

Parashat Tzav: A Drama Awaits Us This Shabbat

Dear Friends,

Purim is behind us (unless you live in Jerusalem, or other walled cities) and Pesach is exactly a month away! A tremendous drama takes place this Shabbat between the parasha and the haftarah. (Reminder: the parasha is always from the Torah and the haftarah from the Prophets.)

Parashat Tzav - the second parasha in Vayikra - continues the almost-obsessive preoccupation with the laws of the sacrifices which the Cohanim were to offer on the altar in the Tabernacle. But then comes the haftarah of Tsav, in which Jeremiah goes out on a rampage against the sacrificial cult.

Jeremiah lived and prophesied at the time of the destruction of the First Temple (586 BCE). He railed against the Jerusalem elite of the period, accusing them of entirely distorting God's word. God never asked for these sacrifices, he claims. This is not the way to worship Him. The spiritual and religious leaders of the period did not like Jeremiah's message and persecuted him to the bitter end. You see... Not much has changed.

Jeremiah claimed, in God's name, that **"...when I freed your forefathers from the land of Egypt, I did not speak with them or command them concerning burnt offerings or sacrifice."** (Jeremiah 7: 22), In other words, who asked you for sacrifices, anyway??? All I asked and still ask is that you listen to me!

This is very harsh criticism, and apparently a very tall order!

The haftarah ends with the following verses: **"Thus said the LORD: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; Let not the strong man glory in his strength; Let not the rich man glory in his riches. But only in this should one glory: In his earnest devotion to Me. For I the LORD act with kindness, Justice, and equity in the world; For in these I delight — declares the LORD."**

Last week I wrote in praise of the God of the Cohanim, the God of routine, ritual, and tradition. This week Jeremiah is inviting us to familiarize ourselves and connect with the God of the Prophets.

Contrary to the tasks of the priests, the prophets' messages do not derive from routine or habit. The truth springs forth eternally at every moment anew - from the heart, from inspiration, from dreams, or from deeply-implanted conscience.

The prophet demands constant authenticity. He is continually attentive to the fresh, current Divine word.

Truth's greatest danger is rigidity of thought. Rigidity destroys truth, and it happens to us all: Remember a time when you heard, or perhaps read, some amazing truth that rocked your world? Perhaps you even wrote it down so as not to forget it, maybe even put it on the refrigerator door. You wanted to retain it so you can refer to it again and again. Perhaps you passed it on to your children. You protected it valiantly from being overshadowed by other competing truths. In this way, that authentic truth which was once so fresh, original, and exciting began to stagnate, to be covered with an infinite number of layers, words, explanations, and arguments, until there was nothing left of the original vitality it once contained. Only a shadow remained of the excitement it generated inside of you so many years ago. While the heart is no longer in it, the mind continues to defend the remaining shell.

In this way truth becomes rigid.

But Jeremiah does not rail only against the sullied routine of rituals in Jerusalem. He also cries out on behalf of the God of justice and charity, whom the priests did not know.

The prophet Hosea, who lived about 200 years before Jeremiah, also raised this double outcry: **"For I desire goodness, not sacrifice; Obedience to God, rather than burnt offerings."** (Hosea 6:6)

The prophets' demand is challenging: In worshipping God, they say, ritual and routine are secondary to immediate, current, fresh connection to the Divine voice. But in order to hear continuously, we have to give up so many things: our conditioning, our anchors, and all of the empty, hardened "truths" we learned. I know very few people who are capable of truly listening lucidly and clearly - to the living God or to their friends.

So who is the REAL God of Israel? The God of Ritual or the God of the immediate and ever changing connection? Is He the God of the commandments or the God of kindness?

Jewish tradition challenges us over and over to live our lives with "both... and..."; with both judgment and compassion, with both the Torah of the priests and that of the Prophets; with both ritual, routine, and habit, and with current, ever-changing, fresh truth. The "either...or" path (either the God of the priests or the God of the prophets, either habit and permanency or fresh, current truth) narrows our lives, causes partial, superficial worship, and reduces God's presence, ultimately leading to idolatry. Idolatry happens when the infinite God is narrowed and reduced down to "a thing".

The courageous rabbis in Tiberias in the 10th century dared to link the subversive, anti-Cohenite haftorah with this very priestly, ritualized parasha.

Are we able to live with both approaches? Will we have the courage to recognize the infinite faces of the Creator - both the God of our biblical ancestors, and the God that speaks to us today, and the God who will appear to us tomorrow, and even the God that we ourselves can't hear but someone can?

"Both... and..." is a world view and also a way of life. It requires maturity: routine, continuity, and tradition on the one hand, and a current, fresh, ever-changing, and living connection on the other. Each of us has their own inclinations. Some of us need routine to protect our sanity. Some of us need change and renewal to do keep us alive.

Therefore, this Shabbat we receive a "Tsav" (a commandment) to strengthen the parts of us which require it, and to tame other parts in order to find the delicate balance between the God of permanency and routine, and the God of renewal and intent.

Let's wish a Happy Purim to those of us celebrating today (in Jerusalem, and other ancient walled-in cities), and Shabbat Shalom to all

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