

International Rabbinic Fellowship

Weekly Dvar Torah

Parshat Tzav

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This week's Dvar Torah is provided by Rabbi Elliot Kaplowitz, Director, OU-JLIC, Brandeis University

Parshat Tzav opens with the two-stepped mitzvah of *terumat ha-deshen* – the removal of ashes from the previous day's sacrifices which have burned all night on the altar – and *hotza'at ha-deshen* – bringing the ashes to a designated place outside the camp. The Gemara in Pesachim 26a rules that the ashes are subject to *me'ilah* – misappropriation of sanctified items – and thus have a status of *kedushah* (holiness). Furthermore, while we may have expected this work to be done by a custodian, we are told that this act was performed by the *kohanim*, the priests – the most privileged people in the Temple – and that it is considered part of the *avodah* (sacred service performed by *kohanim*). The Torah further tells us that the *kohen* must change his clothes in between performing the *terumat ha-deshen* and the *hotza'at ha-deshen*.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch offers a beautiful analysis of the *terumat ha-deshen* and *hotza'at ha-deshen* rituals. He explains that the removal of ashes from the altar marks the conclusion of the previous day's service. Before beginning the new day's service in the Temple, the *kohanim* must first conclude the previous day's work. As Rav Hirsch writes: "It would

give the idea that...today brings no new mission, it has only to carry out, ever afresh, the mission that yesterday too was to accomplish...The Jewish 'Today' has to take its mission from the hand of its 'Yesterday.'" While we understand the value of continuity from one day to the next, there is a danger in placing too much emphasis on the previous day's work, and of living in the past. Not only do we risk living in the past by placing too much emphasis on the previous day's service, but we also run the danger of thinking we have already completed our mission. Rav Hirsch writes that this is why there is a need for the ritual of *hotza'at ha-deshen* (removing the ashes) in lesser quality clothing. In the words of Rav Hirsch: "The thought of what has already been accomplished can be the death of that which is still to be accomplished." He understands the significance of wearing inferior clothing to teach the lesson that, "The past is to be there and not forgotten, but it is to be retired to the background, and is not to invest us with pride before the fresh task to which each new day calls us." In other words, we must live with a delicate balance: On the one hand, to contextualize our current responsibilities as being connect with and a continuation of the previous day's work; on the

other hand we cannot place too strong an emphasis on the past and what we have already accomplished. Our energies and focus must be on the mission of today.

This balancing act beautifully describes our goals and task on the *Seder night*. On the one hand, we come to the Seder with a very strong sense of history. We tell the story of what happened to our ancestors thousands of years ago in Egypt; we all have sentimental memories and nostalgia for the *sedarim* we celebrated as children. Yet, our goal of the seder is not merely to tell the story and focus on the past. As we read in the Haggadah, "In every generation a person must see him/herself as if he/she personally went out of Egypt." We must make the story and message of Pesach relevant to us in our current situation. Our expressed goal of the seder is not merely to retell the story of the Exodus from Egypt as a lesson in history. Rather, we conclude the *magid* section by declaring: "Let us therefore recite before Him a **new song**: Halleluyah!" The song that we recite at the seder, which takes the form of Hallel should be a genuine outpouring of praise and thanksgiving to God for the personal redemption that we experience through the telling of the story of the Exodus.

The hope that our seder leads to a *shira chadasha* (a new song) explains the custom that many have to recite *Shir ha-Shirim* (the Song of Songs)

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immediately after the seder. The Sefat Emet explains that Shir ha-Shirim should be understood as "the song which is comprised of all previous/other songs." We strive to compose a new, unprecedented, song that is made up of our previous songs – our attachment to the history and memories that the Seder evokes.

As we prepare for Pesach, let us strive to realize the message of the *terumat ha-deshen* and *hotza'at ha-deshen* – an authentic continuation of the past, but properly focused on the needs of our time. With this outlook we may merit to realize our goal at the seder of reciting a *Shirah chadashah* that is built on our previous experiences and collective history; but that is singularly unique and unprecedented.

Shabbat shalom!