



Parashat Tzav

Kodesh Kodashim: Honesty and Holiness

by Marisa James on Friday April 03, 2009

9 Nisan 5769

Leviticus 6:1 - 8:36

I heard someone in Jerusalem last week saying that this is the season when no one at his *minyán* wants to speak about the weekly *parasha* at services. “Leviticus” he said, “has so much in it, but no one wants to talk about it.” I nearly pulled him out of the supermarket line to talk; as far as I’m concerned, there’s plenty to talk about in the book of Leviticus, and plenty that I see as directly applicable to our lives.

This week we learn: when we bring to the Temple a “sin offering” (*chat’at*) or a “guilt offering” (*asham*), the priests are to eat it “in a holy place” (Leviticus 6:9, 6:19, 7:6), just as with other sacrifices. But only these two types of sacrifices are described as being “*kodesh kodashim*.” We bring the holiest of holy sacrifices for *chat’at* and *asham*, but the words “*kodesh kodashim*” can more literally be translated as the set-apart of the set-apart. Rather than translating this as the holiest of the holy, we can translate this as the separate of the separate, the most “other” imaginable.

Why should we care? We no longer bring these offerings, there is no longer a Temple, and the idea of bringing a sacrifice for perceived “sin” or “guilt” can feel like a tribal throwback. In the absence of tangible ways to “offer” our perceived sins and guilt to God, many of us today talk to therapists, bitch to friends, write blog posts and status updates. In doing so, we are attempting to continue our ancestors’ “offerings,” by bringing our uncertainties to the people we trust, or completely into the public sphere.

Sharing our insecurities can be a difficult process. When I was in the beginning stages of coming out of the closet, I chose the individuals I told carefully. First my closest friends, then a few others. Only after months of agonized half-outness did I finally begin to think about telling my family. Only after years of feeling guilty and possibly sinful was I finally able to tell new acquaintances that no, thanks, I really have no desire to meet your cousin Josh, but I’d be happy if you fixed me up with your cousin Jen.

And now I wonder about what it would have meant to bring a “sin offering;” to have formally relinquished to God my feeling that maybe I was doing something wrong. I wonder how it



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would have felt to bring a “guilt offering;” to put my guilty feelings on an altar and watch them go up in flames and be devoured. Would that have made the transition easier? Would it have given me the tools to come out sooner, knowing that whatever I offered of myself would be holy? In chapter 6 of Leviticus, we are told that bringing our most vulnerable selves to God is considered the holiest of the holy offerings. There is nothing more holy than our deepest fears being revealed and relieved. There is nothing more sacred than admitting that we feel guilty or sinful, and by speaking them, allowing those feelings to be taken away.

So is the internet our new Temple? Social networking sites have become our outlet for these types of honesty, but they don’t have the power to give us satisfying results. If I write on my blog “I’m feeling guilty and terrible about the bad thoughts I’m having,” I might get a few typed responses along the lines of “Don’t worry about it! Do what makes you happy!” or “So stop feeling guilty.” But if I have the courage and strength to approach another human being, look her in the eyes, and say the same thing, I have offered my self to that person. And if we remember that every human is created in the image of God, then I have offered myself to the divine.

We are an innovative, creative people, we Jews, and those of us who are also blessed with being GLB or T know what it is like to be “*kodesh kodashim*,” the set-apart of the set-apart. But we should also know that the tools our ancestors used for freeing themselves from their burdens are also available to us. Each of us is holy; the truth within each of us is holy. And when we share our truth with the world, each of us becomes “*kodesh kodashim*.”



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