

PARASHAT SHMINI

SHMUEL RABINOWITZ

# Purity of the soul, restraint and humility

Large sections of the Book of Leviticus, which we are in the midst of reading now, deal with laws pertaining to the Temple and to the roles of the kohanim (priests). Other sections of the book detail the laws of purity and impurity that are also largely irrelevant for a time when the Temple is not standing. However, in this week's Torah portion of Shmini, we read a detailed section that is relevant to every Jew throughout time: the laws of kashrut. The Torah specifies the signs upon which we can recognize which animal, fish or fowl we are allowed to eat and which are forbidden.

Kashrut is a significant part of Jewish identity. The basic principle of kashrut is that what a person puts into his body affects not only his physical health but the purity of his soul as well. For thousands of years, humanity has been aware that the food we eat impacts our body's health. As science has evolved, there has been an ever-increasing awareness of the specific influences of various foods on our bodies. However, the effect of food on the purity of our souls is a Jewish innovation. This is not scientific knowledge, but knowledge passed down via tradition from a Divine source. As a result, it has become characteristic of a Jew loyal to Jewish tradition.

In the past, foods were simpler and were composed of familiar ingredients. It was easy to know if a certain

food was kosher or not. As the food industry developed, it became more and more complicated to know if a food item, which could be made of tens or even hundreds of ingredients, was kosher and permissible. For this reason, there are kashrut networks around the world that operate supervision from the production of basic ingredients to the preparation of the products. This made it possible for any Jew to know if any given product is kosher or not.

Other than the benefit in preserving the purity of the soul by observing kashrut, there is an additional, very significant benefit. A Jew who pays attention to the kashrut of food is exercising restraint and self-control on a daily basis.

We are all aware of the abundance and availability of products in our world over these past few decades. But such abundance also creates a challenge to our self-control and ability to delay gratification. As our world advances in industry and technology, we also see an increased challenge to our ability to restrain ourselves and withstand attraction or strong desire. The solution is to repeatedly practice restraint and to delay satisfaction. Every Jew who keeps kosher is practicing this daily, often several times a day. By paying attention to what is or isn't kosher, we become more stable, responsible and deliberate.

Kashrut also sets limits on human control over the

environment. We are used to controlling our surroundings. Is there any product not available for sale? If in the past there were products available only in a certain country, today, a person can order anything from anywhere in the world with a few simple key-strokes and have it delivered within days. We feel we can control what exists around us, and correlated with that, our egos swell, consideration of others gets trampled, the environment gets destroyed, and we attain a sense of ownership over reality. And we hunger for more.

On the other hand, a person who keeps kosher knows: I cannot eat this food item, or drink this drink. He gets constant reminders of the fact that he is not the owner of reality. It is a reminder of humility in the face of creation. A person is welcome to use and enjoy his environment, but he does not control it.

And finally, kashrut requires us to remember the profound difference between ourselves and other living creatures: moral insight, conscience and choice. As opposed to animals, man can restrain his attraction and obey the Divine command that forbids him from eating certain foods. This is the glory of man and his greatness.

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JUDAISM 3.0  
GOL KALEV

# Passovers of growing emancipation

Expanding Jewish emancipation from the first Festival of Freedom to this year's

The continuous emancipation of the Jewish nation can be viewed through examining a series of "first" Passovers.

## First Passover

A busy schedule of events occurred in the lead-up to the first anniversary of the Exodus: the completion of the tabernacle, God filling it through the cloud, the 12-day inauguration festivities, the tragic death of Aharon's two sons, and on the 14th day of the month at dusk, the first Passover!

We know how it feels to celebrate the 3,500-ish Passover. One can only imagine what it felt like for the first time. Not only were they celebrating the Exodus from Egypt "back then" (a year prior), but they were also celebrating the establishment of a new anchor of Judaism: the tabernacle, which later became the Temple. A month after the first Passover, the nation, strengthened by those monumental events, began its short journey home toward the Promised Land.

