A Simple Task, A Menial Task?

A Mitzvah

by

Rabbi Eliyahu Safran

A simple, even mundane task – a chore! We take care of such a task often begrudgingly, sometimes unconsciously, occasionally with annoyance. Such a task so often takes us away from the important things we must do, doesn’t it?

Doing the dishes, making the bed, sweeping the floors, changing diapers, taking out the garbage… oh how wonderful life would be if we were relieved of these onerous tasks! How wonderful life would be if instead of dealing with eating, sleeping, making sure there is enough gas in the car, catching a train or picking up groceries, we could just concentrate on the holy things we are *called* to do!

Oh, to live a life of study and prayer…

Oh, how *un*-Jewish!

*Parshat Tzav* opens with a discussion of two *mitzvot* that, at their base, instruct the *kohanim* to perform a most menial chore, that instruct them to “take out the trash.” The first, the *mitzvah* of *terumat hadeshen*, instructs the *kohan* to separate the ashes from the fire that had been burning on the *mizbayach* during the night. Each and every day, the *kohan* was to begin his day by taking a shovelful of these ashes and moving them to the floor of the *chatzer*, the outer courtyard or ramp, to the *mizbayach*. The second, *hotza’at hadeshen*, called for a more thorough removal of the ashes, requiring the *kohan* to change into his “work clothes” (his older, less glittering *bigdei kehunah*) and clear away the larger pile of ashes that had accumulated on the ramp and carry them outside the camp of *b’nei Yisrael*.

Even allowing for whether this second *mitzvah* was to be performed daily (as Rambam taught) or only when needed (as Rashi taught) we are left with some puzzling questions. An obvious one is why is this *avodah* two *mitzvot* rather than one? Another is why is the removal of the ashes distinguished from the many other chores that were required to maintain the cleanliness of the *Mishkan*? What made removing the ashes so “special”? And, perhaps most importantly, why couldn’t the *kohanim* get someone else, a janitor, to perform this lowly chore?

To answer our questions is to understand something fundamental about the Jewish experience and how we engage in the world. Our answers also teach us that even the most “menial” task can often be imbued in holiness and teach us once again to appreciate that, for Jews, holiness cannot be separate from the everyday, the sacred does not exist only in some lofty sanctuary but rather is all around us, part and parcel of the world and how we live each day.

R’ Samson Raphael Hirsch teaches, the idea that each day is a “new day” doesn’t agree with a genuine Jewish sensibility. We do not “start over” each day. We do not “turn over a new leaf”. Rather each ensuing day is fundamentally dependent on the one preceding.

Everything about our lives is nestled in our tradition, *mesorah*. Our traditions reach back to Sinai, handed from rebbi to *talmid*, one generation to the next. It is the *mesorah* itself that validates what we do as Jews, that tells us what is real Judaism and not merely a diversion, fad or, God forbid, worse. We can only move on to our next day if we see it and experience it as a continuation of the day before.

So too in our *avodah* – we begin our daily connection to God by building on the service of the day before, which is itself built on the day before so that what we do *today* is firmly rooted all the way back to Sinai! In this understanding, it is clear that yesterday’s “ashes” are not mere refuge to be discarded. They are the foundation upon which we construct today!

In this same way, the ashes of the *terumat hadeshen* are physical remnants, evidence and proof that the *avodah* of the previous day had been fulfilled. The priest beginning the *avodah* would know, upon seeing the ashes piled on the ramp leading to the *mizbayach*, that the previous day’s *avodah* had likewise been attended to,

Day by day, firmly rooted in the *mesorah* that is gifted to us from the past, we can go forward in holiness. The past is not a place to get “lost in” or to be nostalgic for but rather a foundation upon which to build a strong and meaningful today and tomorrow. Our entire lives can be properly understood through this lens. Not long ago, I had the opportunity to hear an elderly rabbi speak of coming to America as a young child. When he arrived, he said, it was not like the experience most of us enjoy today. Then, ignorance of Judaism was the norm. Finding kosher food outside New York was a near impossibility.

How did we get from then to now? By the efforts of one generation after the next, building on the work of the previous generation! We are all, no matter our station in life, privileged to stand upon the shoulders of the giants who came before us, those of previous generations who have furthered the *mesorah* so that our own ability to live and learn is greatly enhanced.

We have the sacred task of doing the same for our children and our children’s children.

But why did the *kohanim* themselves have to perform this task? Would its importance have been so diminished if a maintenance worker would have taken care of it? After all, taking out the garbage is… well, taking out the garbage.

Rabbi Maury Grebenau, writing in YUTorah online, responds that the answer certainly is, yes the importance would have been diminished. He notes that in order for the cleaning of the ashes to be the beginning of the *avodah* it should “contain a central idea to the service of the Temple and by extension to our service of Hashem.”

How does he know that this task, unlike the other maintenance tasks of the *mizbayach*, was a matter of “service to the Temple”? By looking closely at the words of Torah, he finds the answer we are looking for. While we might expect the verb describing the action here to be “to clean” or “to remove” the ashes, instead the Torah tells us it is *v’herim*, to “lift up.” This makes clear that *terumat hadeshen* was not “merely” a cleaning task, not just tidying up the *mizbayach* for the next day’s service but rather an ennobling act meant to bring majesty to the Temple.

It is an act of devotion.

In fact, it was such an act of devotion that the *kohanim* would draw lots to determine who would have the privilege of cleaning the ashes!

In a work called, “Palm Tree of Devorah” by Rabbi Moses Cordevero (1522-1570) there is a discussion of our call to “imitate God”. In the context of his discussion, R Cordevero likens God’s goodness to us to a parent changing a baby’s diaper.

Clearly, in this comparison, he is making clear that just as a parent’s love for his child prompts him to perform the most basic tasks to keep the baby comfortable and clean. But to suggest that changing a diaper can be a spiritual experience? That doesn’t sound like what most young parents think when changing a diaper!

Which brings us back to our *parasha*. By having the *kohanim* “take out the garbage”, the Torah is highlighting the true and submissive nature of the *kohan’s* role. While we often portray the priest in his fine garments attending to the highest and most holy of tasks, he can only rise to that level of holiness by being truly submissive and humble before God.

Competing for the “honor” of cleaning up the ashes is, in fact, a statement not of the *kohan’s* prestige but of his humility. For it is by that humility that he can perform the holy tasks he is commanded to perform.

So too all of us. Oh, we are high and mighty, important and upstanding members of the community – or so we would like to be perceived. However, if we are not willing to engage in the mundane aspects of our lives with genuine humility, how can we hope to approach our *avodah* with the honor and dignity it commands?