

## Can We Sanctify Incivility?

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Parashat Tzav opens with instructions for the *olah*, the offering (primarily the twice-daily sacrifice) that is entirely burnt on the altar. The ninth chapter of the talmudic tractate *Zevahim*, notes that the word *olah*, which means “ascending,” can be understood both as denoting an ascent to heaven from earth, and equally, an ascent up the ramp of the altar to the place from which it is offered. The double meaning gave rise to a principle that is articulated in the opening mishnah of that ninth chapter. But some background is necessary before citing that principle.

The Temple was a center of holiness and purity, and the altar was, within that larger precinct, the very epicenter of purity. No part of a sacrificial animal that had become ritually impure was permitted to approach the altar, and certainly not to be offered in the sacrificial fire that burned there. The impurity could have arisen by a dead insect having fallen on the animal’s carcass after the slaughter; or a host of other conditions might have arisen, any one of which would have created a certain revulsion to the guardians of the sacred precincts. We cannot today reconstruct precisely why impurity and revulsion were said to arise from particular things in ancient times, but there were such deep aversions.

Now comes the principle given in the mishnah I referenced earlier: “*Hamizbeah mekadesh et hara’ui lo*,” “the altar sanctifies every thing that is fitting for it.” The Sages took the repetition of the word that means “going up” to signal that there are things that ought never to have been taken up the ramp to the Temple altar, but once having been brought there, should not be removed. Although they would normally be disqualified from the altar because of some blemish on their sanctity or purity, having reached the altar, by happenstance, the altar itself overrides both the impurity itself, and the revulsion that impurity would generate. The impure flesh that was an affront to the altar

from afar, having touched the altar, now became fit, and could be treated and handled like any other object whose purity was uncompromised.

The principle here is by turns counterintuitive and intriguing. Counterintuitive, because how could impurity ever be allowed to coexist with the very center of purity, even if the juxtaposition arose unintentionally? Shouldn’t something profane and impure immediately be removed from the epicenter of sanctity? But it is intriguing at the same time because there is something fascinating and alluring about the idea that there are places, things, perhaps phenomena, that are so suffused with the force of holiness that they can completely eclipse and overwhelm even those things that stand in opposition to it. We are taught, for example, that a *mikveh*—a ritual pool that is used to return to a state of purity—can itself never become impure or polluted. No matter what may fall into it, its purity is unchanged. The Torah itself has that property. Contrary to centuries-long misogynist misreadings that were calculated to keep women away from the Torah, there is nothing that can impart impurity to a scroll of the Torah.

So it’s at least a curious twist in the annals of ancient Temple and priestly rules. But for us, today, is it harmless?

Are there things that are so sacred, that are of such ultimate importance, that they serve as solvents to dissolve all flaws that come into contact with them? Are there contemporary sancta that can and should have the power to wash away all manner of stains that we would normally treat with the same revulsion and disgust with which our ancient priests treated their sources of impurity?

In particular, I have in mind a matter of serious concern regarding discourse within the Jewish community today. Does a profession of love and support of the Jewish people

and the Jewish state, and a determination to identify and defeat antisemitism, have the power to sanctify and cleanse the impurities of rank incivility and malicious slander? The latter are rightly reviled, and no one would think of raising them up to the altar, as it were. They are as unwelcome and as noxious as *hametz* is on the upcoming festival of Pesah. Were such incivility and slander to be practiced by foes of the Jewish people, we would rightly take such offensive character traits as being of a piece with hostility to Jews and Israel. But what shall we say and do when the very people who profess to love us and have our best interests at heart—our own Jewish confrères—display the very same defiling traits towards their fellow Jews of different opinions? Should that not at least cast some serious doubt on whether they truly get who we are and what our mission and cause is? Should we allow ourselves to get pushed to the point at which expressions of love of the Jewish people and the Jewish state become like the ancient altar, dissolving and washing away all sins and impurities? Even observant, practicing Jews can be targets of incivility and slander when they raise concerns about the policies and practices of Israeli governments. The same happens to Jews who, while deploring antisemitism, do not see it in all the places at which they are told they should see it. Often they are demonized, tagged as wolves in sheep's clothing, and as enemies of the Jewish people. There is far too much contempt for those of other opinions.

We all, under normal circumstances, reject vulgarity, contempt, and slander. Yet some may maintain that the Rabbis in Zevahim were on to something; that in our day the dangers we all agree that Israel and the Jewish people face should have the power that the ancient altar had and should dissolve the impurities of language and deed that we would normally reject in normal times. But there is a word in the Rabbis' mishnah to which we have not paid much attention until now. “The altar sanctifies everything that is fitting for it.” What does “fitting” mean in that context? If the flesh of a sacrificial lamb were made impure, then its having reached the altar would sanctify it nonetheless, because lamb flesh is fitting for the altar. But not so for the flesh of something unfit for sacrifice. The flesh of a deer,

and certainly that of a swine, does not get sanctified by the altar; only that which is minimally fitting for the sacred place to begin with does.

So which is it? Should the incivility, slander, and even vulgarity that too often gets directed at honest and conscientious questioners of mainstream assumptions be overlooked when wielded in a professed solidarity with Israel, or concern for antisemitism? Or are they so unfitting, so incongruous to who we are and what our values are, that our contemporary holy of holies cannot cleanse them?

I end with these questions. We will all answer them as we will. But we cannot avoid conscientiously grappling with them.