

Parshat Tzav -- Shabbat HaGadol

April 4, 2020 -- 10 Nissan 5780

Leviticus 6:1-8:36 (Hertz p. 429-438)

Haftarah: Malachi 3:4-24 (Hertz p. 1005-1008)

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Torah Portion Summary

Sefer Vayikra began with a description of the different types of *korbanot* (offerings). Parshat Tzav now takes the form of a priest's manual, as God tells Moshe to instruct Aaron about the rituals the kohanim are to use as they offer the various *korbanot*. We learn that the *zevach sh'lamim*, the offering of wellbeing, was to be brought for three reasons – for thanksgiving, in fulfillment of a vow, or as a freewill or voluntary offering. A person in a state of ritual impurity may not eat from any of the sacrifices. No one is permitted to eat *cheilev*, the fat covering an animal's kidneys, or blood. Portions of these offerings were to be set aside to be given to the priests. God instructs Moshe about the priests' consecration ceremony. Aaron and his sons are washed, dressed in their ceremonial garments, and anointed. Moshe offers sacrifices on their behalf. The ritual of ordination continues for seven days.

I. The Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: Take Aaron along with his sons, and the vestments, the anointing oil, the bull of purification offering, the two rams, and the basket of unleavened bread; and assemble the whole community at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. (Leviticus 8:1-3)

1. Take [win] him with words and draw [attract] him. (Rashi--Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105, France)
2. The Holy One said to him: Persuade him with words, for he is fleeing from the office. (Tanchuma Yashan)
3. While it has always been considered an enormous honor to be a kohein, the honor comes with several serious restrictions: The Bible forbids a priest to marry a divorcee and to come in contact with any corpse except that of a very near relative. (Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, Biblical Literacy, p. 126)
4. "Take [Israel's elders] to the Tent of Meeting" (Numbers 11:16). God said to Moshe: Take them by persuasive words. First speak to them words of praise: "Happy are you that you were appointed." Then speak to them words to Israel's discredit: "You are to know that they are litigious and contrary. So you are taking this responsibility upon yourselves with the understanding that they may curse you, may throw stones at you." (Sifre B'Midbar 92)
5. "Gather for Me seventy of Israel's elders" (Numbers 11:16). Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: After the elders were appointed, all Israel kindled lamps in their honor as they rejoiced over them. When Miriam saw the lamps lit, she asked Tzipora, "What is the meaning of these lamps alight?" After Tzipora explained the matter to Miriam, Miriam said, "[How] happy these men's wives must be at what they see – how their husbands have risen to authority." Tzipora replied, "Alas for these wives." (Yalkut Shimoni, B'ha'alot'cha 738)
6. A rabbi whom they don't want to drive out of town is no rabbi. And a rabbi who lets himself be driven out is no man. (Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, 1810-1883, Lithuania and Germany)

Sparks for Discussion

Rashi and the Tanchuma suggest that Aaron had to be persuaded to accept the office of high priest. Do you find this plausible? Why might a person be reluctant to serve as a religious leader? What are the rewards of religious leadership? What are the drawbacks? What do you make of the words attributed to Moshe's wife, Tzipora? How would you react to the news that your child or grandchild wanted to pursue a career as a rabbi or cantor?

II. And Aaron and his sons did all the things that the Lord had commanded through Moshe. (Leviticus 8:36)

1. This is to declare their praise, that they did not deviate to the right or left. (Rashi--Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105, France)
2. Can we for a moment imagine that Aaron and his sons would diverge from God's words? What, then, is the meaning of Rashi's statement, that they did not deviate to the right or left? We can answer this homiletically. Many people, when offered some type of honor related to fulfilling the commandments, show signs of being ill at ease, out of ostensible modesty, and they shrug their shoulders to the right and left. Aaron and his sons, on the other hand, did exactly as God had commanded, without any hesitation. (Chatam Sofer--Rabbi Moshe Schreiber, 1762-1839, Pressburg, Hungary)
3. The Ktav Sofer wrote that there are some people who are inwardly very conceited but outwardly try to act as if they were humble. Therefore, when they receive some honor they shrug their shoulders to the right and to the left to give others the impression that they are so humble that they do not feel they deserve the honor bestowed upon them. But in their hearts they are really very arrogant. This can be one understanding of Rashi's words: "They do not deviate to the right or left." While inwardly they were truly humble they did not try to give others the impression that they had humility (cited in Otzer Chayim). True humility is an inward attitude. The more you make an effort to give other people the impression that you are humble the less sincere humility you actually have. (Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, Growth Through Torah, p. 245)
4. Never allow "humility" to serve as an excuse to avoid or evade making important decisions. The late sixteenth-century Sefer Chareidim (Book of the God Fearers) by Rabbi Elazar Azikri warns scholars and community leaders that they should not avoid making hard decisions out of fear of rendering a mistaken judgment. The Ethics of the Fathers teaches, "In a place where there is no man, be a man" (2:6). In short, we must never let humility prevent or even paralyze us from acting. We should also never let humility either blind us to matters of right and wrong or, worse, become a cover for cowardice, and stop us, for example, from reprimanding or criticizing an evil person or ideology. Such behavior is common among moral relativists who, supposedly guided by a form of humility, say things like "Who is to say our society is better than such-and-such a society?" even when it clearly is (in the sense that it promotes greater freedom, and protects human rights). (Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, A Code of Jewish Ethics, Volume I: You Shall Be Holy, pp. 232-233)

Sparks for Discussion

The Torah praises Moshe as the most humble of men. Why is humility such an admirable quality? How would you define true humility? The Chatam Sofer and his son, the Ktav Sofer, suggest that too many displays of humility are false. Do you agree? Why do you think a person claims that he or she doesn't deserve an honor? Is it true humility? A desire to be coaxed with words of praise? A flight from responsibility? Rabbi Telushkin connects false humility to moral relativism. Do you agree? When is it acceptable, even necessary, to say, "My/our way is best"?