That journey, however, lasted longer than expected. The enslaving Egyptian mindset was evidently still prevalent in spite of the above events, and was on high display during the 12-spies affair. A physical exodus from Egypt was evidently insufficient. Hence, to get rid of the reproach of Egypt, God resorted to the extreme measure of a generational replacement, through 40 years of wandering in the desert – what Theodor Herzl called "education through migration"

## First Passover in the Promised Land

The new generation arrived in the Promised Land right before Passover of Year 40 and was indeed ready. After crossing the Jordan, they parked next to Jericho, which was under a seemingly irrational self-imposed siege. (Could the fear have been caused by a pandemic described earlier? See box below).

Like the first Passover celebration 40 years prior, which was done after the inauguration of the tabernacle, this one too was done right after a monumental event – a communal *brit mila* (covenant of circumcision). The generation that left Egypt was circumcised, but they died in the desert. The new generation was not. Hence the nation's entire male population was circumcised within days (except Joshua and Caleb, who had been circumcised in Egypt). The astonishing mass-circumcision operation was the ultimate expression of "getting back to life," as explained: "And the Lord said unto Joshua: 'This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you.'"

Having been purified from Egypt, the nation was ready to celebrate the first Passover in the Promised Land, in Gilgal. This was followed the next day by an even higher level of emancipation: the manna welfare program that was provided by God during 40 years in the desert ended, and instead the nation became self-sufficient, consuming the produce of its land.

## First Passover under Haman's edict

Centuries later, in Persia, during the first days of Passover, the nation reached another level of self-sufficiency. Haman had been hanged, but his genocide plan scheduled for 11 months later, remained in



HAVING BEEN purified from Egypt, the nation was ready to celebrate the first Passover in the Promised Land. (Piqsels)

effect. On that Passover, Jewish emancipation was radically expanded: from begging the king to reverse Haman's edict (which could not be done), to the king giving instead a mandate to the Hebrews to defend themselves by themselves.

Some 25 centuries later, Herzl continued this pattern of emancipation – he rebelled against the Jewish establishment's prevailing mantra of philanthropy-based Judaism, and instead planted the seeds for a Jewish transformation that would be based on self-sufficiency. His efforts led to another first Passover 70 years later.

## First Passover in the re-united Promised Land

In June 1967, centuries after being expelled from their land, the Jews returned to Judea and Samaria, the land where Joshua held that first Passover and where much of the biblical Jewish civilization thrived.

In April 1968, a hundred or so Jews rented a hotel in Hebron to celebrate that first Passover in the reunited Promised Land. Supported by local Hebron Arabs as well as Jews from the Left and Right alike, this became the scion of today's settlement movement.

Like the first Passover ever – and the first one in the Promised Land 40 years later – this one too came right after a monumental event: returning to Jerusalem, Hebron and to the biblical heartland. That Passover too symbolizes a new level of self-sufficiency, but this time, in line with Herzl's vision that the nations be blessed by our liberty, it was not just for the benefit of the Jews.

Herzl understood that the European occupation of mindsets is debilitating, and therefore in order to develop we need "some rest from Europe, its wars and social complications."

Europe today remains an occupier of the Palestinian mindset. It has created debilitating dependencies, mostly through an unselected regime that is accountable to its European funders rather than to Palestinian Arabs, and hence a narrative of victimhood and con-

flict-perpetuation is forced on Palestinians from the outside. Paradoxically, the settlement movement that started that Passover, represents an outlet for Palestinian emancipation from the reproach of Europe, providing a path to self-sufficiency through the start-up nation that flourishes in the settlement next door.

One of those 1968 Passover participants, Elyakim Haetzni, an early leader of the settlement movement and advocate for coexistence, described the enslaved reality forced through philanthropy-based nationalism: "The conflict is [therefore] to Palestinians what oil is to the Saudis."

## First Passover after COVID

Some 73 years later, Passover of 2021 in the Jewish state that Herzl envisioned, also came right after a monumental event: a rapid vaccination operation, which, just like in that Passover by Jericho, allowed Israelis to get back to life. Our upward journey toward expanded emancipation continues.

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## New look at the battle of Jericho and a possible pandemic

Right before arriving in the Promised Land, a mysterious plague killed 24,000 Hebrews who were in close contact with local Moabite women. Just a few months later, we are told that nearby Jericho is under strict lockdown: "None went out, and none came in." A siege is usually imposed by the enemy to cut the lifeline of supplies, not by the defenders. Was there another fear that guided the action by Jericho?

