

TZAV (LEVITICUS 6:1-8:36)

Don't Do Me Any Favors!

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

SHABBOS HAGADOL

The Saturday before Passover is known as "Shabbos Hagadol --The Great Sabbath." One of the reasons for this special designation is that a great miracle took place on the 10th of Nissan, 5 days before the Exodus from Egypt.

One of the Mitzvahs of the Seder is the Korban Pesach, the Passover Sacrifice. A lamb is supposed to be designated several days before Passover, slaughtered on the Eve of Passover, and then roasted and eaten Passover Night. On the 10th of the month of Nissan, which that year came out on Shabbos, the Egyptians saw that thousands of lambs were being designated for slaughter.

The lamb was an animal that was considered by the Egyptians to be sacred. What the Israelites were planning was an abomination! What greater sacrilege could there be in the eyes of the Egyptians than the mass ritual slaughter of their deity? (To get a little idea of how "politically incorrect" this was, imagine what the reaction would be today if Jews went around town collecting Christmas trees for a bonfire!) What an outrage! There should have been a riot! And yet, the Egyptians quietly accepted the fact that the Children of Israel were planning to barbeque an Egyptian god and eat it for dessert!!!!

And yet, there was silence.

This silent acquiescence of Jewish independence and religious freedom is considered to be a miraculous beginning of our Redemption from Egypt. Hence, "Shabbos Hagadol--the Great Sabbath."

In the Haggadah at the Seder, we read a quote from the Talmud: "In every generation, a person is obligated to view himself as if he himself left Egypt."

We are required to recognize that if not for G-d's Divine Protection, we would still be living under the strong arm of the Pharaoh's regime. We have to feel as if we ourselves are enjoying the sweet taste of freedom for the very first time.

We American Jews have been spoiled. We live in a country where our right not to work on Shabbos is protected by federal law. We are entitled to practice our religion, although our beliefs contradict the religious tenets of the majority of Americans. An orthodox, Sabbath observant Jew can be respected by

millions, and come within a few hundred chads of the Vice-Presidency.

We are naive enough to believe that religious tolerance is normal. We sometimes forget that the norm is actually to live in country where we are persecuted and despised. The norm of Jewish history is to be surrounded by people who consider us to be big-nosed god-killers who use Christian blood to bake Matzahs. Christopher Columbus and his fellow Jews of that time could tell us about Spain under the Inquisition; a land of "religious tolerance" where a Jew who is caught wearing a white shirt on Saturday or with Tefillin hidden in his home ends up on top of a pile of firewood!

The Founding Fathers of this country articulated a strange new concept to the world; that you don't have to persecute Jews just because their beliefs are different. To be sure, anti-Semitism is alive and well in America. But by and large, we have the good fortune to live in an unusual and wonderful country.

We continue to celebrate the Exodus from Egypt. G-d bless America, where every day is Shabbos Hagadol!

TZAV (Leviticus, 6:1-8:36)“Don't Do Me Any Favors!”

Last week we discussed the significance of the offerings in the Temple. That discussion continues in this week's Torah Portion.

Last week's Portion closed with the sacrifice to atone for dishonesty. If a person had falsely denied a financial obligation under oath, he was required to bring a guilt offering. There was, however, a prerequisite. He was required to pay what he owed, PLUS twenty-five per cent. He would then bring his Guilt Offering, after which, “...*he will then be forgiven for any crime that he has committed.*” (Leviticus, 5:25)

Immediately after dealing with the offering to atone for dishonesty, this week's Torah Reading tells us the rules pertaining to the Burnt Offering. This offering, as its name implies, remained on the Altar until it was burnt to ash. Unlike other offerings, it was not eaten by the Priests or by the person who brought it. This was totally a gift for G-d.

Torah commentaries often point out the significance of the order in which topics in the Torah appear. A particular Mitzvah is written immediately after another particular Mitzvah. There is a reason for it. The proximity of these two Commandments is more than mere coincidence.

Midrash Tanchuma says that the Mitzvah of returning a stolen object is a prerequisite to bringing a Burnt Offering. G-d is telling us that a Burnt Offering may not be brought using a stolen animal. If you want to bring an offering in the Temple, you must refrain from stealing. G-d wants sacrifices from people whose hands are clean from theft.

Isn't this obvious? The Torah already told us, in reference to the Guilt Offering, that the stolen items must be returned. Why does the Torah tell it to us again?

Apparently, the Torah is addressing an attitude. It is very easy to convince oneself to let the ends justify the means. "After all," we tell ourselves, "I didn't steal for myself! I'm giving it to G-d!"

(It reminds me of the stereotype of the Mafia don robbing and murdering someone on Saturday night. He then proceeds to go to church on Sunday, placing a substantial gift into the collection plate, and lighting a memorial candle in memory of the departed.)

As we mentioned last week, the Hebrew word for sacrifice, "*Korban*," literally means something that brings someone close. G-d is telling the thief, "If you want to get close to Me by giving me a gift, give Me YOUR gift, not your neighbor's!" As the prophet Samuel told King Saul, "*Does G-d want burnt offerings and sacrifices, or does He want you to listen to His voice?*" (1 Samuel, 15:22)

A friend of mine once asked me why the laws of the Torah are so strict. By relaxing some of the rules, he argued, we would make Judaism easier to observe, and therefore, more people would be religious.

I answered him with the following scenario:

Your wife loves fur. She has always wanted a fur coat. You can't afford a fur coat. Your wife's birthday is coming, and she is dropping hints that she would love to have a fur coat for her birthday. It is impossible, on your salary, to afford a fur coat... You manage to buy her a fur coat.

"Oh my goodness! You did it! You bought me a fur! You DO love me! You are the most wonderful, generous, considerate, and loving husband! I am the luckiest woman in the world!

"By the way, how did you manage to afford to buy it?"

"Simple," you respond. "I uh...well, I...borrowed the money ...um... uh...from my ...uh...girlfriend."

"Does G-d want burnt offerings and sacrifices, or does He want you to listen to His voice?"

The ends DO NOT justify the means. Whether stealing an animal for a sacrifice, borrowing from your girlfriend to buy a present for your wife, or watering down the Torah to fulfill the Torah, the message is the same:

"Do Me a favor, and don't do me any favors!"

Have a great Shabbos and a happy and Kosher Passover.

