In The World.

Of the World?

Kashering and the Art of Living

by

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Oye.

Is there a better expression of what it means to exist in our current political and social moment?

I once met a man who was a member of his local community board. He told me that he felt so dirtied after public meetings that after he would come home and just stand in the doorway of his children’s room and watch then peacefully sleeping, hoping that would make him feel clean.

I know how that man felt! We are bombarded with political “discourse” that is defined by name calling and finger pointing. Our televisions traffic in what can only be called soft-core porn. Our young people idolize “stars” whose behavior no moral person could ever condone. How can we ever feel “clean” when the world weighs upon us with the heaviness of a sodden blanket?

Our experience lends credence to people and sects that seek to wall themselves off. However, doing so is not only decidedly not Jewish it is a practical impossibility. We cannot and should not exist in a bubble – even if doing so would preserve us from crossing paths with people crisscrossing streets and avenues in pursuit of some ridiculous new fad.

We are Jews. We are to be part of the world. We are Jews. We are to be *better*. So, how do we live *in* the world while preserving our sacredness and keeping ourselves from becoming *of* the world? We are called to live in both the material *and* the spiritual world. But, what does it mean to exist in the material and the spiritual world? Or, put more directly, what does it mean to be fully a Jew?

Upon returning from the war against the Midianites, the Jews were instructed to purge the non-kosher food taste from each and every pot, pan and food utensil which had been taken as a spoil of battle.   This instruction makes plain a fundamental principle of kashrus as taught in the Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 75b), that the manner used to remove the absorbed, forbidden, non-kosher taste demands a cleansing that is commensurate with how the non-kosher taste was originally imbued into the utensil. “*Ke’bolo kach polto*.” In the same manner that the taste of the food is absorbed by a utensil, so may the taste be purged. *Everything that comes into the fire, you shall pass through the fire*. *Kashering* a spit or grill can only be achieved by scorching with fire; *kashering* a pot used for boiling can only be purged with boiling water. Utensils used in cooking and eating absorb the *ta’am* – the taste and residue – of non-kosher food. This taste and residue is often unseen but it is there. Our tradition teaches that there is only one way to remove this unseen residue, by *kashering*. To the non-Jew making something “kosher” relies on the magical, on the incantation of blessings. But that is *not* how a utensil is *koshered*. The object can only be made kosher by being exposed to a like process that made it un-kosher. Just as heat always infuses taste into another material /substance, only heat can purge it; the more intense the heat, the more intensely the taste is absorbed and therefore the more intense the heat of purging.

There is no shortcut to *kashering*. Likewise, there is no shortcut to cleanse ourselves of the things of the world which diminish us, no shortcut to rid ourselves of *tarfus* – physical or spiritual. It cannot be washed off with soap and water. A descent into addiction, immorality, deceit or ethical impropriety does not happen in an instant. Neither can a full cleansing from them be an overnight task.

The yetzer ha’ra burns through a man. It is not easily stamped out. It is like a raging, uncontrollable fire. But so too is the power of Torah like a fire!

“Everything that comes into fire…”

We live in a harsh, cruel, desecrated world. There are no quick fixes for the world or in the way in affects our souls and our lives. The fire of the world can only be “made kosher” by a greater fire, Torah.

To be cleansed of the ills of *yetzer ra* one must immerse oneself in the fire of Torah. We deceive ourselves if we think that anything else can purge the human vessel. And, until the vessel is purged, it cannot be used for that which is holy and good. No sanctimonious outer garment can hide the stain of one’s soul.

The *ta’am* and residue of the world may not be visible, but it remains within us until it is purged by a flame at least as hot.

Words alone will not suffice.

I recall the many occasions when food manufacturers applying for OU kosher certification reached the point in their application process when ingredients were approved for kosher production, some ingredients needed to be replaced with kosher version, kosher production policies were fully understood and accepted but then came the last, biggest hurdle. The enormous machinery and equipment used with non-kosher ingredients and materials needed to be kashered. Invariably, the executive would pale at this news. “But rabbi” he’d argue, “we regularly clean and sanitize all our equipment. We have the finest cleaning procedures here.”

“Can’t the rabbi just bless the equipment, after we clean it our way”?

No, I would explain patiently. To “remove” all “non-kosher” from the machines and utensils, we must follow the rules articulated in this week’s parasha – it needs to become not just clean but in a very real sense, new.

And that can’t happen with just soap and water for a knife or a fork, an enormous spray dryer or for a human being. Soap and water is the first step – *kashering* is never done on oily, greasy equipment. It must be physically spotless *before* it is remade anew.

Rav Menachem Mendel of Kotzk asks why the mitzvah of koshering was not introduced after the wars with Gog and Sihon, whose vessels were also not permissible, but rather after the war with Midian. His response speaks directly to our moment in time. In the wars with Gog and Sihon, he taught, the Jewish psyche was not affected; Jewish morals were not challenged or compromised. It was much different with the Midianites who brutally challenged the Jewish moral and religious foundations. The Midianites wrought havoc on the Jewish household. In the face of such a “soiling” the Kotzker tells us the Torah teaches the laws of koshering. That is, to go on as Jews, you will need to go through the fires of koshering!

In his *Darash Moshe*,Rav Moshe Feinstein makes clear that the laws of *kashrut* have universal Jewish implications. Just like physical vessels, the human vessel can be *koshered*. Just as placing non-kosher pots into boiling waters cleanses and *kashers* the pot, so too placing oneself into a proper, positive and motivating environment, allows one to be fully cleansed. While it may require a great deal of honest introspection to determine which method of *kashering* is appropriate for a given human vessel, the underlying guiding question must be, How did the vessel become “non-kosher”?

The answer to this question defines the way forward.

How powerful this insight! Its clear message is, once one is committed to be *kashered*, anyone can be purged of even the most deeply-ingrained *tarfus*. How optimistic this Torah message is! It teaches us to never give in to despair. No matter how far the fall, there is a way to be purified, to be *kashered.*

We go to extraordinary lengths to *kasher* an expensive utensil. How much more are we willing to do if it is a human being to be *kashered*, the crown of creation?

Our sages have taught that each human being is equal to the whole of creation. Each of us is unique and valued in God’s eyes. Even the human “monster” deserves compassion and sensitivity if he is willing to be redeemed. And he *can* be redeemed. It will not be easy, for *kashering* demands a process that matches the impurity. Heat for heat. Flood for flood. Tears for tears.

*Zos chukas haTorah.*

Redemption can be achieved.

This is the decree of the Torah.