

## **Parshat Tzav- Shabbat HaGadol 5775**

The focus in this morning's parsha is not what you would expect it to be. In examining the laws of the sacrifices, the Torah gets stuck and spends time on the very important detail of Terumat Hadeshen and Hotza'at Hadeshen – sweeping up the ashes from the altar (from the previous day's sacrifices) and then later moving them outside the camp.

And maybe this image of meticulously sweeping ashes somehow resonates with our own experiences prior to Pesach given the extensive cleaning efforts required to get our homes ready for the Chag.

Indeed, the extensive physical preparations for Pesach, like the Terumat Hadeshen and Hotza'at Hadeshen in the Tabernacle and the Temple, should be recognized as spiritually significant, and warrant the full participation of the various members of the household.

Because here we are, deep cleaning our homes, our cars, our offices, and the task can very quickly feel over-bearing, not-meaningful, mundane – and so the Torah comes along to teach us that even the most mundane actions, if accompanied by the right Kavanah or intention, are elevated.

In fact, sometimes having the right Kavanah can transform the very act itself. Here is an example that I remembered reading several years ago in the New York Times New Year's magazine dealing with the best new ideas or inventions in 2007. The title of the piece is "Perceptions Matter", or as we say in our community, Kavanah counts.

By CHRISTOPHER SHEA, December 9, 2007

Simply by telling 44 hotel maids that what they did each day involved some serious exercise, the Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer and Alia J. Crum, a student, were apparently able to lower the women's blood pressure, shave pounds off their bodies and improve their body-fat and "waist to hip" ratios. Self-awareness, (Kavanah) it seems, was the women's elliptical trainer.

At the start of the study, Langer and Crum quizzed 84 maids at seven carefully selected hotels about how much exercise they got. A third of the women said they got no exercise at all, while two-thirds said they did not work out regularly.

Langer and Crum took several measures of the women's basic fitness levels, which confirmed poor health of basically sedentary people. Then just over half the women were told an unfamiliar truth: cleaning 15 rooms daily — pushing (Oreck) vacuum cleaners, scrubbing tubs, pulling sheets — constitutes more than enough activity to meet the surgeon general's recommendation of a half-hour of physical activity daily. The researchers even provided specifics: 15 minutes of scrubbing burns 60 calories, 15 minutes of vacuuming burns 50. The basic message and the details were then posted in the maids' lounges in the hotels where the 44 women worked, to serve as reminders, while a control group was left in the dark.

A month later, Langer and Crum observed remarkable results. The average maid had lost over 2 pounds, while her sblood pressure had dropped by 10 points; by all measures the 44 women

“were significantly healthier.” Yet there were no reported changes in behavior, only in mind-set, with the vast majority of the women now considering themselves regular exercisers. Langer sees the study as a lesson in the importance of mindfulness and engagement, and I see this as a lesson in the importance of Kavanah.

If we realize what we are doing is holy, and meaningful, and spiritual significant, then what we are doing becomes more holy, meaningful, and spiritually significant.

And so when my doctor asks me if I work out, I try to explain to him that davening three times a day, in addition to being an intellectual and spiritual exercise, is also physical. We shukel back and forth, we sit down and stand up, sit down and stand up, we lift the Torah, and wrap the Torah four times a week, it all adds to the mix.

Rabbi Dov Linzer, however, takes the lesson of Terumat Hadeshen, sweeping the ashes, in a slightly different direction. He explains that coming to the Temple in a certain sense was like going to Disney World – the idea that you were mesmerized by what you saw.

Everything looked beautiful and perfect – so when the Torah teaches us about Terumat Hadeshen, and you would occasionally see a Kohein wearing his janitorial outfit instead of his priestly garments, you would learn about the true nature of the job.

We should always remember that there is so much that goes into the important things we have in life, like our homes, our synagogues, our schools, and sometimes it’s important to peel back the curtain.

Writes Rabbi Linzer: The thousands of details and the hundreds of man-hours required to get everything perfectly in place, to make it all look easy and simple, are somehow so easily forgotten.

This blindness extends to our interactions with our spouses - how often do we get upset when something is not exactly as it should be? Do we realize how much work it takes to keep a house in order, to “remove the ashes”: taking out the garbage, vacuuming, doing the wash, putting everything in its place, keeping the house stocked with groceries, having meals ready at the right time, having the table set, having the dishes done, having the bills paid, interacting with the children’s teachers, handling the extra-curricular activities? Do we see all of this? Or do we just get upset when something was forgotten or not done to our liking?

This also occurs in our appraisals of our modern day “Kohanim”. When it comes to those who work for the community or serve others at the Jewish community pay-rate, or educate our children – in Torah or in secular studies – do we stop to appreciate all of the hours that they put in over countless nights: grading tests, preparing lessons, writing thoughtful feedback on exams and essays, writing assessments, writing letters of recommendation? Or do we take all of that for granted, or worse, do we not even see it at all?

That’s why our parasha opens, “Command the children of Israel” (6:1). For now and for all future generations. Those who are doing the tireless work behind the scenes need

encouragement. The work is hard. It can feel like taking out of garbage, not like the holy work that it is.

There is a reason why some of our most talented people don't devote themselves to the Jewish community and why we sometimes lose our best rabbis and our best teachers and our best professionals.

Writes Rabbi Linzer: If all of their effort goes unacknowledged, if we do not give them the encouragement that they deserve and need, then we should not be surprised if the fire on the altar no longer burns as strongly or as brightly. This is the challenge of Parashat Tzav.

In the Preface to Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler's "Strive for Truth", the translator, Rav Aryeh Carmell writes how the author described arriving in Kelm, in the year 1906, as a young boy of 14, – and how he was considered too young to be given the much coveted task of sweeping the Yeshiva floor.

And in his "Toldhot Chag Simchat Torah", Avraham Yaari describes the auctioning of honors that took place on the night of Simchat Torah, which included opening the Ark, having Aliyot, lifting the Torah, and amazingly, above all the rest of the honors, the privilege of cleaning the Shul throughout the year. Imagine such a culture when people realized that cleaning the Shul was a privilege and an honor.

We remember this Shabbos Hagadol, the week before Pesach, that the first priority for those serving in the Temple was that mundane and necessary task of removing ashes - so that everything would be perfect in the morning. The Kohanim's work was to ensure that everything would flow so easily and function so perfectly that it can be taken for granted. Our work is to make sure that we never take it for granted.