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Saving Others Embarrassment

For many years my wife worked in Jerusalem as a volunteer collecting and distributing clothing to the poor. Experience had taught her that it was too embarrassing for the poor to simply receive a "hand-out." Instead, often the clothes would be "sold" for quite nominal sums, freeing the beneficiaries of shame.

My wife also discovered that the condition of the clothing was critical. The poor people were far more sensitive to the way their clothing looked than an average, middle class family. Often, nice clothes would be rejected by the people because it did not appear brand new. I believe this was also due to their underlying feeling of embarrassment.

The Torah, in discussing the "sin offerings" to be brought to the Temple, shows great sensitivity to the feelings of the poor. The Torah permits each person to bring an offering according to his or her means. For example, a wealthy person could bring a bull, while a poor person could bring a flour offering.

But wouldn't it have been simpler for the Torah to simply suggest that everyone bring flour offerings?

In actuality, there was a great benefit in bringing an animal offering, for those who could afford to do so. First of all, it gave the wealthy an opportunity to give what they felt was a significant gift to the Almighty. More importantly, there was a tremendous psychological device associated with the sacrifices. When a person brought certain animal offerings, he would confess his sin while placing his hands on the animal. Then he would watch the animal being slaughtered. It was this stark emotional experience that would hopefully deter the person from sinning again.

Given this, the problem remained how to alleviate the embarrassment of the less fortunate when bringing their flour offerings. What the Torah does, in fact, is go out of its way to change its phraseology concerning the offerings of the poor. In all other instances, the Torah speaks the one bringing an offering as a "person." But the Torah refers to the one who brings a flour offering as a "soul."

The Talmud says that this change in terminology shows that in God's eyes, it is not the value of the offering that counts, but rather the intention behind it. Because the poor person may live from day-to-day not knowing where his next meal is coming from, it may well be

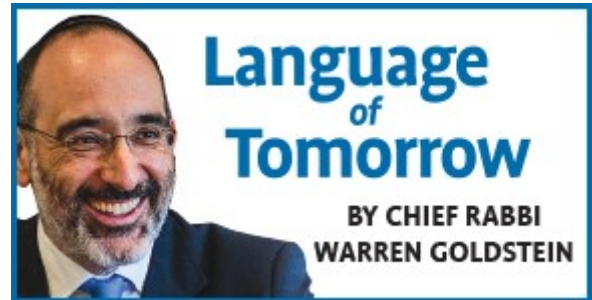
that the flour offering of the poor was greater than the rich person's bull.

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There's a basic question we should be asking? If the Torah is so sensitive to potential embarrassment, then how is it that everyone - whether rich or poor - brought a "sin offering" to the Temple? The activities in the Temple were a public event! So wouldn't everyone automatically know that they were bringing a "sin offering" offering because they'd transgressed?

To minimize this potential embarrassment, the Torah prescribes that all "sin offerings" be slaughtered in the same location as the "burnt offering" - which was brought primarily as a voluntary offering, and thus lacked any negative connotations. Therefore, when a spectator would see a sin offering being brought, it would be unclear whether this was a sin or burnt offering. In this way, the transgressor would be spared embarrassment.

As in so many places, in both bold and subtle ways, the Torah emphasizes to us the importance of never causing another person the pain of embarrassment.



How to Grow through Tough Times

This week is Shabbat HaGadol – The Great Shabbat, so named because it is the Shabbat before Pesach, and a time to prepare spiritually, intellectually and emotionally for this festival.

The Dubner Maggid, one of our great sages from 19th century Eastern Europe, asks a very simple question about Pesach, which necessitates taking a step back and re-examining everything we thought we understood about the festival.

He asks: What are we thanking God for? The Dubner Maggid, famous for his analogies, gives the following parable to illustrate his question: Suppose you break your arm, God forbid, and a doctor sets the bones, puts it in a cast, and helps you make a full recovery. You would be grateful and give thanks to the doctor. But, what if it was the doctor who broke your arm in the first place? Would you still be grateful to him for healing you?

The analogy is clear. Why, asks the Dubner Maggid, should we express gratitude to God on Pesach if He put us into slavery in the first place? We were not taken as slaves by an invading army. We had been in the Land of Israel and God orchestrated a series of events that saw Jacob and his family land up in Egypt. Remember, Joseph was sold, then there was a

famine, and Jacob and his family went down to Egypt and were reunited with him. And even on the way down to Egypt, when Jacob hesitated and expressed certain reservations, God reassured him and told him to press on – that this was part of the plan and that He would be with him. God had even foretold the plan to Abraham in the famous vision of the ‘Covenant Between the Pieces’: “Your children will be strangers in a land that is not theirs. They will be enslaved and oppressed.”

Clearly, this was God’s plan from the beginning. And if He put us into slavery in the first place, why do we thank Him for taking us out of it?

This question strikes at the very heart of Pesach. And the Dubner Maggid offers the following extraordinary answer: On Seder night, we give thanks to God not only for our freedom, but for the slavery! Because it was the slavery that forged us into a nation; it was the slavery, along with the resulting freedom, that made us into the Jewish people, that prepared us for receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai, changing the course of human civilisation.

