



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Tzav 5771

By Rachel Travis

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I have very distinct memories of standing in *shul* under my father's *tallit* as a child, trying to peek through the weave of his woolen prayer shawl as the *kohanim* blessed the congregation. Later, these avuncular men schmoozed and ate herring with the rest of us, but in my mind, they retained an aura of holiness even in the social hall.

For millennia, the *kohanim* served as the spiritual pillars of the Jewish community, and large sections of Vayikra are dedicated to describing the *kohanim*'s service in the Tabernacle. *Parshat Tzav*, in particular, chronicles in precise detail the laws of various sacrifices, delineating step by step how the *kohanim* should conduct the holy service. The Ramban, a preeminent medieval rabbi and philosopher, teaches that the sacrifices and Temple service had a profound effect on the heavenly strata.¹ They were crucial to the religious wellbeing of the Jewish people.

And yet, I cannot help but notice that the role of the priests as described in the *parshah* seems decidedly unglamorous. If anything, the job of the *kohanim* reads as repetitive, physical labor. Tasked with ensuring that the fire on the altar never goes out, the *kohen* kindles wood upon the altar every morning before offering the daily burnt sacrifice. Each day, dressed in his priestly garments, he shovels the smoldering ashes from the altar (the remains of the previous day's offering, which has burned through the night), changes his clothing and takes the ashes outside of the camp.² The *kohen* repeats the same assignments every day: lighting fires, slaughtering animals, preparing meal offerings, shoveling ashes, etc., etc. Each time I read this, I wonder how to reconcile the seeming discordance of these repetitive, mundane jobs with the incredible spiritual weight they carry.

This week, I discovered an insight into the *kohanim*'s service in an essay by the food journalist Michael Pollan. In "Why Bother," Pollan frankly addresses issues of climate change. He wonders, when the magnitude of environmental problems seems to vastly outweigh the individual's ability to effect change, should we even bother to try? If we're really in the midst of a climate crisis, does it actually make a difference if you or I do something as banal as composting our detritus or switching out our light bulbs for more energy-efficient ones? Pollan answers quite eloquently that "the Big Problem is nothing more or less than the sum total of countless little everyday choices, most of them made by us."³ By the same reasoning, the solution is the sum total of an opposite, more constructive, set of daily choices and actions. True change doesn't result from dramatic, high-profile actions—one-time international summits or celebrity endorsements—but from the accumulation of many individuals' quotidian acts.

The same lesson holds true for the *kohanim*'s service. In the abstract, their mission—to give the people an avenue through which to offer thanks to God, to express penitence for wrongdoing, and to communicate piety—seems almost unattainable. It is only through the accumulation of specific, focused, repetitive tasks that the *kohanim* can

¹ As cited in Rabbi Yehudah Nachshoni. *Studies in the Weekly Parashah*. New York: Artscroll, 1989.

² Vayikra 6: 1-6.

³ Pollan, Michael. "Why Bother?" *The New York Times Magazine*, 20 April 2008.

actually make a difference in the peoples' spiritual lives. And though the implementation may appear downright gritty, the kohanim infuse even the most mundane elements of the service with intentionality and holiness.

Sometimes, global issues—gender inequality, water shortages, climate change and natural disasters, to name but a few—seem so overwhelming that we feel discouraged from taking any action at all. We wonder if we, as individuals, really have the ability to help solve such complicated problems. But the kohanim remind us that it is precisely through the accumulation of small, repetitive—and often the least glamorous—actions that we can have a true impact. Our charge, like that of the kohen, is to infuse these acts with meaning by making them a part of our daily routine and by viewing them as a piece of a larger goal. In that light, shoveling ash is a means of sustaining God's spiritual abode, and maintaining a compost pile in our own backyards isn't just dirty work; it's a conscious effort to help build a better world.

Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, observes in his commentary on Vayikra that although the kohanim change their garments in between tasks, the same kohanim who carry shovelfuls of ash also serve in God's presence. The Rebbe concludes that we, like the kohanim, should take pleasure in even the simple, physical chores, because they are part of the same pursuit of the greater good as more lofty work.⁴

This is not always an easy thing to accomplish; the most crucial tasks can also be the most boring or least prestigious. But if we make these acts part of what we do each day, they will become an integral part of our identities. We can recycle our waste, turn off the lights when we leave a room, read the news, call our elected officials, or give a few bucks to an important cause. Whatever it is we decide to do in service of building a better world, let's do it again tomorrow, and next week, and next month—until it is truly part of who we are. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, that's how we will "be the change [we] want to see in the world."



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⁴ *Sefer Vayikra with Commentary from Classic Rabbinic Texts and the Lubavitcher Rebbe*. Ed. Chaim Miller. New York: Kol Menachem, 2004. p. 36.

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