

Parah 5768
The Four Shabbatot Leading To Pesah

Shabbat Shalom.

Let me start with a question: how did your spiritual tradition become compelling to you? Can you think of a moment in your life that transformed your connection to your religious tradition? ...

At a recent conference I attended, several leading Jewish philanthropists were asked these questions about their Judaism. One spoke eloquently about watching his grandchildren light the Hanukkah candles. He urged them to skip the *brakhot* – the blessings – but they refused, saying: “Grandpa, we need the blessings to light the Hanukkah candles.” Hearing them recite the *brakhot* was deeply moving for him.

While it was a compelling vignette, it did not fully answer the question – was there a personal moment in his life when he experienced a Jewish transformation by himself?

This week is a unique Shabbat – Shabbat Parah. It is one of the four special Shabbatot we mark each spring – two before Purim and two before Pesah. Today we read a special *maftir* portion about the *Parah Adumah*, the red heifer, whose ashes were used in a purification ritual so that all could partake and share in the Pesah sacrifice. Anyone who came into contact with an object such as a corpse had become ritually impure and thus was required to be ritually purified.

Since we no longer have the Temple, we no longer offer this unique sacrifice of a red cow without blemish and no longer use its ashes in a purification ritual. However, as we do in many places in Judaism, we read the section of the Torah that deals with it in order to remain connected to this mitzvah, to this commandment.

Let me place this Shabbat in the context of the four special Shabbatot. Shabbat Shekalim, the first of these, is observed on the Shabbat immediately preceding the Hebrew month of Adar –

the month in which Purim falls. In addition to the weekly Torah portion, we recite additional verses whose theme is the duty of donating half a shekel toward the upkeep of the Temple. It commemorates the custom that occurred on the first of Adar, when special messengers were dispatched to all Jewish communities to collect these donations. Of course, this is one of the major themes connected to Purim where special messages were sent out in order to announce the great deliverance that had occurred.

The second Shabbat, Shabbat Zakhor, the Shabbat of remembrance, is the Shabbat before Purim. Its name derives from the additional Torah portion read from the end of Devarim/Deuteronomy, whose theme is the duty to remember what Amalek did to Israel. Our tradition understands that Haman was a direct descendant of Agag, the king of the Amalekites, and thus there is a direct connection between this reading, about how Amalek attacked the Jewish people in the desert, and Haman, who wanted to kill the Jews centuries later.

The third Shabbat is Shabbat Parah, the Shabbat of the Red Heifer -- today. This is the third of the four special Shabbatot, and it is the Shabbat that precedes Shabbat Ha-hodesh. We read an additional portion from the Book of the Bamidbar, Numbers, whose theme is the ritual purification with the ashes of the red heifer.

The fourth special Shabbat is Shabbat Ha-hodesh, literally meaning the Shabbat of the new month of Nisan, the first month of spring and the month that contains the birth of the Jewish people commemorated during Pesahh. It precedes or falls on the first day of the month of Nisan. Its reading explains the ritual laws concerning the Pesahh sacrifice and the interdiction to eat leaven, *hametz*, on the festival.

This morning I want to offer my own modern *midrash*, a modern interpretation of these four shabbatot to see them in the context of modern Jewish life. Perhaps each Shabbat reflects a different type of Jewish orientation.

Shabbat Shekalim is about donating money, the need to keep the community going. This is the Jew whose primary focus is donating money. While I am a big supporter of donating to good causes, donating money is not enough to be one's sole focus.

The second Shabbat, Shabbat Zakhor, the Shabbat of memory, is representative of another Jewish orientation. This is the Holocaust Jew, who tends to look at the world through the lens of anti-Semitism. A primary focus is to commemorate the terrible tragedy that befell our people some 65 years ago. While remembering is required of all of us, it is not the whole of Judaism.

The third Shabbat, today, Shabbat Parah, is more nuanced. Parah is all about an act of purification, which is both incredibly spiritual and a bit superstitious. This reminds me of my grandmother who used to say "poo, poo, poo" or "keneharah" to ward away evil. This is also a Judaism rooted in flavor, but not necessarily rooted in knowledge.

