

Today's Torah Portion – *Tzav*

Summary:

The regular portion for this week is *Tzav*, the second portion in the Book of Leviticus. In addition, today is *Shabbat Ha-Gadol*, “The Great Sabbath,” which is the final Shabbat before Passover. While there is no additional Torah reading, there is a special Haftarah from the prophet Malachi proclaiming that the Great Day of the Lord is at hand and will be heralded by the prophet Elijah. With the approach of this Festival of Freedom, this season of hope, the message is most appropriate. Passover’s intergenerational emphasis is evoked toward the Haftarah’s end, “And He shall turn the hearts of the parents to the children, and the hearts of the children to their parents.”

The Torah portion repeats the description and procedure for the sacrifices discussed in last week’s portion.

Issues:

1. Leviticus 7:27 contains an absolute prohibition against consuming blood and thus is the basis for the regulations and procedures regarding the preparation of Kosher meat. A variety of reasons have been suggested for this prohibition: a) it is a health measure; b) it is a means of weaning the Israelites away from the practices of idolatrous nations (Maimonides); c) it is a reminder of the sanctity of all life (Nachmanides).
2. *On Sacrifice*: Richard Rubenstein, a rabbi and existentialist theologian, writes: “Few aspects of contemporary Jewish theology offer as much promise as a reconsideration of the abiding relevance of the sacrificial elements in the liturgy. For the past century, Jewish thinkers have tended to be acutely embarrassed by the sacrificial survivals in our tradition.

I have come to believe that the archaic elements in religion are often the most meaningful. I do not see man as capable of much improvement through homiletic exhortation, but rather as a creature of inescapable conflicts which he but barely understands ... He needs the drama and the consolation of religion as much to share his inevitable failings as to be encouraged to further striving.

Sacrifice is the drama of man’s hatred of God and his ultimate submission to him ... Men achieve catharsis by symbolically acting out that hatred through ritual violence against the sacrificial victim, without being consciously aware of what they’re doing ... In sacrifice, we overcome God, and, at the very same moment, we submit and recognize His inevitable victory.”

Rubenstein calls sacrifice a more potent teacher of human limitations than any verbal message. He says, “With dramatic force ... the terrible lesson is born in on the community that it has only the choice of controlled, regulated violence or irrational and uncontrolled violence.” He says sacrifices allow us to channel our natural drives toward violence, hatred and subsequent guilt into an organized, contained ritual.

- Do you agree with Rubenstein?
- What do we have in our lives to fill the void? How do we contain (ritualize) our anger and guilt? Does prayer effectively harness it?
- Do you agree with Rubenstein’s view of human nature, which is essentially Freudian and opposed to much of Jewish traditional thought? Is the purpose of religion to control the animal within us, as he suggests, or to lift us to a more sublime and angelic state?
- *The Big Question*: Is human nature doomed to remain flawed which is what Rubenstein says the sacrificial system assumes, or is it *perfectible*, as most prophets and rabbis, and most of us, have always hoped?

3. *Tzav* details the priestly duties. The priests and, in particular, the High Priest offered the Israelites role models to emulate. The High Priest had to be sinless in order to carry out his duties. But, since no individual can be sinless, the High Priest brought a daily sacrifice. If the High Priest can bring a sacrifice, his action may motivate others to do so. The High Priest brings his sacrifice publicly without feeling ashamed. The Israelites, likewise, should not feel ashamed in bringing their sacrifices. The High Priest brings a meal offering, the same offering as that of the poorest Israelite. Thus, the poor should not feel embarrassed by their meager sacrifice. Lastly, twice daily, a sacrifice is offered for the sin of the golden calf. The Sages felt that all the troubles in the world are related to the sin of the golden calf. These sacrifices protect Israel from the effects of the sin of the golden calf (*Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez*).

- How is a rabbi a contemporary role model for the Jewish community? Should community leaders be held to a higher standard of behavior than the general population? Why or why not? The priests carried out a detailed ritual that had great influence on the people. What do you do that has real significance for others?

4. Even the menial task of removing the ashes from the altar entails the wearing of specific garments. For the initial removal of the ashes, when they are placed next to the altar, the priest is to wear special linen attire. Other less important clothing is worn to carry the ashes away from the camp. The rabbis derived two lessons from this. The priestly vestments are worn even for this lowly task because it is a service to God in the Temple. Thus, we learn that when a person wishes to worship, he/she must wear special clothing. A second lesson relates to individuals and the tasks they perform. An individual should never excuse himself/herself from a task because he/she feels it is beneath his/her dignity to perform it.

- Does our synagogue have policies or guidelines regarding what people should and should not wear to worship services? To religious school?
- Do you think there should be a dress code?
- Do you behave differently when you are dressed up as opposed to when you are wearing everyday clothes?
- What household chores do you do? Does your attitude affect how well you carry out these tasks?

5. The Midrash points out that in the Messianic Age, all sacrifices will be annulled except the sacrifices of Thanksgiving, and all prayers will be annulled except the prayer of Thanksgiving. Such a sacrifice or prayer would be offered by one who has experienced a miraculous deliverance such as after a sea voyage, after travel in the wilderness, after recovery from an illness, or escape from imprisonment (Rashi).

- Why do you think this one sacrifice and prayer would endure even in the end of days?
- What does the American celebration of Thanksgiving commemorate? Why has this observance lasted?
- For what are you thankful? How do you express that thankfulness?