We also know that the two Hebrew spies that were sent to Jericho to "see it" did not go inside, but opted to question a collaborator at the city walls. We also know those spies quarantined for three days in the mountains before returning to the Hebrew camp, as they were dodging the Jericho pursuers. Moreover, the unconventional method used by the Hebrews to conquer Jericho – destroying the walls in entirety as opposed to going in through the gates – allowed for open-space combat and radically reduced the need for close-proximity contact with the local fighters. We know the city was then burned, and that Joshua charged the Hebrews with the oath never to rebuild it. When centuries later, that oath was violated, it had deadly consequences (new research on the time viruses can stay in ruined surfaces? Physically or spiritually...).

This circumstantial evidence may not amount to startling conclusions, but it does underscore the eternal vibrancy of the Bible. Our evolving circumstances allow us to read it through new light and draw from it new relevant perspectives – like a ladder of ascending and descending. – G.K.

DAVID WOLPE

# The honey and the sting

Classic love stories often have tragedies at their core. Romeo and Juliet do not end well; neither do Anthony and Cleopatra. Misfortune often lurks at the heart of love, as we see in our Torah portion this week. Nadav and Avihu, at the moment of drawing close to God, are struck down, consumed by the fire.

Their deaths are part of a larger pattern that we see in the Torah. The tragedy of Nadav and Avihu occurs at a triumphal moment. The ordination of Aaron and his sons has just taken place. This sudden reversal – sadness at a peak moment – is paralleled in the haftarah. As David brings the ark back to Jerusalem, in his great moment of success, Uzzah is struck down trying to prevent the ark from falling (2 Samuel 6:6). Shortly after, David is dancing and his wife Michal sees him and thinks it is conduct unbecoming of a king, leading to a lasting estrangement. At the very moment of victory, there is defeat. The night the Temple of Solomon is dedicated, God resolved to destroy Jerusalem (Lev. R. 12:5). The first time Icarus takes flight, he melts his wings. The day Beowulf slays the dragon, he dies.

In life we find this dynamic constantly. Samuel Beckett received the Nobel Prize and his wife Suzanne's reaction to the telegram has become legend: "What a catastrophe." The marriage did not last. How often have people begun a tale of woe with, "Just as

everything was going well..."

The deeper lesson of the Torah's teaching is not that one must have tragedy at the very moment of triumph, but that everything contains its opposite. There cannot be a life without the struggles and anguish and pain that living inevitably brings. When the Torah says that Abraham was "blessed in all things" (Gen. 24:1), we might justly protest. After all, he left his home, endured famines, had domestic discord and strife with his children – how was he blessed in all things? But "all things" means not that Abraham never knew trouble, but that he was blessed to see every side of life, the light and the dark.

The rabbis tell us that Abraham and Sarah struck their own coins. On one side was the couple depicted when they were young and the other side when they were old. In other words, before they knew the lesson of the struggles of life and after they learned the lesson. Two sides, same coin.

The story of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu finds multiple interpretations in our tradition. Some are to the credit of the brothers and some to their discredit. Whatever their motivations or the precise nature of their sin, the deeper meaning of the event is a pattern that the Torah repeats: the moment that Aaron both becomes the High Priest and is bereaved, the moment Moses can see the promised land but must die, the

moment David puts down Absalom's rebellion but must confront the death of his child. The Torah's uncompromising realism makes us confront the reality that life does not come unmixed, that although in the coming week in the prayer for the new month we ask for "prosperity and honor, a life free from shame and reproach" and many other beneficences, life is never frictionless. We demonstrate that knowledge in a central ceremony at our happiest moment.

When the bride and groom stand under the huppah, right before the marriage ceremony is completed, the groom breaks a glass. As the rabbi says, "In a place of joy there must be some trembling" (Ber 30b). We are reminded of the tragedies of our history and that life will not always be perfect. Nonetheless after the glass is broken everyone says, "Mazel Tov" because we affirm the conviction that love and faith are more enduring and powerful than the inevitable wounds of life.

Therefore, when we raise a glass, we do not toast to good fortune or blessedness or even health, but l'chaim – to life, which contains joy and pain, ecstasy and anguish – everything God has given us.

L'chaim!

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