

This is Shabbat HaGadol, the Shabbat before Pesach, in which we hear a special haftarah from the prophet Malachi announcing the coming of the Prophet Elijah, and the imminent shaking up of all we know.

But this is also a regular Shabbat in our year cycle, with a regular Torah reading – Tzav, in the book of Leviticus. Last week’s portion began the descriptions of the different kinds of sacrifices that people would bring, for all sorts of reasons, and all sort of offerings – animals, grain, fruit.

This week’s parashah is largely focused on the ordination of the *Cohanim* – the hereditary Priesthood, which is still honored in many streams of Judaism, but which began with Moshe’s brother, Aharon and his sons. All *Cohanim* today still trace their paternal lineage back to Aharon. And in this portion, Moshe brings Aharon and his sons forward in a ceremony that must have taken hours, first washing them with water, dressing them in the sacred vestments that the people made when they also built the *mishkan*, the Tabernacle. He then anoints them with oil – and by “anoint” I mean he literally pours it over their heads. Finally, there are three ritual sacrifices: a bull, whose blood essentially dedicates the *mizbeach*, the altar; a ram that is offered up entirely as a burnt offering, and then in a visceral climax, a second ram.

Lev 8:22-24 describes what was done with the second ram:

“[Moshe] brought forward the second ram, the ram of ordination. *V’y’s’m’chu* - Aaron and his sons *laid their hands* upon the ram’s head, and it was slaughtered. Moses took some of its blood and put it on the ridge of Aaron’s right ear, and on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot. Moses then brought forward the sons of Aaron, and put some of the blood on the ridges of their right ears, and on the thumbs of their right hands, and on the big toes of their right feet; and the rest of the blood Moses dashed against every side of the altar.

I was struck by two things: first by the act of *s'micha* - laying hands that Aaron and his sons do on the ram. That same word is actually used to describe ordination itself – when a priest in ancient times was ordained – and when a rabbi in contemporary times is ordained – it is said that that person “receives *s'micha*,” referring to the ancient practice of laying hands to transfer authority. One who has received *smicha* has literally had their elder lay hands upon them as part of the initiation and transmission of their authority. That Aharon and his sons perform *s'micha* on the ram that is about to be slaughtered indicates that a some great significance is being conferred on this ram, even though it is about to die.

The second point that struck me in these few verses was the delicacy with which Moshe daubs the ram's blood on the specific body parts of Aharon and his sons. In contrast to the splashing of oil over their heads and the dashing of blood against the altar, Moshe seems to paint the selected body parts of the priests very carefully.

Perhaps because this is Shabbat haGadol, and we are preparing for Pesach, it reminded me of the way that blood is carefully painted on the doorposts and lintels of the Israelite houses on the night of the last plague, back in Exodus Chapter 12. In verses 21-23, after receiving these instructions from Hashem, “Moshe then summoned all of the elders of Israel and said to them, “Go, pick out lambs for your families, and slaughter the Passover offering. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts. None of you shall go outside the door of the house until morning. For when Hashem goes through to smite the Egyptians, seeing the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, Hashem will pass over the door and not let the destroyer enter and smite your home.”

It is challenging to try to understand, with our contemporary and often sanitized perspectives, what the blood of these animals signified – how it comes by its protective power, in the case of the Israelites leaving Egypt, and its transformative power, in the case of the *Cohanim* in this week's *parasha*.

But I am struck by how messy this all is. It isn't some stately, ethereal, decorous process. We are talking about slaughter and guts, about the brand-new best clothes spattered in blood. Perhaps the point is less to protect ourselves from the mess than to inoculate ourselves against fear *of the mess*, by reminding ourselves that there is no way of getting away from the violence of living, especially if we hope for anything to change.

It reminds me of a reflection offered a few years ago by a friend and colleague of mine, Rabbi Aryeh Bernstein. He pushes back on the tendency contemporary Jews (including myself) sometimes have to talk about the 10 plagues and then compare them to terrible problems we are fighting today, such as racism or misogyny. When we do this, he writes, "you are identifying with Phara'oh and framing God as the enemy. In the Pesach/Passover story, we are *on the side of the plagues*, which are necessary to break the stubborn will of evil tyrants and their defenders. The plagues are a reminder that liberation does not come bloodlessly. We are not smug or flip about the plagues -- they are horrific and ugly -- and we reduce our celebration a bit in recognition of that. But if we're looking to understand today's struggles in light of the Pesach story, we should not see racism, capitalism, misogyny, etc. as contemporary manifestations of the plagues, but as contemporary manifestations of Phara'oh. And we pray for, if necessary, plagues to come and break the regimes [tyrants]."¹

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/668930536/posts/10164914602900537/>

Liberation is just not a simple process. It requires breaking things and often, it involves people getting hurt. I have often thought that progressive movements struggle nowadays to achieve their goals because of the constant temptation to make sure that everything about the process is impeccable and that no one gets hurt. But there will always be people who fear change, who resist change – including, often, the same people who recognize the need for change and who believe that they truly desire it. But change rarely comes exactly the way we want it to, and to demand that the process of liberation unfold without any pain to anyone is to reject the process of liberation entirely. Perhaps the animal sacrifices prepare us for that reality, and allow us to face it with some mindfulness and humility.

Rabbi Rachel Barenblat writes, “When Moses slaughtered the ram and painted its life upon Aaron and his sons, it conferred holiness upon them. But they leaned on it first, and in so doing they conferred something upon it: the emotional significance necessary for its death to change them.”²

We are a long time away from that sacrificial system, and for the most part, I believe that is to the good. But as we approach Pesach and think about what liberation means to us this year, I encourage us to consider the concept of sacrifice seriously – what are we willing give up? What are we willing to mess up – in order to move towards the liberation we crave?

² From Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, "Priestly Ordination: Doing, Hearing, Walking" at <https://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2010/03/radical-torah-repost-priestly-ordination-doing-hearing-walking.html>