

But On This Night, We Wear Sweatpants

On the first morning of 'the new normal,' I have to admit that I was nonplussed. A big part of who I am as a rabbi is my personal charge to constantly be on the move. On a normal day, I cover a good chunk of the northwest suburbs, and I'm in the city itself two or three times a week, so waking up with the mandate to "work from home" felt somewhat intimidating.

But that first morning, I did my best to create some at-home professionalism. I took a shower, trimmed my beard, then put on work slacks and a button down. For some of my Zoom meetings throughout the day, I even threw on a sport coat (I never wear a sport coat).

That was three weeks ago. And now, full disclosure, I am writing this while wearing formula-stained Adidas track pants and a U of M sweatshirt that has somehow shrunk over the last few weeks (I'm sure that it shrunk in the wash and that my "social distancing belly" has nothing to do with it).

Now I know what all the studies that are going around say. I know that we're supposed to keep up our normal routine to the best of our ability. I know that we're supposed to shave and style our hair and put on makeup (for the makeup applicators out there). But because I'm a rabbi, I sometimes need to follow in the footsteps of our Talmudic Sages and throw some dissent into the mix, and this feels like an appropriate time to do just that.

Because while maintaining some routine might help keep us grounded during these crazy times, I think it's okay to honor the frustration, the loneliness, and the fear that we find in this moment. And I think the gradual shedding of our public personas, our social and professional avatars, can be surprisingly beneficial, especially as we prepare for a holiday that begs us to do that very action.

For those of you who have been learning the *parashah* with me via Zoom or Facebook for the last month, you probably can anticipate what I'm about to say, because I've been beating the drum of this *kavanah*, of this intention, for weeks now.

The section of the Torah we are currently reading, (the beginning of the book of Vayikra or Leviticus) deals almost exclusively with the sacrificial system of the *mishkan*, the

portable dwelling place of HaShem, and it is a system that will eventually turn into the Temple Service or Avoda Service that we might know from Yom Kippur.

And though there are a lot of uncomfortable passages about how certain animals are slaughtered and prepared for ritual offering, we also see a fascinating repetition of a different type of offering that corresponds to a central mitzvah we are all preparing for in our Passover preparations.

Last week in Parashat Vayikra and this week in Parashat Tzav, we learn the recipe of the *minchah* offering, an offering that was traditionally given each afternoon, which is why the afternoon prayer service that has taken the place of the physical offering of the Temple Service is now referred to as... yep, *minchah*!

That recipe looks very different than the other offerings we see in this priestly system, because rather than an offering of meat and fat, this submission to God and to the Kohanim is actually a cake. It's made up of flour, frankincense, and olive oil, and it contains an important stipulation...

I know that this has been a lot of build up; thank you for bearing with me!

The crucial disclaimer that HaShem sets out for this offering is that the cake must not contain any chametz! No leavening agents at all, and not just during the days of Pesach, but any time it is offered.

This is a remarkable commandment, because it runs counter to the narrative most of us were taught about *chametz* and matzah and their centrality to Passover. What this mitzvah teaches us is that *chametz* isn't about the Israelites leaving in such a hurry that they didn't have time for their bread to rise. In fact, from the exclusion of *chametz* from the *minchah* offering, we can deduce that the process of leavening (or the prevention of that process) actually represents something much more significant to us and to our connection with G-d.

The great rabbi Isaiah Horowitz of Prague, also known as the *Shnei Luchot Ha'Brit*, or the Shl'ach¹, in his commentary on the Torah, explains that deep and profound connection as being one of humility.

Leavening, he suggests, is by its nature an inflator. It takes a substance away from its natural state and stretches it into new measurements. In its distortion, it creates an illusion

¹ C. 1555 - March 24, 1630, Prague

of sorts, and it is because of that illusion, Horowitz says, that it is considered profane when we approach the Divine.

Chametz is ego. And if that's the case, then matzah represents who we are when that ego is put into check. It is us in a moment of humility, of vulnerability, and yes, of fear, frustration, and loneliness.

The holiday of Passover is a reminder to us that our holiest connections are made when we chip away at the veneer of our self projection. It is an eight day celebration of humility in its purest form, stripped of pretension, of imitation, and of hiddenness.

If the Hebrew calendar is a wardrobe, Pesach is our sweatpants and t-shirts. It is us with a couple days of scruff, without makeup or hair gel. And most importantly, it is us at our most emotionally honest.

Routine is important. Normalcy and repetition can keep us motivated and strong during these unprecedented times. But while we are striving to remain resilient during this great uncertainty, let us also give ourselves the permission to honor what we are feeling right now, because that's exactly what we are commanded to do.

As we approach the strangest Pesach of many of our lives, let's get our offerings in order. Let's speak to our loved ones, to our teachers and friends, to ourselves, and to G-d with hearts free of *chametz*, with sincerity, and with comfort in knowing that it's okay to be who we are right now. That we might be scared or lonely, that we might be exhausted and struggling to make all of this work. But that those feelings aren't just okay, they're the purest sacrifice we can offer. And because of that, they are holy.

Meredith, Elior, and I wish you a Shabbat and a Passover of true and lasting comfort, of honest and necessary rest, and of gratitude, joy, and song. We, like all of our clergy, staff, and lay leadership, are here for you if you need anything at all, even if it's just to let go of some of that emotional *chametz* with a phone call or e-mail.

We love you, we miss you, and we are wishing you all a Shabbat Shalom and a Chag Sameach!

Rabbi Yonatan Dahlen
April 2, 2020
Parashat Tzav 5780