

A TASTE OF TORAH

By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, The Rabbinical School, JTS

The Fire Within

Parashat Tzav discusses the role of the priests in the Temple, and emphasizes the vigilance with which they were to offer sacrifices. As the parashah opens, Aaron and his sons are commanded to tend to the ritual of the burnt offering. “A perpetual fire will be kept burning on the altar, not to go out” (Lev. 6:6). On one level, those responsible kept the flames of the altar continually burning by adding wood every day, stoking the fire and keeping watch. The constant attention and dedication necessary for this daily task are impressive in themselves. But, what did this *aish tamid* (perpetual flame), symbolize? And how does this seemingly distant commandment inform our lives today as modern Jews?

In his commentary on the Torah entitled *Ad Tumam* (To the Very End), Professor Ze’ev Falk discusses the symbolism of this perpetual fire commanded by God. “The fire continually burning,” Falk writes, “expresses the presence of God’s Indwelling.” For it is not enough for the Israelites to offer sacrifices whose aim it is to bring them closer to God’s Presence. A visual symbol of God’s Presence must stand in their midst at all times. That symbol is the perpetual fire. Further, fire has both divine and human qualities: on the one hand, its mysteriousness and unpredictability make it very much representative of the divine; on the other hand, its fragility and ephemerality speak to humanness. It is truly a gift of God, maintained and strengthened by the hands of human beings. Torah, too, is a gift of God that requires human care to be perpetuated. “In the life of the individual Jew,” Falk writes, “the Torah expresses perpetuity: for in the Psalms it is written, ‘I will guard your Torah always’ (Psalms 119:44) and in Proverbs, ‘Guard the commandments of your fathers and do not abandon the Torah of your mothers; tie them to your heart always’ (Proverbs 6:21)” (Falk, 247). Passion for the teachings of the Torah ties us into an ancient history, a meaningful present, and a hopeful future.

Accordingly, the true challenge for each of us is to ignite our spiritual consciousness and hold that vision clearly before us. Abraham Joshua Heschel presents two compelling models of a “fire continually burning”: first is the Baal Shem Tov, who felt that “a Jew should serve God with ardor” and it is “necessary, vital, to have fire in the soul.” But Menahem Mendl of Kotzk felt that the flame should “be steady and burn at full force, though deeply concealed” (Heschel, *A Passion for Truth*, 48–50). The Baal Shem Tov desired a flaming personality that could radiate the light and love of Torah and God from the inside out; moments of spiritual ecstasy keep the flame continually burning. For the Kotzker rebbe, it is steadiness and directedness that keeps an internal, concealed flame driving the individual. May each of us choose and aspire to our own vision of spirituality, tending to an eternal flame within each of our souls.

The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.

To subscribe to the weekly JTS Torah Commentary email, visit www.jtsa.edu/subscribe

Torah from JTS

Parashat Tzav / Purim 5774 / 2014

PURIM COMMENTARY

By Rabbi Julia Andelman, Director of Community Engagement, JTS

Purim Reversals

A few months after college graduation, I arrived in Israel as an eager new yeshiva student. I spent my spare time those first several weeks wandering the streets of Jerusalem and soaking up the vivid and diverse manifestations of Jewish life all around me—a far cry from a Jewish existence that revolved around a single Hillel building, albeit a thriving one. It was almost Sukkot, and when I heard that an ad hoc *shuk* (market) had been set up on King George Street featuring dozens of vendors selling *lulavim* and *etrogim* in honor of the holiday, I practically sprinted my way through the center of town to get there. When I arrived, I was dismayed to see an oversized banner strung up across the opening of the huge tent, proclaiming *ha-k’nisah li-gvarim bil’vad* (entry for men only).

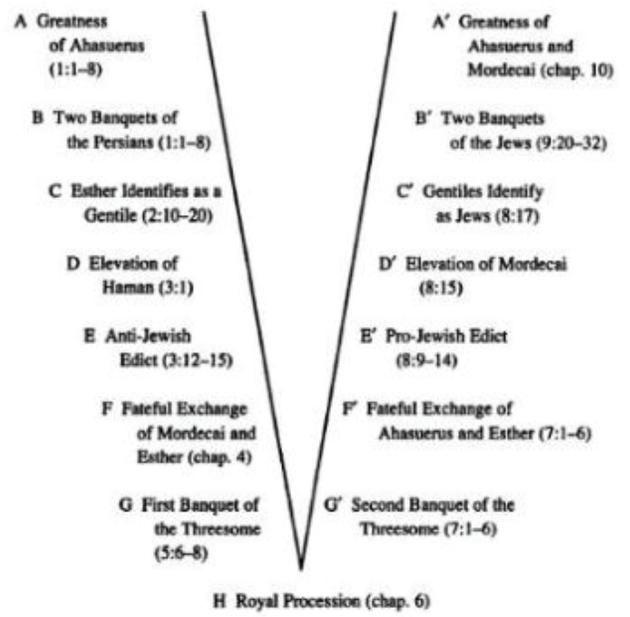
Relegated to observer status, I tried to make peace with the situation, and found a spot to perch on a low wall nearby where I had a decent view of the teeming goings-on inside the tent. I watched men of all religious stripes enter the tent, examine the wares, haggle with the sellers, and depart with their carefully chosen new treasures. I had dressed for the occasion, of course—a long skirt and an elbow-length T-shirt—and didn’t expect anyone to mind my presence. But a black-hatted man soon started heckling me, saying that I was bothering him and others. I replied that I wasn’t bothering anyone—I was just watching. Another man walked by and in a low voice advised me that it would be in my best interest to leave (“*lo k’dai lakh*,” he said). But I wanted to take part to the extent that I could, and so I naively remained on my perch. A moment later, an open bottle of orange soda was being hurled at me, and it struck my arm before I had a chance to react. I left, my shirt stained and wet, my skin stinging and covered in sticky soda residue, and my excitement and sense of oneness with the Jewish people shattered.

