

Anticipating Easter, Preparing for Passover
(Lev. 5:17-26; Ps. 51)

An attractive, well-built man emerges from a swim in the ocean. Watching him intently from the beach is a voluptuous woman. She likes what she sees. They exchange glances. She observes approvingly as the man, looking out on the water, pulls up his jeans. Anticipating an encounter, she poses provocatively to draw his attention. He puts on his shirt, and she takes in his tanned and toned torso. As he turns to meet her inviting glance, her eyes are drawn to his neck. They grow wide—the handsome man she has been surveying with such appetite is wearing a clerical collar. He is a priest. Smoothly, confidently, he comes over to her and touches her—intimately, delicately, on her forehead, where, with the condensation from her soda can, he places the sign of the cross. This brief video, with the headline, “A Lenten Meditation” recently made the rounds, amusing all the clergy I know. Indeed, it depicted an opportunity, but not the kind of opportunity the sensuous woman had in mind. Things are not always what they seem. For a change, seduction gives way to purification.

Purification was once more explicit, easier and, well, cleaner. In Leviticus, we read of an elaborate ritual process with all the proper people and animals in place. The Hebrew word for sacrifice, *korban*, comes from the root *karov*, to be close. In the Hebrew Bible, bringing a sacrifice closed the distance between the sinner and God. The cleansing that ensued was physical and palpable. Yet these rituals of purification were paradoxical—the sacrificial act brought purity back into the world, yet the act itself was messy and bloody. Biblical Scholar and Emeritus Berkeley Professor Jacob Milgrom resolves this paradox in a fascinating way. He teaches that the *korban*-- the sacrifice brought to foster closeness to God—does not purify the sinner. Rather, it purifies the place. The sacrifice purifies the sacred space of the Tabernacle, polluted through the damaging consequences of the sin. Even an accidental transgression leaves the community's sacred space in a state of contamination, which must be quickly reversed. Dr. Milgrom maintains that it is not the transgressor himself who undergoes a rite of purification; his remorse at the discovery of his act is enough. What needs to be purified is the space of the Tabernacle; hence the [ritual] calls for sprinkling the blood of the sacrifice seven times "before the Lord in front of the curtain of the Shrine" and "on the horns of the altar of aromatic incense, which is in the Tent of Meeting, before the Lord (Leviticus 4:6-7)." This sevenfold sprinkled blood, Milgrom coins as, "... ritual detergent employed by the priest to purge the sanctuary of the impurities inflicted upon it by the offerer of the sacrifice (p. 256)."¹

¹ Chancellor Ismar Schorsch, Jewish Theological Seminary, Shabbat Zachor, Vayikra, 5755, March 1995, quoting Rabbi Jacob Milgrom, Anchor Bible Commentary to Leviticus, 1991 <http://learn.jtsa.edu/topics/parashah/5755/vayikra.shtml>

Dr. Milgrom teaches that sacrifice is ritual detergent. Purification could be seen, and freshness brought into the place of holiness. It isn't as odd as it sounds. Have you ever noticed feeling lighter and cleaner yourself when you walk into a clean house? Cleaning has tangible repercussions. In the absence of the rituals of the Temple, without their earthiness, their concreteness, their explicit directions, we need to institute other ways to purify, other means to know that our desire for atonement is recognized, that our yearning for a fresh start can be addressed. At this season--for Christians, the Lenten Season anticipating Easter, and for Jews, preparing for Passover—both communities are engaged in our respective rituals of cleansing.

For Jews, for me, that clean house is not theoretical. We are commanded to remove all *chametz*, all leavening, which translates into a lot of elbow grease. Purging the house of all crumbs and dirt, spring-cleaning takes on religious proportions. In the Chassidic tradition, *chametz* is understood to be that which puffs us up, so not only crumbs, but also egos need to be cleansed and purified. No doubt, it is possible to clean mindlessly; but the intention behind the obligation is to be mindful, to reflect. Similarly, for Christians, by intentionally forfeiting a designated desire for Lent, sacrifice leads to reflection. Our religious traditions have created rituals of spiritual detergent—to assist us in returning to a path that leads to reconciliation with God.

For some of us, the way we have strayed is incremental and nearly unconscious. But for some of us, there was a specific act, a distance we traveled from God that may make it seem nearly impossible to come close again. In Psalm 51, part of the Lenten liturgy, we have such an act. It is not often that we are given a context for a psalm, but here, we do. King David had observed Bathsheva after bathing (perhaps as our sensuous woman in the Lenten video had hoped to be observed), and he desired her. That she was married did not dissuade him. He had the power to fulfill his desires. However, their consequences were not totally in his power. Bathsheva became pregnant. Trying to hide his sin, David attempted to have it appear that Uriah, her husband, was the father. But even before paternity tests, he failed. So David, the king, placed Uriah on the frontlines, so he would be killed in battle. David's trusted advisor, Nathan, rebuked the king and according to tradition, this psalm is David's cry for repentance.

The psalm begins “A Psalm of David when Nathan the prophet came to him after he had come to Bathsheva.”

“Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity
and purify me of sin.
Purge me with hyssop till I am pure
Wash me till I am whiter than snow
Fashion a pure heart
Do not cast me out of Your presence or
Take Your holy spirit away from me.”

David wants spiritual detergent, but not by means of sacrifice. Like us, he seeks another measure to know that he has been purified. It was through his body that he

sinned; it is through his body that he seeks purification. It is through his mouth, his lips, his words, his praise and his heart that his repentance is achieved. Listen to King David's words:

“O Eternal open my lips and let my mouth declare Your praise
You do not want me to bring sacrifices.
You do not deserve burnt offerings;
True sacrifice to God is a contrite spirit
God You will not despise
A contrite and crushed heart.”

