

## Tzav 5778 Sermon

In Europe, before the war, my father-in-law and uncle had a sister who was left handed. Whenever she would try to write, or do anything with her dominant hand, her teacher would smack it with a ruler. In Europe, going back hundreds of years or more, using the left hand was not merely happenstance for a minority of the population; it was seen as engaging in evil behavior. In Jewish practice as well, the right has always been emphasized as the appropriate side. Almost without exception, any practice involving the hands assumes the right hand, or the right foot. Believe it or not, Jewish law has provisions for how to properly put on shoes: ‘He should put on the right shoe first, but not tie it, and afterward put on the left and tie it, then go back and tie the right’ (Karo, Shulkhan Arukh Orakh Hayim 2:4) But what if you wear shoes that do not require tying? There is an answer for that as well: ‘For our shoes, which do not involve tying, he puts on the right first.’ (Isserles, *ibid*) A commentary on this adds that when one washes, the right hand should be washed first.

In parshat Tzav, we have one of the original appearances of the dominance of the right side, as we heard in the section detailing the ritual of the ordination of the first kohanim, the priests. The Torah says: [Read Lev. 8:22-24, pp. 582-584]. This is one of the more obscure rituals in our tradition, one that invites scrutiny. We are uncomfortable with blood. The sight of it is almost never a happy occasion, or at least never an unambiguously happy one. The presence of blood typically means injury, sickness or death. Much of biblical religion, and religion generally, channels our most primal feelings through rituals involving blood. In the Torah, blood serves as a marker of moments filled with awe. When animals are sacrificed, their blood is used in a

variety of ways. Sometimes it is rubbed on the horns of the altar; sometimes it is poured out on the side of the altar; sometimes it is sprinkled on or toward people or ritual objects.

Here, the procedure was to slaughter a ram, and then to take some of its blood and apply it to the right ear, right thumb and right big toe of Aaron, the High Priest, and his sons, the regular priests. This is part and parcel of the ritual that elevates Aaron and his sons into the priesthood, and which enables them to officiate in that capacity. As strange as this custom seems to us, when seen as part of a larger complex of behaviors and beliefs about the power of blood, it is at least understandable.

A parallel case in the Torah helps to explain why the priests were ordained in this way. It is the case of those afflicted with skin ailments, who also underwent a ritual in which sacrificial blood was daubed on their right ear, thumb and big toe. The metzarah, the afflicted person, was separated from the rest of the community until their skin affliction healed. After it did, the priest would examine the person and then perform a ritual which was meant to purify the person so that they could return to the rest of the community. The blood ritual was part of that ceremony, and its purpose there seems to be to mark the person off from his prior status, and to confirm that he was now fit to be among other people.

In both the case of the metzarah and that of the priests' ordination, the use of blood appears to be a means by which their status is marked off. For one, it means that they can return to the community; for the other, that they are now a distinct class within the community, one that will perform the special function of communicating with God on behalf of the people. Blood marks off a moment of changed status in their lives because it represents the seriousness of the state they are leaving or entering. For a metzarah, a skin ailment could have been

life-threatening; when the person recovers and heals, the blood is a sign of how close to death he came and how he is re-emerging from a state of illness to a state of health. For the priests, dealing with the sacrifices was a daily matter of life and death, both for the animals which lost their lives and for the transgressions that the kohanim were appealing to God to forgive.

Blood marked off important transitions in life, and the right side is dominant. But why the ear, thumb and toe? What is the significance of the particular body parts that are used in this ritual? Some commentators have pointed out that they are symbolic of the whole body, the whole person. The metzarah and the priest were being anointed 'from head to toe,' as we might say. Rabbi Joseph Hertz suggested that in the case of the priests, the ears symbolize their attention to God's commands, the thumb represent the hands which should be ever ready to do God's will, and the toe represents the feet which will now always walk in God's ways. Each of those interpretations actually suggests the same idea: The priest is someone who will serve God with every means at his disposal; he will be totally dedicated to God.

This is Shabbat haGadol, the 'Great Shabbat' just prior to Pesakh, and there is no better illustration of the connection between the use of blood and a transition from one status to another, than Pesakh. Blood is central to the story and the experience of what occurred to our people as they moved from slavery to freedom. Pharaoh tried to spill the blood of the Hebrew boys by ordering that they be cast into the Nile; Moses kills an Egyptian and hides the body; the first plague turns the Nile to blood; the Hebrews daub blood on their doorposts to ward off the final plague, the death of the firstborn; the Egyptian army is drowned in the Sea of Reeds. Every significant point in the story involves violence, death or blood. Blood is the means by which our slave ancestors the Israelites are liberated.

In our time, none of the Torah's blood rituals remain, save one. As a result, we have largely lost the capacity to experience these types of awe-inspiring moments. While I would never argue for the return of the blood rituals, our continued use of just one of them provides us a brief moment of insight into what our ancestors experienced many times. That moment, of course, is when we hand our sons over to a mohel for brit milah. While we rejoice afterward over the child's entrance to the brit, we shudder just prior to and during the actual circumcision. That feeling of apprehension and awe is what the priests would have been feeling whenever they performed a sacrifice. It is the feeling that the kohen gadol, the metzora, and the Israelites protecting themselves from the tenth plague with blood on their doorposts would have felt. So while I would never argue for the return of the sacrificial system, we have yet to come up with an equally awe-inspiring set of rituals.

The closest that our tradition can come to providing us access the awe of these moments is through studying them in our sacred literature. Even though we no longer sacrifice or use blood in rituals, we study and recall those days when we did. In the haggadah we read how our ancestors used it on their doorposts to ward off death, and we feel their fear and dread of what was to come. When we pray, we recall the sacrifices and try to feel how those kinds of offerings opened a channel of communication between heaven and earth. And every week when we read the Torah, we are reminded of how dangerous the world has always been, and continues to be, of the human blood that has been and continues to be spilled. When we study and when we pray, Judaism provides us with the stories and the symbols that enable us to cope with a world that sometimes seems awash in blood. It reminds us that it is not spilled lightly, and that when it is,

something terrible, or awe-inspiring, is occurring. Ultimately, the Torah teaches us the value and the precariousness of life through its ritual use of blood.

Jewish tradition says that God wishes us to be like an entire nation of priests. In a time when blood rituals are no longer operative, that must mean something other than what it once did. Perhaps we can reimagine the idea of a priestly nation as a community of people so moved by their tradition it is as if they were held in awe by a ritual as powerful as those involving blood. When we are able to mark off sacred time, to eat in distinctive ways, to observe seder in a mood of both joy and awe, we too can be as the kohanim of old. As we approach seder this year, I wish each of you a zissen Pesakh, a sweet Passover, a Pesakh same'akh, a happy Passover, and Pesakh kadosh, a sacred Passover.

Shabbat shalom