

Tzav 5767—Starting Over

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Sacrifices are a challenge. As a movement, Conservative Jews, myself admittedly among them, tend to be uncomfortable with our people's past with animal sacrifice. Our movement, beginning no later than 1946, has removed or revised passages of the traditional liturgy that have us praying for a return to sacrificial worship. Perhaps owing to this fact, when, in my fourth year of rabbinical school, my classmates and I faced the task of choosing dates for our senior sermons, a ritual not unlike a bar or bat mitzvah that has senior rabbinical students offering *drashot* to the Seminary community, the *parashiyot* of the book of *Vayikra* were not a popular choice. Although a part of me wanted to request a *Vayikra* senior sermon, just for the challenge of finding meaning in these verses, ultimately I went for the easy win, and chose something out of *Bereishit*.

In the ritual life of a community, however, we don't have the option of avoiding these chapters of our Torah, no matter how challenging they may be. And while I still relate to the concept of animal sacrifice as something foreign, outside my personal boundaries of spiritual expression, there is in fact much meaning we can glean from these *parashiyot*.

The book of *Vayikra* is, in essence, a manual for the workings of the *mishkan*, the portable temple in the desert, the place where God's presence was among the people, and where the people would reach out to God by bringing sacrifices. Just a few weeks ago, as we finished the book of *Shemot*, we read of the instructions for building the *mishkan*, for preparing its vessels, and for ordaining Aaron and his sons, who would be the priests. In our parasha this week, *Parashat Tzav*, we see the *mishkan* become a living, functioning entity, as Aaron and his sons are ordained and the first sacrifices brought. The descriptions of this process in our parasha are detailed and explicit—viscerally depicting what would be done with the slaughtered animals, and with their blood. But as I read through our parasha this week, these rituals spoke to me in a way they hadn't before. On this *Shabbat HaGadol*, the rituals of *Parashat Tzav* reminded me of *Pesah*.

The section of our Parasha we read this morning is taken up with the ordination of Aaron and his sons and the consecration of the *mishkan*. To begin this ordination ceremony, Aaron and his sons are dressed in their priestly garments, Moses anoints Aaron and the altar, and a sacrifice of purification is made. Their first action after the slaughter of this bull is to put some of its blood on the corners of the altar, to purify it. What follows are a number of other sacrifices, each, like the first, with Moshe guiding his

brother and nephews through the proper steps, teaching them how to do the job they will take on following their ordination. But this ordination ceremony is no one-time event. It is to continue for seven days—during that week, Aaron and his sons will stay in the *mishkan*, only afterward emerging as fully ordained priests.

Both this week long period and the inaugural moment of spreading blood on the altar stayed with me as I studied *Parashat Tzav*. The Talmud Yerushalmi suggests that the seven days of ordination for Aaron and his sons correspond to the seven days of creation—a powerful analogy. Just as God took seven days to put the world in order, so too it would take seven days to prepare Aaron and his sons thoroughly for their roles as *Kohanim*. But to me, it felt more like *Pesah*. Although we in the Diaspora celebrate for eight days, in the eyes of the Torah, *Pesah* is a seven day holiday. Now, seven is a significant number in our tradition, I could relate this seven day period to any of a number of other rituals or events, and draw meaning from there as well. However, the connection to *Pesah* that I felt here was strengthened by that inaugural act of spreading the blood on the altar. Looking back to the instructions for the Passover sacrifice, given on that terrifying last night in Egypt, Moshe tells the people to slaughter their lambs,

and immediately thereafter to apply some of the blood to their lintels and doorposts—the corners not of the altar, but of the entrances to their homes.

I see in the week long ordination of the priests a re-creation of our *Pesah* rituals. But still, I'm left with a question. Why seven days? We know that *Pesah* is a seven day holiday, but what's the reason? In the sections of the Torah that recall the exodus from Egypt, we're constantly reminded to "Remember this day, on which [we] went free from Egypt." (Ex. 13:3) Wouldn't it be even more powerful to re-enact that day each year, to see ourselves in the same position as our ancestors, rushing out of Egypt, taking that slim moment of opportunity to be freed from slavery, and celebrate *Pesah* on that one day, and one day only? Yet the Torah instructs us to celebrate for seven days.

Our parasha, specifically this seven day ordination period, give us guidance in answering this question. For Aaron and his sons, it would take seven days (at least!) to learn the requisite skills and to begin to think of themselves as *Kohanim*. Their new beginning as priests needed some time to set in. Their transformation could not be immediate. The *Sefat Emet*, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, the second *Gerrer Rebbe*, explains how this transformation would take place. He teaches that there are kinds of worship that require words, and kinds that require action. Moshe was our

guide for the words—he brought the words of the Torah from God to Israel. Aaron would be our guide for action. His seven day sojourn in the *mishkan* would school him in how to take these actions that would become essential components of worship for *b'nei yisrael*. These acts have great power, the *Sefat Emet* explains, because through them, our bodies and souls are transformed, clarified. Our actions, and the process through which we master them, help us know better who we are.

This same reasoning applies to our celebration of *Pesah*. One night, even one night packed with symbolic actions, wouldn't have been enough for the Israelites to begin to see themselves as the free people they had become. Similarly, one night isn't enough for us to see ourselves in their place as people who left Egypt, as we are obligated to do each year.

Adapting to new experiences, new roles, new self-concepts takes a little time.

Our Parasha gave Aaron and his sons that time during their week of ordination, during which their new clothes, new surroundings and new skills helped them actually become the *Kohanim* they were commanded to be. *B'nei yisrael* had their seven days of *Pesah* to help them cope with the events of that first day, to unlearn their identities as slaves, and to learn to become a people freed by God. Each year, we follow their lead, taking our

own eight days of *Pesah* to, following the *Sefat Emet*, clarify our souls, to make our own journeys from slavery to freedom. Each year, we are obligated to see ourselves as having left Egypt. Our eight days, like the seven that Aaron and his sons experienced, give us the time to consider what has been our Egypt, our מצרים, our place of constraint, and to learn how to understand ourselves anew, as liberated people.

May this Shabbat of new beginnings lead us and our families into a *Pesah* where we are renewed and transformed by *b'nei yisrael's* passage from enslavement to freedom, and by our own.

Shabbat shalom.