

Lessons from the Ashes

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Many of us choose our careers and life roles carefully and spend our days engaged in pursuits about which we feel passionate. However, sometimes even a vocation can feel like drudgery. Whether a profession, family role, or volunteer position, roles that once came with a sense of calling or purpose can become hard to face and starting the day can require exceptional energy. This can happen as part of the ups and downs of ordinary life but is especially true when we experience multiple simultaneous crises.

Burnout often refers to an exhaustion of motivation, interest, or energy for one's work, sometimes prompted by tedium. Compassion fatigue refers to the toll that caregiving can take on a person in work in caring, helping, or service. Both can create a vocational crisis. This week's parashah suggests several strategies for combatting the depletion we all face at some point.

The beginning verses refer to the first action of the day for the kohanim in the Temple: *terumat hadeshen*, the lifting up and removal of ashes from the altar from the previous day. The Torah provides a detailed instruction:

The priest shall dress in linen raiment, with linen breeches next to his body; and he shall take up the ashes to which the fire has reduced the burnt offering on the altar and place them beside the altar. He shall then take off his vestments and put on other vestments, and carry the ashes outside the camp to a pure place. (Lev. 6:3-4)

The first action of the day was not new business, but rather the removal of the ashes of the previous day's offering.

Lessons from this ritual guide us to retain vocational vitality, in at least four ways:

1. Stay connected to yesterday's holiness

The Hasidic master Simcha Bunim (1765-1827) of Przysucha in South Central Poland found meaning in the timing of *terumat hadeshen* as the first act of the new day. The act of lifting up the ashes symbolized that "what was holy yesterday must be treated with respect today as well" (*Etz Hayyim Commentary*).

Terumat hadeshen was performed before sunrise and lacked the public honor associated with the offering of the sacrifices. The work of removing the ashes to ready the Temple for the new day's sacrifices could be seen as meritless, messy drudgery. However, in an ironic way, *terumat hadeshen* could also challenge the kohen to confront what has been lost and to grieve. By lifting up the ashes, the kohen was prompted to remember the holiness of yesterday's sacrifice, honoring what it had been. *Terumat hadeshen* models for us a daily practice for grieving day-to-day loss.

2. Connect with others as an ordinary person

Simcha Bunim also finds interpersonal meaning in the ritual of *terumat hadeshen*. By requiring the kohen to change into ordinary clothes and leave the holy precincts of the Temple, the Torah is seeking to ensure that "he never forgets his link to the ordinary people who spend their days in mundane pursuits" (*Etz Hayyim Commentary*). By literally stepping out of the professional space, by acknowledging his own humanity, and by being willing to be seen this way, the kohen created the possibility for his own receiving of care from others.

3. Be flexible and innovative

Systems for care and service sometimes need to be modified or redesigned. The Talmud provides a cautionary tale of how the system for *terumat hadeshen* went awry and needed modification. The Mishnah explains that initially it wasn't imagined that many priests would want to do *terumat hadeshen* and so no lottery system was necessary, unlike other areas of Temple service that were popular and sought after by many priests (BT Yoma 22a). Whoever wanted to do *terumat hadeshen* on a given day would simply "run and ascend up on the ramp" leading to the altar (M Yoma 2:1).

But there was an unintended consequence of leaving this role to whomever would volunteer. One time two kohanim were "running and ascending on the ramp, and one of them shoved another and he fell and his leg was broken." Henceforth, the kohen was chosen by lottery (M Yoma 2:2). Times had changed and the culture changed. However, this led to a new challenge. Once the lottery was established, enthusiasm for doing *terumat hadeshen* diminished to the point of insufficient numbers of kohanim to meet the need. As an incentive, it was then established that the priest who conducted *terumat hadeshen* would also play the special role of "laying out the arrangement of wood on the altar" (BT Yoma 22a).

How can we understand the ambivalence and swings in attitudes and enthusiasm for doing this ritual? Perhaps it reflects the struggle the kohanim experienced to stay connected to the difficult work of *terumat hadeshen*. Their behavior reflected the ebbs and flows of human nature when doing meaningful yet difficult work. They adjusted their system to ensure that service continued and that it responded to the needs and wellbeing of the kohanim.

4. Stay connected when you feel alone

Like so many leaders and caregivers today, the designated priest for *terumat hadeshen* acted alone. The Mishnah describes: "No person would enter with [the priest]." Furthermore, "with no lamp in his hand, he would walk by the light of the arrangements. The other priests would not see him, nor could they hear the sound of his steps" (M Tamid

1:4). The kohen is solitary and in the dark when confronting the grimmest part of the work.

But, in fact, the kohen is not alone. While he performed the ritual by himself, his brothers and other kohanim kept watch for him to return and listened for signs of his completion of the tasks at hand (M Tamid 1:4, 2:1).

The ritual of *terumat hadeshen* helps us when we might feel alienated from our sense of purpose and resigned to burnout. It offers us ways to embrace our sense of purpose even if it feels fragile. *Terumat hadeshen* reminds us: When we begin the day, before starting a new task, let us do something that connects us to yesterday's work as it will keep us connected to our sense of purpose. Let us spend time each day as ordinary people, changing from our professional clothes to regular clothes if need be. Let us change our procedures if the old one becomes dangerous and let us partner with colleagues to update systems to create professional communities that are caring to us as well. Finally, even when we act alone and even when we feel solitude, let us know that there are others who are with us. Though we might not see them, they are listening for us.