



Parshat Tzav D'var Torah – March 30, 2024

By Arnie Zar-Kessler

- I. Introduction
 - a. Thanks to Roger Klein for this opportunity
 - b. I had told Roger that I'd be ready to jump in – or shorter notice – to fill in should there be a need
 - c. And so, when he asked me earlier this month to prepare and share a d'var, I was – and am – grateful to him.
- II. About Leviticus
 - a. Around this time each year, the eyes of many shul-going Jews begin to glaze over Leviticus seems so utterly foreign, the rituals and practices as described so alien, this vision underlying them so obscure that connecting to it seems impossible.
 - b. Are these texts not destined to seem hopelessly antiquated to contemporary readers?
 - c. And yet, if we dig a little deeper, we find a great deal about Leviticus that can speak powerfully to modern sensibilities in hearing it.
- III. (about Parashat Tzav)
 - a. That this portion is almost entirely devoted to details of the various sacrifices at the Mishkan
 - i. Priestly meal offering (Minkhah Kohin) 6:12-16
 - ii. Sin offering (Khataht) 6:17-23
 - iii. Guilt offering (Korban Ashahm) 7:1-7
 - iv. Thanksgiving offering (korbahn Todah) 7:11-17
 - b. Thus, it should come as little surprise why it was so 'available'
 - c. But at my advanced age, I had also forgotten that I had given a talk to this same group at this same lectern on this very portion just last year....
- IV. 'nevertheless'....
 - a. What makes parts of the Tanakh so powerful, so compelling, and so utterly contemporary is precisely the fact that they do not paper over the reality that life can be totally frightening. And seemingly so random. Biblical texts give voices to the pain of affirming the reality of a powerful God on the one hand, while acknowledging the often-excruciating ways that the world we believe God envisions and wants is unbearably far from being realized, on the other.
 - b. There seems to be an element of walking in God's ways here, just as God is separated and ordered. So Israel must engage in separation and ordering
 - c. What happens to a person who has visited the tabernacle and by extension into our own time, was imaginatively entered into the tabernacle, to close study of Leviticus, having partaken of or merely glimpsed the counter world that the Mishcon represents. Person has changed at least when the practice works. After the glimpse, he or she has been afforded, nothing looks quite the same anymore. He or she sees another reality as possible that the chaos and suffering he or she observes all around are not ultimately all that there is.
- V. Last year, I was struck by the potential of a single line

- a. 6:11 – Every male of the children of Aaron shall eat (of the meal offering sacrifice) an equal portion for your generations, from the fire-offerings to Ha-Shem, and whatever touches them shall become holy (*asher y-gah bahem yik-dash*)
 - b. Struck by an idea – does our tradition contain / embrace the notion that holiness can be contagious?
 - c. That if holiness can be embodied in an object, or more so, in an individual who has been immersed in things and activities that are holy
 - d. Does Va-yik-rah 6:11 hold the potential **that ‘holiness can be contagious’**
 - a. Can that holiness ‘spread’?
 - b. And thus, within a community can the holiness – even the good intention – of one ‘rub off’ on others.
 - c. Or – as the joke goes,
 - i. Two fellows, Reubenstein and Moskowitz come every week to shul
 - ii. When asked why, Rubenstein says, “I come to be closer to God.”
 - iii. And when Moskowitz is asked, he says ‘I come to be closer to Rubenstein’
 - d. And – my quest was – does Va-Yikra teach us that they both are right?
 - e. However, despite my search for something of ‘Northwest passage’ to that idea of a contagion of holiness, there is simply no rabbinic or textual tradition to that effect
 - f. Problems of ownership of that source of holiness eventually led to conceptualization of cities of refuge – where the site provides a specific – limited safety approaches the idea, but no line of tradition that furthered my search.
- V. captured by the same instinct of a year ago – if the concept of contagion of holiness – and by inverse extension – of the wrong intention of one could ‘rub off’ on others, I welcomed Roger’s invitation as a further opportunity to possibly unlock this riddle, to find an understanding, and even a mechanism for how holiness can be spread around.
- VI. Perhaps there is another vehicle to consider a contagion of holiness of sorts in considering the Korban Todah, the Thanksgiving Sacrifice. (Leviticus verses 11 through 17)
- a. Improper execution of the sacrificial ritual can create a situation of “pigul’, in which the sacrifice itself, the one making the sacrifice and anyone who eats of it is ‘cut off’ from the community – ‘traifs up the whole place’ - an inversion of a contagion of holiness, but might provide a vehicle in
 - b. when someone has survived a life-threatening crisis, he brings a Thanksgiving offering (todah) to express his gratitude to God and in recognition that it is God who saved him. (from Psalm 107) David's hymn of gratitude the sages in referred 54 B’rachot that four categories of people are required to bring the offering
 - i. those that survived a desert or other potentially hazardous journey
 - ii. dangerous imprisonment,
 - iii. serious illness
 - iv. or a sea voyage.
 - c. (Rashi suggests that this is the likely antecedent of ‘benching Gomer’
- VII. Why must the Thanksgiving offering be eaten within a day – part I; the problem (r. Shai Held)
- a. The sacrificial offering associated with giving thanks to God (korban todah) differs in crucial ways from other sacrifices mentioned in the book of Leviticus. if we discern the rationale behind those differences, we will have gone a long way towards understanding the meaning of gratitude in Jewish piety and spirituality.
 - b. The burnt offering (olah, described in Leviticus 1) is totally given over to God and is thus completely consumed by the fire on the altar. The sacrifice of well-being (zevach ha-shelamim, described in Leviticus 3), of which the korban todah is a prime example, is