This is why we eat the maror, the bitter herbs, representing slavery, on Seder night. We don’t suppress the bitterness, we discuss it, in some ways we even celebrate it – because it was part of the process of becoming a great nation. The structure of the Haggadah is revealing. As designated by the Talmud, it begins with the negative, the fact that we were slaves in Egypt, and concludes with the positive, the triumph of our liberation – because it’s all one story, and it has to be told in its entirety. It’s all a part of who we are.

Our slavery was a prerequisite for receiving the Torah, and it prepared us in two ways. Firstly,

our faith in God was strengthened because of the incredible miracles that accompanied our liberation. These miracles – the 10 plagues, the splitting of the sea – were only necessary because we had been in slavery. We see this explicitly in this verse: God says (Exodus 10:1-2): “I have made him [Pharaoh] and his advisors stubborn, so that I will be able to demonstrate these miraculous signs among them. You will then be able to tell your children and grandchildren how I did awesome acts with the Egyptians, and how I performed miraculous signs among them. You will then fully realise that I am God.”

Secondly, suffering itself can have a purging effect. At times, people go through tremendous difficulties, but they emerge from them stronger, elevated, transformed almost beyond recognition. So, too, the Jewish people emerged from the unimaginable hardships of the Egypt experience purified and much closer to God. This idea is captured in a magnificent image later on in the Torah, in the verse which describes how Moses, Aaron, and the 70 elders were on Mount Sinai and saw a vision from God, in the form of “brickwork of sapphire and like the essence of the heavens for purity”. (Exodus 24:10) What was this mysterious “brickwork of sapphire”?

The answer is the key to unlocking the meaning of the Egypt experience. The Jerusalem Talmud explains that this brickwork, which lay directly beneath the Heavenly Throne, represented the bricks and mortar with which the Jewish people had been forced to build during their enslavement. It was a sign of God’s solidarity with the Jewish people, that God remembered their pain and was with them in their suffering.

This concept is encapsulated in a beautiful verse in Psalms: “I am with him in his suffering”.

(Psalms 91:15) When we undergo great difficulties and suffering, through it all, God is with us; He feels our suffering and the brickwork of our pain lies beneath His Heavenly Throne.

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, one of our great sages of the previous century, asks: If the purpose of showing them the sapphire brickwork was to demonstrate that He was with the Jewish people throughout the painful Egyptian slavery, why did God only show them this vision on Mount Sinai, after they had been liberated? If He wanted to convey His solidarity while they were in pain, He should have done so during their enslavement?

Rav Sorotzkin explains that with the sapphire brickwork, God was showing them what they had achieved while they were in Egypt, how they were elevated now that they had come out on the other side. The sapphire, as it says in the verse, was “like the essence of the heavens for its purity”. It represents the refinement and spiritual greatness they achieved during their slavery, and that a person can attain, with pain, the catalyst for that transformation.

While they were enslaved, it was possible that the Jewish people thought their pain and suffering was empty; in their minds, they were simply working with bricks and mortar, and they could not see the higher purpose. When they reached Mount Sinai, however, they realised that, in retrospect, their suffering – along with their faith, their prayers, their growing connection to God and the tremendous miracles they had witnessed – had refined them and made them great; had forged them into a

people who merited to receive the revelation of Torah.

Through their unrelenting pain and suffering, their blood, sweat and tears as they worked with bricks and mortar, they were actually building the heavenly sapphire brickwork – which, in turn, reflected their greatness.

We see that Pesach is not just about liberation, it’s about the process leading up to it. This is an important lesson for life: sometimes we go through very difficult times and we may feel that the suffering is empty. But, even as we suffer, there is a process of growth taking place, we are becoming greater people and getting closer to God. We are building incredible heavenly edifices of merit in the next world, which, sometimes, we are not even aware of.

Pesach is about acknowledging the heavenly brickwork of greatness that the Jewish people built during their slavery in Egypt in preparation to receive the Torah on Mount Sinai.



Taking Out the Trash

How do you begin your day? Some people start with a cup of coffee, and others with a brisk walk. In Temple times, the priests would begin their day in an entirely different and unexpected way. After getting dressed, the priest would ‘raise the ash of the elevation offering that the fire consumed on the altar and place it next to

the altar' (Lev. 6:3). Essentially, the priest began his day by literally shovelling all the ash from the previous day off the altar and placing it outside of the Sanctuary (Rashi ad loc). It would seem this tedious task was below such venerable individuals, and that someone else should be dispatched to carry it out. Why is it necessary for the person who spends his day immersed in lofty and holy endeavours to carry out this mundane chore?