There are many Jews today and non-Jews like Madonna who flock to programs like the Kabbalah Center. While their mystical focus is a part of the tradition, it is often missing key building blocks of text, history, philosophy and learning that are at the core of all these experiences.

Madonna is a perfect example – it is strange that she is studying the Zohar, a most complicated, advanced and esoteric 13th century Jewish mystical text, without first grounding herself in core Jewish ideas and practice. Normally, spirituality grows out of that.

One of the unusual ideas behind the ceremony of purification with the red heifer was that whoever prepared these ashes became impure while the very ashes made those who were impure, pure. This seeming contradiction led to many commentaries in rabbinic literature trying to explain this paradox.

One rabbinic tale (Tanhuma 3, 26) relates that a non-Jew once came to Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakkai and asked about the

reason for the ritual of the red heifer. The rabbi gave him a rational answer, trying to explain away all the seemingly magical acts that are involved in the ceremony.

But, later Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai explained to his students that a mystery was involved for, in and of themselves, the dead were not impure nor the ashes purifying. “But”, said the sage, “this is what God has decreed and we must not transgress God’s laws.”

While there may be some rational explanations, the point of this ritual was to remind us how life and death are intertwined. At moments of birth and death, we are reminded about the fragility of life and that sparks of eternity are everywhere.

When we encounter a spiritual practice, we should ask why is this here? What can we learn from it? How can it bring more healing into the world? Or as Carlo said in his dvar Torah – how can it make the everyday holy? How does it add to our sense of wonder?

The final Shabbat is Shabbat Ha-hodesh, right before the month of Nisan. The first three Shabbatot all point to Ha-hodesh, which leads into Pesahh and which ties all this together.

From the first Shabbat, why should we donate money? Because we need to take care of our community and the world.. We need to tell the story of the Jewish people within that context.

Why do we fight anti-Semitism and speak out against hate, especially the kind of hate that is being talked about today in the Arab world against Jews and Israel? Because we know that we have enemies. Whether it’s Pharaoh, Haman or Hitler, evil exists, and we must rally against it. That has been a large part of the story of the survival of the Jewish people throughout the millennia.

By telling the story of Pesahh – the story of freedom after oppression, of justice over injustice – then we can truly see the big picture.

We must incorporate all these perspectives into one holistic picture. Instead of simply relating the story of our miraculous deliverance, we must appreciate all its frames. We need to learn from the mysterious rite described today on Shabbat Parah. We need to develop a sense of wonder of God, a sense of mystery at God's ways, and even a sense of marvel at the survival and creative existence of the Jewish people despite its vicissitudes.

So, these four shabbatot lead into Pesah, which, of course, is the ultimate synthesis of all these observances.

Our first holiday, Pesah, does all these things: it narrates the story of the birth of our people; it reminds us to be a part of a community, inviting the poor to share our seder (as we say at the Seder: kol dikhvin), donating money (the Maot Hitim), and crying out for justice throughout the world as we do at our seders.

The Seder, with its ancient rituals, combines text learning in the Hagaddah and a mystical re-enactment, seeing ourselves in the Exodus.

Pesah works on the physical and spiritual levels. We literally clean out our homes, making sure that they are rid of hametz, the literal hametz, the leaven that exists within our homes, and the metaphoric hametz that exists within our hearts. It is a physical and spiritual cleaning.

After Purim, we start thinking about Pesah: looking for new insights so that we can share them with everyone at the Pesah seder. The seder is the ultimate Jewish ritual combining food, prayer, study, song and spirituality, discussion and conversation, and, of course, questioning.

Let me close with another story from that conference. One of the other philanthropists shared his transformational moment. Sitting on a plane next to someone who was studying Talmud, he asked the person what he was studying. It began a conversation about Jewish learning and inspired him to begin his own process of Jewish engagement. Every day he spends twenty minutes studying Torah with a friend or on his own. His study is an on-going, life-long quest.

Although he had seen people studying Talmud many time before, on this flight, the phenomenon really grabbed him. He was open to beginning a new experience. All the other times, he had closed himself off.

There is no time in the Jewish calendar better structured for opening our hearts and minds to the richness that Judaism offers us each day than these weeks that lead into Pesah. Let this be the year when we grasp that opportunity and hold onto the many ways our tradition can deepen our lives.

Shabbat Shalom.