different: Although parts of it are consumed on the altar, other parts are shared by priests and the people bringing the sacrifice as a sacred meal. Most of the grain offering (minhah, described in Leviticus 3) may be eaten, but only by the priests. The sacrifice of well-being, in contrast, may be consumed by those bringing the sacrifices as well. Bible scholar Baruch Levine suggests that this permission expresses the very purpose of the sacrifice: “To afford the worshipers the experience of joining together with the priests in a sacred meal at which God Himself was perceived to be the honored guest.”

- c. But the thanksgiving offering is not like the other sacrifices of well-being. Whereas other sacrifices of well-being may be eaten until the third day, parashat Tzav tells us that “the flesh of [the] thanksgiving sacrifice of well-being shall be eaten on the day that it is offered; none of it shall be set aside until the morning” (Leviticus 7:15). Whatever is left over until the following morning must be burned.
 - d. ***The question is why. Why does the Torah find the prospect of leftovers disturbing? Why must the thanksgiving offering—of all sacrifices—be eaten on the very day it is brought? What is it about the Thanksgiving offering that prompts this restriction?***
- VIII. Why must the Thanksgiving offering be eaten within a day – Part II; some responses
- a. (sifra) This – todah - offering comes to thank God for a miracle. But we are not surrounded by miracles all day long? As we say in our prayers, we ‘thank God for your miracles that are with us every da’y. That’s in the Modeh Ani prayer of the Shemoneh Esrei. Thus, when we bring a Thanksgiving offering (todah), it is only because we happen to become aware of one miracle while we remain oblivious to all the others. Therefore Thanksgiving offering (todah) may be in the one day, since tomorrow there will be other miracles for which to be grateful.
 - b. R. Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508) offers one well-known explanation. The Torah’s purpose, Abravanel argues, is to publicize the miracle the person is celebrating. The fact that a great deal of food must be consumed in a short time leads the thankful person to invite “relatives, friends, and acquaintances to share in his meal and his joy.” He will thus have the opportunity to tell them of the wonders and miracles that were done for him, and God’s name will be publicly glorified (Abravanel, Commentary to Leviticus 7:11ff).²
- IX. Why must the Thanksgiving offering be eaten within a day – R. Shai Held
- a. proposes another (perhaps complementary) way of thinking about why the thankful person needs to invite others to share in his meal: The nature of gratitude is such that it is inherently outward-looking.
 - b. Think of a moment in your life when you have had an overwhelming sense of gratitude to God or to another person. Imagine especially a moment when you received something— whether a much-needed meal, a kind word, or a gesture of deep love— that you were not at all sure would be forthcoming. You may well notice that when you fully inhabit the sense of gratitude, you feel an urge to share the gifts you have received with others. When we are moved to the depths of our being by having been given something, we seek to become givers ourselves. A grateful heart overflows.
 - c. Gratitude is the bridge between the realization of how much I have been given, and the commitment to be a giver myself.
 - d. What Shai is suggesting is that the laws around the consumption of the thanksgiving offering are ***intended to express and inculcate a core religious value: When one has been the beneficiary of God’s kindness, one is expected to bestow kindness oneself. This is both a normative claim—gratitude should be inclusive and outward-looking, and a descriptive, psychological one—true gratitude by its nature is inclusive and outward-looking. Otherwise, it is merely pleasure or gladness, but not gratitude.***

