

United We Stand

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Parshas Tzav

20th of Adar Bet 5784

The Parsha's Path

And he slaughtered [the sacrifice], and Moses took some of its blood, and placed it on the cartilage of Aaron's right ear... (8:23)

This week's Parsha describes the process in which Moshe initiated Aharon and his sons into the *kehunah*, the priesthood. First, Moshe bathed them in water and dressed them in the priestly garments. Then, he anointed their heads with oil which was followed by taking the blood of an offering and placing it on their thumbs, big toes, and ears. Then he took some oil and blood and sprinkled it on them and their garments. Then, he instructed them not to leave the Mishkan for seven days.

What is the meaning of all these rituals? Why was this the way the *kohanim* were inaugurated?

The Shem MiShmuel (Parshas Metzora 1) points out that there's one other place where blood is placed on one's thumb, big toe, and ear: The purification of the *metzora* (someone afflicted by *tzaraas*). Several contemporary scholars including Rabbi David Block (Aleph Beta) have observed that in fact, all of these elements of the inauguration of the *kohanim* are present by the *metzora* as well. They point out that the laws and description of *tzaraas* equate it, in a way, with death: *Tzaraas* makes one's skin white like a corpse, the *metzora* has many of the same laws as a mourner, conveys *tumah*, and must remain outside the camp. The reason for this is that through speaking *lashon hara* or committing other interpersonal offenses, the *metzora* cuts himself off from his bond with his fellow Jews, in a sense killing his communal identity. Thus, a part of him becomes, literally, dead. In order to reenter the congregation, then, it is not enough for him to achieve purity; he must undergo a rebirth and cultivate a new life. Rabbi David Fohrman explores many parallels between the purification of the *metzora* (in particular, the *metzora's* sacrifices) and the *korban Pesach*, which formed us as a nation; both represent the birth of national identity.

To generate this rebirth, of course the *metzora* must first shed his impurity; he must bathe in a *mikvah*, and change into fresh clothes. But he must also undergo a new sanctification. This begins with an anointment, just as new kings are anointed.

The Shem MiShmuel explains that the blood placed on the thumb, toe, and ear serves as an atonement for the geographical extremities of the body; these organs are the most engaged in outward activity and experience and the furthest away from the inner, spiritual dimensions of the soul. Hands and feet are used to traverse and engage with the outer world, while the ear absorbs everything being said around it. Holiness in Hebrew means separateness; to be holy is to be separate from the outer world and focused on the inner, ideal world. An overemphasis on the outer world, counterintuitively, cuts us off from our identity – both individual and communal – as we become consumed by superficial self-indulgence and egotism. Thus, the *metzora* must redeem these organs in particular to sanctify them in holiness. Perhaps, just like a baby is covered in blood when emerging from the womb, so too we cover these organs, which are undergoing a rebirth, in blood.

The *metzora* is, in a sense, the anti-*kohen*. If the *metzora* epitomizes death, then the *Kohen* epitomizes life. The *metzora* was banished outside the camp for seven days; the *kohanim*, upon their inauguration, had to stay in the tent for seven days. The *kohen* may not contract impurity from a corpse, and everything about service in the *Mishkan* and *Beis Hamikdash* is meant to affirm the sanctity of life. Even the food *kohanim* eat, *terumah*, is holy and may not be consumed by the rest of the people. The *kohen* is elevated in holiness above his brothers, charged with the special role to be even more separate, spiritual, and idealistic than the rest of the people. While most of *klal yisrael* have a degree of holiness that reflects an ideal balance for G-d's chosen people, the *kohen* must go to a further extreme as the spiritual leader within the chosen people.

When Aharon and his sons became the first *kohanim*, they, like the *metzora*, needed to undergo a kind of rebirth. They were being elevated to a new plane of life, a mode of existence that transcended who they were before. The process in this week's *Parsha* was how they did that.

Full disclaimer: I'm a *kohen*, so I'm a big fan of this insight. But as we see from the *metzora*, the process of rebirth outlined here is not exclusive to *kohanim*. All of us are bidden to *choose life*, to live in holiness, separateness, and connection to shared values and allegiance to G-d and His people. We are all susceptible to the life-draining forces of the external world, which pushes us to expose ourselves and engage with the

vulgarity of secular society and shatters the loving life-force that unifies us and all with G-d. Whether through technology and social media, TV, politics, ads, materialism, or gossip, so many forces try to distance us from holiness. This does not mean that there is not a time and place for such engagement and exposure. Sometimes there is much we can gain or accomplish from these encounters. But we must also be extraordinarily wary of how it affects us, and take whatever measures necessary to preserve the inner holiness that makes us who we are. And, like the *metzora* and *kohen*, we must always remember that rebirth is never out of reach.

Deeper Meanings

In the previous article, we alluded to the paradoxical idea that the *kohen's* separateness is actually the key to his unity with the rest of the people. The quality of holiness, while turning a person spiritually inward and away from the rest of the world with its problems and messiness, actually enables a person to be closer to it. For example, a Rabbi cannot have the same relationship with his congregants as he has with his colleagues; his elevated status requires him to exercise a certain degree of separateness. At the same time, he is, on another level, more intimate with his congregation than anyone else. This can be true both on the communal and individual levels, having an intimate relationship with each and every congregant. How is this possible?

The Rambam, in his commentary on Pirkei Avos (Avos 1:6 - *and acquire for yourself a friend*), explains that there are different levels of friendship. A friendship may be purely pragmatic, like a business partnership; it may be based on shared pleasure, like enjoying each other's company; or it may be based on a shared value system and commitment to coming closer to G-d. This latter friendship is the strongest and deepest of all, for it transcends the selfish and conditional and connects the essence of our souls. Our souls are pure and seek G-dliness; when relationships are based on our souls, there is nothing more genuine and profound.

The Rabbi and the *kohen's* relationship to the community is based purely on this G-dliness. They cannot and would not share a friendship based on other values and considerations, so their relationship will inevitably differ from that of others but they bond with everyone on the realest level. They are able to do this precisely because they are more removed from all other aspects of life; precisely because they keep themselves pure from the superficial and vulgar aspects of existence, they are free to tap into a deeper connection. They may deal with

very unpleasant and complex situations, and they may be exposed to the messy world with which they must deal, but they still manage to detach themselves from it, to deal with it from a vantage point of purity. Through their immersion in Torah, they retain a pristine objectiveness which enables them to penetrate to the heart of the issues without being swept away by their vagaries and problems.

Senator Joseph Lieberman, z"l, was an example of this kind of leadership. Like my Saba, z"l, he was a politician who didn't get caught up by politics, whose commitment to Torah and his Judaism enabled him to transcend the pettiness of his peers, stand for his values, build bridges, and gain widespread respect. I was privileged to take a class in YU co-taught by him, and got a glimpse of the dignity and measured way in which he conducted himself and his pain over the partisanship that has become the hallmark of contemporary politics. *Yehi zichro baruch*.

This is the true path to unity. Especially during these particularly contentious yet vulnerable times, let us strive to seek out these kinds of leaders and emulate their example.

Goal of the week

Think carefully before discussing a contentious issue: Is this particular conversation with this particular person going to really be constructive?

This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Shaindel Temma bas Rochel Zlotta, Masha Sarah bas Teiviah Leah, Bracha bas Shoshanah, Reuven ben Golda, Yitzchok Moshe haKohen ben Miriam, Ephraim Melech ben Teilah, Gavriel Margoliot Ben Malka, and all those injured by the war and acts of terror, as well as for the safe return of all the hostages and soldiers. Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.

Have A Great Shabbos !!

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