in listing the various animal sacrifices that our ancestors were instructed to offer, this week's Torah portion, *Tzav*, describes some of the different ways of saying thank you within the ancient sacrificial system. Years ago, one rabbi quipped that he would undertake to break the four-minute mile and run in the opposite direction just to avoid the obligation of explaining the passages that describe the animal sacrifices, since the fat covering the entrails of the ram did not appeal to him as a subject of discourse. As a Reform rabbi, I can empathize with his distaste for the subject of animal sacrifices. I am also willing to make the assertion that the biblical passages that exalt social justice and tell stories about our ancestors are far more attractive than those regarding the burning of dung and the rendering of fat. After all, the closest we ever come to a burnt sacrifice today is when we overcook meat on the barbecue.

However, if we attempt to extract the essential intentions that motivated the biblical practices some of us now interpret as alien, we find that the ancient text is still quite instructive. By now, all regular readers of this forum realize that we are permitted, even encouraged, to revisualize the Torah and reframe it in a context that permits our increased understanding of it. Certainly we recognize that no one within the Jewish community actually offers the sacrifices of goats and rams anymore. Putting blood on an ear, thumb, or toe is no longer part of the modern ordination ceremony. But an offer of thanks to God is a mark of piety, just as an offer of gratitude to our friends for their kindness continues to be a mark of civility. Today, using the techniques of modern scholarship, we can see beyond the minutiae of instructions once taught by Moses and accepted by Aaron and recognize that they are meant to describe the cooperative relationship between one who was inspired and one who was able to carry out the divine commands.

It is at this juncture that the name of this week's Torah portion, *Tzav*, becomes important. We are

reminded that *tzav* is an instructive word in the imperative mood. This form of the word implies relationship and status: It implies that there is a Commander and therefore also a commanded one. Extending this idea a bit further, we can thus infer that there is an agreement or covenant between the two parties that makes the giving of these commands a serious act. We might even employ the buzzword currently in use in our nation's capital and describe the action of receiving divine orders as a moment filled with gravitas. Aware of the serious mission assigned to Aaron, Moses takes the blood of a sacrificed ram and smears it on the ear, thumb, and toe of the first person whom he ordains. The blood on Aaron's ear reminds us that we must listen to the pain of others. The blood on Aaron's thumb reminds us that we must stand in opposition to the needless shedding of blood. And the blood on Aaron's toe reminds us that if we are forced, we must walk to the arena of conflict in order to make peace.

While the ARZA/WORLD UNION, North America rabbinic group that journeyed to Israel did not perform animal sacrifices there, what we did do was practice the values symbolized by the placement of blood on Aaron's body. Reading *Tzav* allows us to understand those values more clearly. We journeyed to be present with the people of Israel, just as Moses and Aaron were present to the people of their time. When we visited with parents who were still searching for their kidnapped sons; when we encouraged new students attending the Jerusalem campus of HUC-JIR to continue their devotion and their study; and when we met with young soldiers who have committed their faith, fortune, and future to the continuity of the Jewish people, we were following the path laid out for us in biblical times. We came to hear the pain, oppose evil, and seek peace. We came to fulfill the sacred tasks that Moses and Aaron have laid before us.

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