- e. The Torah tries to teach something similar about the joy Jews experience during the three pilgrimage festivals: “You shall rejoice in your festival,” Deuteronomy teaches us, “with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities” (Deuteronomy 16:14). Deep joy is meant to be shared. In this instance, it is not just one’s family or friends who must be included, but also (and perhaps especially) those who are socio-economically vulnerable. Maimonides (also known as Rambam, 1135-1204) amplifies the biblical message dramatically: “While one eats and drinks himself [during a festival], it is his duty to feed the stranger, the widow, and other poor and unfortunate people, for he who locks the doors to his courtyard and eats and drinks with this wife and family, without giving anything to eat and drink to the poor and the bitter in soul— his meal is not a rejoicing in a divine commandment (simhat mitzvah) but a rejoicing in his own stomach (simhat kereiso)... Rejoicing of this kind is a disgrace to those who indulge in it” (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Yom Tov, 6:18; cf. Laws of Megillah 2:17). Joy that is not at least somewhat outward-looking, Maimonides forcefully suggests, is merely self-indulgence. “True joy,” “overflows the boundaries of individualism and becomes kindness (hesed).” Selfish rejoicing, according to Maimonides, is a contradiction in terms. Like gratitude, then, real joy looks outward. Like a grateful one, a joyous heart overflows.
- f. The simple requirement that there not be any leftovers from the thanksgiving offering thus teaches us a fundamental theological and spiritual lesson. We are not meant to rest content with being recipients of God’s gifts but are asked to become givers ourselves. God’s gifts are meant to flow through us and not merely to us.
- g. ***...As channels, we exist not merely to enjoy things, but [also] to pass them on. Our purpose is twofold: To flourish and to help others flourish.***
- h. In their very first encounter, God promises Abraham (then still named Abram) that “I will bless you,” and then adds that “I will make you a blessing” (Genesis 12:2). God seems to want Abram to know right away that being blessed and becoming a blessing are thoroughly intertwined. “The same double blessing is given to us: If we just enjoy good things without passing them on, if we are blessed without being a blessing, then we fail in our purposes as channels. We are givers because we were made that way, and if we don’t give, we are at odds with ourselves.”
- i. The lesson is simple: Gratitude and hoarding are incompatible, even mutually contradictory. ***A genuinely grateful heart does not understand acquisitiveness or possessiveness.***
- j. The prohibition on setting aside any of the thanksgiving offering until the next morning calls to mind another, parallel biblical prohibition. Discussing the paschal sacrifice (korban pesah), which is also a sacrifice of well-being (zevah shelamim), Exodus announces: “You shall not leave any of it over until morning; if any of it is left until morning, you shall burn it” (Exodus 12:10). Something profound is at play here. Think of what we say near the beginning of the Passover Seder (if only we more often acted accordingly): “All who are hungry, let them enter and eat; all who are in need, let them come celebrate Pesah.” If one of the core lessons Israel is meant to learn from its long sojourn in Egypt is to care for the vulnerable and downtrodden, then allowing any portion of the paschal sacrifice to be left over until morning should be unimaginable: Surely there is someone in the community who is hungry or alone, and who thus could and should have been invited to participate in our celebration. Leftovers from the paschal sacrifice suggest that the lessons of slavery and liberation have not yet been fully learned and internalized. Leftovers indicate a failure of empathy. The prohibition on

leaving over any part of the thanksgiving offering reminds us that we cannot be at once grateful and self-enclosed.