This is not only a Lenten psalm. In Jewish tradition, Psalm 51 is called “The Chapter of Repentance.” Rabbenu Yonah explains that its contents are the foundations of the principles of atonement, and if one wishes to repent for his sins, its words are a fitting prayer.² Changing how we behave, how we live, may not be as concrete as sacrifices, but when it is our very bodies that effect the change, they can transform us as powerfully as sacrifices.

Sometimes we are washed clean when we are bathed in the waters of love and caring, when we are believed in and encouraged. Sometimes we live up to the glorious confidence that has been placed within us. But sometimes, spiritual detergent is found in adversity. Sometimes we need a jump-start in order to find our way home. Here is such an occasion for purification. This spiritual detergent had elements of love, but many more of hardship.

As a middle school student, Ashleigh Rehs was depressed, isolated, and nearly flunking out of school. Her teachers didn't know what to do with her. Then her mother, Valerie Imdorf woke up one day and couldn't see out of one of her eyes. She was eventually diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. Upon absorbing how her life would change, Valerie prayed “Lord, if this is what I am supposed to have, than I am trusting that you have a reason for this. Someone's going to be blessed. You're going to use me somehow.” Never in her wildest dreams did she think that the blessing was going to be her own daughter. Ashleigh, the oldest child, became her mother's primary caregiver. As her mother's condition deteriorated, Ashleigh was the one to give the IV infusions and injections, coordinate her doctor's visits, to keep up her mother's spirits, to take care of her brother and sister. One might expect that with her added responsibilities at home, Ashleigh's attention to school would diminish still further. But the opposite took place. She went from failure to achievement. Ashleigh's experience led her to want to be a neuroscientist to look for a cure for MS.³ Aimlessness led to purpose. Ashleigh was tempered in the fires of crisis, washed clean in the waters of trial. Her spiritual detergent was abrasive, even as it renewed her life.

² Rabbenu Yonah, Shaarei Teshuvah 1:23

³“Caregiver Role Brings Purpose-And Risk-to Kids,” “Morning Edition” National Public Radio, Thursday, March 23, 2006

As this story teaches us, sometimes we are washed clean by the adversity that comes to us. But we can also be washed clean by adversity that we willingly take on, adversity in the form of a struggle against injustice. Unlike David, who asks God to cleanse him, who says:

“Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity and purify me of sin.
Purge me with hyssop till I am pure
Wash me till I am whiter than snow”.

The prophet Isaiah insists that God wants **us** to do the washing. He prophesies that no sacrifices, regardless of how properly and carefully they are offered, will be accepted if the hands that offer them ignore injustice.

Listen to Isaiah’s words:

“Wash yourselves clean
Cease to do evil:
Learn to do good
Devote yourselves to justice:
Aid the wronged,
Uphold the rights of the orphan;
Defend the cause of the widow.” (Is. 1:16:17)

The spiritual detergent of Isaiah’s prophecy cleanses us by propelling us into the fray. It is not enough to live without sinfulness, if we are living in a world awash in sin, violence and apathy. We wash ourselves clean when we devote ourselves to justice.

Too recently we have seen blood spilled, prompting us to work for justice. We were heartbroken at this blood spilled not on a sacred altar but shattering the most innocent of sites—a first grade classroom decorated with colorful bulletin boards filled with children’s drawings and carefully written letters. The lives sacrificed so horrifically and senselessly at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown a few short months ago cry out to us to devote ourselves to justice, to right the wrongs that led to such a tragedy.

In the story of David and Bathsheva, a king’s sin is that he knowingly sent Uriah, Bathsheva’s husband, to die on the frontlines. In the story of little Daniel Barden and Rachel Davino, the story of Noah Pozner, Avielle Richman and Benjamin Wheeler,⁴ the story of Newtown and Columbine, of Aurora and Blacksburg, our sin is that we knowingly send our children to the frontlines—that we as a society even allow our streets and schools to remotely resemble a field of battle.

We need to work for justice so that the mentally ill receive the care they need to keep themselves and others safe. We need to work for justice so that schools are places of protection and promise for our children. We need to right the wrong of wanton and

⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/15/sandy-hook-shooting-victims-names_n_2307354.html

pervasive gun violence in our society. With 88 guns for every 100 people, our country has the highest rate of gun ownership in the world. Yemen, the runner up, has 55 guns per hundred people. Every day, in our ostensibly civilized and sophisticated country, 30 people are killed and 200 others are wounded by firearms. The sacrifice of those children and their faithful educators in Newtown cracked open the insistence that gun manufacturers are too powerful, that the gun lobby is too formidable, that guns cannot be regulated, that guns symbolize freedom. We have made idols of our guns. It is time to turn away from such idolatry. Will the innocent blood shed at Sandy Hook Elementary School cleanse us of our apathy? Will it demand that the voices of moderation and cooperation be heard over the deadly staccato of assault weapons?

This week, the first gun control bill in decades—one outlawing buying a gun for someone who couldn't pass a background check—passed out of the Judiciary Committee on its way to the Senate. Let it be the first step of many in changing our culture, in regulating weapons of destruction, in striving not to sacrifice our first-born, nor our second-or third-born like so many Pascal lambs.. This too, is a kind of spiritual detergent, clarifying our culture, cleansing our apathy, refining our resolve.

At this season of cleansing, let us find the spiritual detergent—and the righteous determination—that will refine our souls, our society and our lives. Let us find our way back to God, back to purity and back to justice. May your Lenten Season be reflective and cleansing. May your Easter be filled with renewal and hope.