Perhaps the Torah is teaching that even the most menial of tasks, such as 'taking out the trash', can be imbued with implicit holiness. Whilst many religions define that which is holy and spiritual by its distance from the material world, and by maintaining a clear separation between the spiritual and the material, here the Torah is sanctifying the material by synthesising it with the holy. Through taking this most physical of actions – clearing the ash – and imbuing it with spirituality, the Torah is demonstrating that holiness is not only achieved through separation and abstinence, but rather it can be reached through harmony between the material and the spiritual, and through an acknowledgement of the material as essentially spiritual. Indeed, this idea is so important that it is taught through the first task of the priest's day, which remains the first part of the 'sacrifices' section read in Shacharit, the morning prayer service, and thus establishes our perspective on spirituality for the entire day. This approach to achieving holiness through the elevation and sanctification of the mundane generates a significantly wider array of possibilities for achieving spirituality than the approach that requires separation from the ordinary in order to become holy.

The requirement that the priests start each day by clearing the ash from the previous day before

embarking on their holy service in the Temple, presents an additional insight into the 'celebrity status' of the priests. As stated in the Jerusalem Talmud: 'There is no greatness in the palace of the King' (Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate *Shabbat* 10:3). That is to say, relative to the greatness of the Creator, we are all mere mortals, regardless of our social status. Celebrities in almost every arena are often put on pedestals by other humans. For this reason, we do not think of famous movie stars, rabbis and politicians as engaging in basic everyday errands such as washing the dishes or sweeping the floor. This in turn can very easily affect the self-image of those individuals, who begin to believe that they are above being involved in the everyday trivialities of life. This law requiring the priests to sweep up the previous day's ash, equalises all humans in relation to God and serves as a reminder of the humanity of the saintly priests despite their elevated status.

That said, the question still stands as to why the priest should begin his day with it. Why does it come before all the other tasks?

Not only do the masses need to understand the humanity of those with elevated status, but perhaps of greater importance is the need for the spiritual leaders themselves to appreciate their own normality and their place in the material world. It is easy for people with great fame or fortune to let their status and their material riches define who they are to the extent that they think themselves above basic responsibilities. By beginning the day with such a menial task, the priest is forced, on a daily basis, to absorb tremendous humility in view of his own position relative to the King of Kings.

This powerful lesson has long outlived the Temples and, as mentioned, is still positioned right at the start of the daily morning prayers. Perhaps, hidden beneath the surface of this fascinating requirement for the priests to clean up yesterday's mess before starting their daily Temple service, is a metaphor for us all in the way we are meant to start each day. Every day, the first prayer we say upon waking up is *Modeh Ani*, a prayer of thanks to God for restoring our souls to our bodies and offering us the gift of a new day. 'I offer thanks to You, living and eternal King, for You have mercifully restored my soul within me; Your faithfulness is great' (Rabbi Moshe Ben Machir, *Seder Hayom*). If God with His ultimate faith in His beings, can restore our souls to us each morning, granting us the gift of a new day, it is incumbent upon us, before even starting our day, to set aside the 'ashes' of the previous day, to clear our slate, to set aside grievances and to start each day with a renewed and fresh perspective. Approaching each new day through this lens will help us appreciate the greatness of God and His mercy. It will help us maintain a humble perspective and remember the value and hidden sanctity in seemingly inferior tasks.



True Value

One of the commandments in this week's Torah portion is to remove the ashes from the Altar. Certain parts of the sacrifices were burned and

the ashes were removed by the priests every day before sunrise. This was the only part of the Temple service that was done on a "first come, first served" basis. All other elements of the service were apportioned out. But with the ashes, if you wanted a ticket, you had to get there early and wait in line.

One might think that for a minor and even demeaning task of removing the ashes - a janitor's job, almost - it was hard to find takers. There were many more glamorous jobs in the Temple: lighting the menorah, or burning the incense, for example.

However, the opposite was true. So many priests wanted to remove the ashes on a regular basis that they would race up the ramp of the altar in order to be first. Once, there were so many of them racing that one fell off the ramp and broke his leg.

In this generation, we usually judge a person by how high-flying his career is and by how much money he makes. A lawyer who makes lots of money by defending wife-beaters may garner more respect than one who is defending the wives for free. It's a bit of a convoluted value system. Defending criminals might make lots of money, but it doesn't make you a good person.

Of course, the true evaluation of a person should not be based on how much he makes, or whether people are impressed by what he is doing. The true worth of a person is to be found in his contribution to family, friends and society.

The priests understood that taking out the ashes, taking out God's rubbish, so to speak, was a great honor. Not because society said so, nor because it paid well. But because if God wants something done, by definition that means it's

good. And to struggle to be good is what gives us value.

So if you have to compete, then do so in goodness, not honor or riches. If there is to be a race, let it be up the altar of our own Godliness. The priests raced to take out the rubbish - not because the act itself was meaningful, but because it was God who commanded it.

There is much in life that people value, yet is utterly meaningless. There is equally much in life that people do not value - that is very meaningful and good. Do not judge by wealth. Do not judge by what others think. Judge by what you honestly believe to be good. And do it, no matter how belittling and 'dishonorable' it might seem to others. In the end, that's what is truly worthy of praise.

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