- k. The prohibition on leaving over any part of the paschal sacrifice is intended, at least in part, to remind us that those who are hungry are our responsibility, that we are to open both our hearts and our homes to them. Both laws tell us: Open your hearts, and open your doors

l. Our purpose is twofold; to flourish and to help others flourish

- X. But, we live in a world
 - a. Without sacrifices, without the Temple
 - b. And where the festivals come but three times a year
 - c. What regular practice can form a mechanism to achieve or at least further that purpose?
- XI. Which leads us to Rabbi Sharon Brous of IKAR in Los Angeles.
 - a. a few weeks ago, Reva shared a small-but-mighty book she had just picked up, 'The Amen Effect' by Rabbi Sharon Brous,
 - b. It suggests a mechanism for being the channels that Shai wrote about
 - c. makes the case that the spiritual work of our time, as instinctual as it is counter-cultural, is to find our way to one other in celebration, in sorrow, and in solidarity. To show up for each other in moments of joy and pain, vulnerability, and possibility, to invest in relationships of shared purpose and build communities of care.

Brous contends that it is through honoring our most basic human instinct-- the yearning for real connection-- that we reawaken our shared humanity and begin to heal. This kind of sacred presence is captured by the word *amen*, a powerful ancient idea that we affirm the fullness of one another's experience by demonstrating, in body and word: "I see you. You are not alone."

- d. She argues that human connection...
 - i. Is both a biological and spiritual necessity
 - ii. Is the key to belonging
 - iii. And the antidote to loneliness
 - iv. Can e the deepest expression of faith, honoring the image of God
 - v. Gives our lives purpose and meaning
 - vi. Helps us approach moments of joy and pain authentically
 - vii. Helps both the wounded and the healers and thus impacts bpth the giver and the receiver
 - viii. Won't save us, but matters profoundly, nevertheless
- e. An thus, the 'amen effect is
 - i. The fulfillment of the
 - ii. "...very human longing for connection
 - 1. In our most intimate relationships
 - 2. In community
 - 3. With strangers
 - 4. Perhaps with God"

- XII. What is 'Amen'?
 - a. Thus, when we say 'Amen', , With a shared faith (Emunah), I affirm what has just been uttered
 - b. And when we embrace the idea of 'Amen' within a community, we are saying
 - i. I see you

- ii. I affirm you in your joys and in your sufferings
 - iii. And that “I am walking with you’
 - c. In other words, from the bounty I have been blessed with, I am sharing
 - d. And thus, I am spreading those gifts,
 - e. I am a channel for that
 - f. Of my own flourishing, and acting in a way that hopefully will enable your flourishing
 - g. In effect, I am operating with the idea that holiness is contagious.
- XIII. Returning to the ‘contagion of holiness’
 - a. When anyone walks through the main entrance doors of this building – if they look – they will see inscribed into the stone tow Hebrew letter, ‘kuf kuf’, an representing an acronym for kehillat kodesh, a sacred community.
 - b. By what right does this building – or any other – substantiate the claim that it is a ‘holy community.?
 - i. Because it houses sacred objects, like Torah scrolls; that makes it a sacred space, but not a sacred community
 - ii. That it holds religious services – good
 - iii. That there’s food after the services? – very good
 - c. What R. Brous suggests that what makes this space deserving of ‘kuf kuf’ inscription is the way we treat each other
 - i. How we show up for each other – at times of joy
 - ii. At times of loss
 - iii. At times when we’re in need of healing
 - iv. In each case, our ‘Amen’ is saying I am here for you
 - v. That’s our Amen Effect; that’s our mechanism and manifestation of a contagious of holiness
 - d. Would suggest that...
 - i. It’s “Rubenstein and Moskowitz” realized
 - ii. And that it should be amongst our highest spirations as a community.
- XIV. Conclusion
 - a. Thus may we - especially in these times – grow our capacity to be there for each other, to demonstrate our intent to affirm each other,, to raise ourselves and others up is the source of the ‘contagion of holiness’ we can build, and thus heed the teachings of the korban todah – the expansive, inclusion expression of gratitude.