Fast-forward to Purim. In the intervening months, I had had an amazingly rich experience of intensive Jewish text study and traditional egalitarian communal observance with my peers and teachers at the Conservative Yeshiva and other progressive institutions in Jerusalem. But the pain of that pre-Sukkot encounter stayed with me, reinforced by the many other aspects of religious life in Israel that keep women on the sidelines. When it came time to choose a Purim costume, I knew exactly what I would wear. I headed off to Me’ah She’arim and found a set of curly brown *pei’ot* (sidelocks) in a Purim shop. I borrowed the requisite black and white garb from a male friend. And, donning a pair of tzitzit (ritual fringes)—voilà, I became an ultra-Orthodox man for a day—climbing into the skin of the person who had injured my faith in Jewish peoplehood.

Purim is a holiday of reversals—written into the megillah itself. Haman creates an elaborate ritual by which the king should honor him, but his enemy Mordechai is honored with that same ritual instead. The gallows Haman builds for Mordechai end up being the instrument of his own death. And the fate of a nation changes from doom to victory in the blink of an eye: “And so, on the 13th day of the 12th month—that is, the month of Adar—when the king’s demand and decree were to be executed, the very day on which the enemies of the Jews had expected to get them in their power, *v’nahafokh hu*—the situation was reversed—and the Jews got their enemies in their power instead” (Esther 9:1).

Reversals of fortune, narratives doubling back on themselves in opposing incarnations, are to be found everywhere in the book of Esther; and so the theme of a holiday—*v’nahafokh hu*—is born. Cross-dressing, inebriation, public parodies of teachers and friends—all of these traditionally questionable or forbidden boundary crossings are sanctioned and even celebrated on this one day of the year when norms are freely reversed. The name of the holiday itself is a nod to the theme of reversal, referring to the date on which Haman determines, by casting lots (*purim*), to destroy the Jews—the date that instead becomes a day of national victory, memorialized throughout Jewish history.

A larger arc of reversal is revealed through close examination of the megillah, as shown by Jon D. Levenson in *Esther: A Commentary*. In addition to pointing out numerous cases of reversal and flipped meanings in the narrative and syntax of the megillah, he argues that the entire book is structured as a chiasm, a series of corresponding events with contrasting significance, mirroring itself:



From Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*. Old Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. Used by permission.

Purim is thus an opportunity to revisit past events and transform their meanings—to cross boundaries in society and in ourselves, challenging norms to uncover unexpected truths. For me, on that Purim long ago in Jerusalem, the tradition of *v’nahafokh hu* gave me permission to violate a strict social boundary in order to dress (literally) a wound inflicted by one Jew upon another—to heal the pain through humor, through the strangeness of “becoming” the other who had hurt me and thus permeating the invisible line between us. The impact of the offending experience did not disappear, but by assuming his role for that short time and tasting the social power automatically bestowed on him as a man, I was able to feel the bruise less keenly. Just as the Jews in the Purim story were transformed from would-be victims into aggressors, I reversed my own fate temporarily, physically embodying the Jew who—like me, set out that day to buy a beautiful *lulav* and *etrog*, but who instead decided to use his male privilege in Orthodox society to belittle me. My brief foray into that world of Orthodox male dominance—partly imaginary, in my own head, and partly quite real, visible to everyone—acted as a salve, giving me distance from that distressing episode and allowing me to take ownership of my own religious life and move forward—sadder and wiser, but joyful in the holiday nonetheless and triumphant in the metaphorical reversal that I had succeeded in effecting.

The Mishnah states that one who reads the megillah backward has not fulfilled the obligation (Megillah 2:1). The Ba’al Shem Tov, the founding mystic of modern Hasidism, explains that “one who reads the megillah backward” refers to someone who thinks that the miracle occurred only in the past and not today; such a person has not fulfilled the obligation to read the megillah on Purim. In other words, true observance of the holiday must include an effort to seek out the deeper meaning of Purim as it applies to our own times and lives. This year, I offer the suggestion that we take advantage of Purim’s permission to reverse realities and meanings, to cross boundaries that we hold sacred the rest of the year, to turn our own narratives backward to see what new significance they might yield. *V’nahafokh hu*—sometimes, it is in our power to reverse the negative into the positive, if only in our own understanding of the role that the seemingly negative has played in our lives. As we read in the book of Psalms, which employs the same Hebrew root of reversal, “*hafakhta mispedi l’mahol li*—you turned my lament into dancing, you undid my sackcloth and girded me with joy” (Ps. 30:12). The import of an emotional experience is multi-valent, and has the potential to be transformed if we will it.

The Talmud (BT Pesachim 50a) tells the story of Rav Yosef, who becomes ill and falls into a coma, but then regains consciousness. His father, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, asks him, “What did you see?” “*Olam hafukh ra’iti*,” Rav Yosef answers, using our same root of reversal—“I saw an inverted world: the uppermost were lowly, and the lowly were above” (in other words, a person esteemed in this world became trivial, and the lowly person was honored). Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said to him, “My son, you saw a clear world”—you saw the world as it truly is. May we allow ourselves the opportunity to see and effect reversals in our lives and the world—finding moral and spiritual redemption where we may least expect it, and giving ourselves the power to determine the meaning of our experiences and encounters.

The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z”l) Hassenfeld.