

First of all, how awesome was the Purim shpiel Wednesday evening?! I was so impressed. The talent, the effort, the huge community undertaking. That shpiel really gave me a sense of what I love about this community.

And yet, I always struggle with the holiday of Purim. Not just because of the gratuitous violence committed by our own people in Chapter 9 of the Megilla. Not just because I am particularly upset that Queen Esther is only positioned to save the Jews due to the banishment of the fiercely feminist Vashti. But because in the end, there is actually so little to celebrate. Yes, the Jews have been saved, to the tune of the slaughter of 75,000 others. But an impulsive, capricious king who thinks nothing of throwing 180-day parties and commanding his wife to dance naked is still the ruler of the known world. The fate of Esther, Mordechai and all the Jews rest on his graces, and his graces throughout the story proved fallible - to say the least.

This problem is discussed in the Talmud, in Masechet Megilla 14a. The rabbis ask why on Purim we do not say Hallel, the Psalms of praise, that are said all of the Chaggim and Hanukkah. Raba says: There is a good reason [for saying Hallel] in the case [of the Exodus from Egypt] because it says [in the Hallel], Praise ye, O servants of God, [Halleluyah avdai Adonai] - who are no longer servants of Pharaoh — But can we say in this case, Praise ye, servants of the Lord and not servants of Ahashverosh? We are still servants of Ahashverosh!” In essence, Rabbah has pointed out, the status of the Jews at the end of the Purim story is no different than the status at the beginning.

And perhaps this is why we celebrate Purim with costumes and silliness and drunken revelry. Purim is a holiday about chance. That's what the name - *purim* - lots, or dice, signifies. God's presence is hidden and human actions seem arbitrary. Without a true liberation, with our existence still circumscribed by the whims of a capricious ruler, famous for his drunkenness and foolishness, how appropriate that our celebration should mimic our circumstances.

And that is essentially how the Jewish year closes. Because Adar is considered the last month of the Jewish year, which resets with springtime, with Nisan, the month in which Pesach falls. And so with the birth of the new spring comes a new chance for a more complete liberation, as we approach the holiday of Pesach, where we move from being under the yoke of Pharaoh to the service of the divine. We move from the disorder - the ee-seder - of Purim to the order, the seder.

And how does Divine service differ from servitude to Ahashverosh?

It is wonderfully appropriate that we are guided through this season by the parshiyot of the Book of Leviticus. Last week we opened the Book with Parashat Vayikra, this week is Parashat Tzav, and as we make our way in the struggle towards liberation and Pesach, the structures and strictures of the sacrificial offerings and the laws of purity will frame that journey.

In contrast to Purim's almost nihilism, the parshiyot of Leviticus assume a world of interconnection, a world where human action *matters*, where even symbolic action is significant. How, where, and when we eat, when we procreate, what we wear, how we construct our houses. These things matter. As our own Rabbi Maurice Harris wrote in a Dvar Torah for the organization T'ruah last week, the parshiyot of Leviticus remind us that "in the many ways that we humans consume, whether it's food or clothing or the labor of others, we have an obligation to recognize the ever-present *kedusha* (holiness) in the seemingly ordinary aspects of life and honor it. . . Leviticus reminds us that denying the *kedusha* that is present in all moments, creatures, and things leads to a desacralized culture of indifference.

In case this feels too hypothetical, try this: I try to only buy fair trade chocolate. I acknowledge that in our cultural context, that's a symbolic action. My personal chocolate purchasing - though I do eat impressive amounts - is nonetheless not going to make a difference in the large-scale trend of multi-national corporate business models.

What if, however, an entire people were committed to buying fair-trade? Not just chocolate, but every product? Not only would that have a real impact on the lives of workers and on corporate practices, but it would also impact the consciousness of everyone in the community. If we all shared an assumption that the pay and treatment that workers received really mattered to our conception of whether food was fit to eat, that would be a sacred kind of consciousness.

But I don't actually need to depart from the book of Leviticus for a relevant example: Leviticus 7, in this week's parasha, Tzav, offers a model for eating meat as a communal event. The meat is slaughtered at the mishkan, the central place, and eaten with the priests, as an act of thanksgiving. There can be no leftovers, so it's important to invite many people into the feast. How different would our community be nowadays if meat had this very specific place in our culture - not something we considered casually in our menu planning, but something that we ate only when there was occasion to do so, when there was something to celebrate?

This is precisely what Leviticus offers, as we embark on the transition that our tradition encourages us to always make at this time of year; from disorder to order, from serving impulsive human rulers to serving the divine. We do this not by negating our humanity, but by seeking to infuse every aspect of our humanity with kedusha. We do this through ritual and through restraining those same impulses that are allowed to run wild on Purim.

It might go without saying, but I'll say anyway, that this feels especially important in the violently chaotic times in which we now find ourselves. With terrorists attacking centers of civilization, presidential candidates seeming to be competing for the title of "most incendiary", and the American Jewish community seemingly divided on what constitutes our safety and our integrity, these parshiyot remind us that ritual is fundamentally about standards, the standards of civility, morality and mindfulness that are increasingly blurred by the rhetorical fads of the moment.

As Tamara Kohn Ezkenazi writes about Leviticus in the Women's Torah Commentary, "In this book's worldview, anyone who breaks God's ordained harmony can - and must- repair it. . . .In Leviticus, a person's body, the sanctuary and the community each constitute a microcosm of the universe in its sacred aspect. Each reflects and has an impact on the larger, integrated whole."

So as we move from Purim towards Pesach, I encourage us all to internalize this truth - that our actions matter. That we are an integrated part of a larger whole, and our choices about how we speak and eat and walk in the world are of deep consequence. They ultimately either hamper or further the journey toward liberation.

Shabbat shalom.