

My Torah for Parshat Tetzaveh explores the power of language to open up conversations and hearts, and my T'fillah commentary addresses how the language of sacrifice can be meaningful even today. As always, I would love to hear your thoughts!

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Sam Blustin

## Torah From The Holy Land Parshat Tetzaveh

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### **Torah: Words Matter**

Parshat Tetzaveh reads more like a fashion magazine or manual than a typical Torah story. It specifies in exacting detail how each garment that the Kohanim, the Priests, are to wear when attending to their duties in the Mishkan. These garments are not just to look good; if a mistake is made, they can cause any service to become invalid, or worse, can signal life or death. The garments themselves affect a change in the wearer, as it says that Aaron's garments "sanctify him to minister to Me" (Exodus 28:3). Further, Aaron must wear a robe with bells on them, and that "it must be on Aaron in order to minister. Its sound shall be heard when he enters the Sanctuary before Hashem and when he leaves, so that he not die" (Exodus 28:35). In the case of the Kohanim, the clothes make the man, or at least, the service of Hashem.

Like clothing, words can also be used to dress up a concept. They can make something holy or be used to denigrate another human being. As we know, Judaism places a huge emphasis on the power of words. In the beginning, the Creator created the world with speech, and Balaam, when trying to curse the Israelites, ends up blessing them instead, saying "Mah tovu ohalecha Ya'akov, mishkenotecha Yisrael", "How beautiful are your tents Jacob, your dwelling places Israel."

And like clothing, words can also be an integral part of one's identity. Jewish American, American Jew, Jewish Israeli, Palestinian Arab Israeli, and Israeli Arab are all labels that we take for ourselves, or place upon others. Beneath these labels are extensive narratives, told for generations and shaped by the borders that we impose or that imposed upon us in the present. And inside of these communities, words have worlds of meaning. They can define who is in or out of a group, who is too heretical for or perfectly in line with a group's views.

Last week, I attended an event hosted by the T'ruah Rabbinic Fellows in Israel on the topic of how to take action on our values. The two activists we spoke with, Sahar

Vardi and Gili Re'i, both talked about the power of words in their own activism. "Use language that speaks to the other," Gili said. If the language you are using is a deal breaker for the other person and would immediately stall the conversation, then you have to use language that will invite them into the conversation. As one example, instead of using the language of "occupation", she takes care to say "the Israeli regime in the territories of Judea and Samaria", a burdensome phrase, but one in which she's found people on the right respond more positively to.

In a world today in which it is becoming increasingly hard for people to talk together, it's important to use language which talks to the other. If we continue to talk past each other, shouting down each other, then we run the risk of further polarizing our society and pushing people further away. This week, may the Holy Blessing One bless us with the wisdom to recognize the narrative of those around us, and may we have the words to speak to the souls of others and the courage to open our hearts to hold the narratives of others along with our own. Amen.

## **T'fillah: R'tzei and the Language of Sacrifice**

*R'tzei Adonai Eloheinu b'amcha Yisrael u'vitfilatam, v'hashev et haavodah lidvir beitecha.*

*Find favor, Lord our God, in your people Israel and their prayer.*

*Restore the service to Your most holy House. (Amidah)*

With this parasha focusing on the Kohanim, I want to focus on the blessing that the Kohanim recite during the repetition of the Amidah. While I'll address the actual text in a later d'var, what interests me here is its placement in our service. The Priestly Blessing comes immediately after the *R'tzei* blessing, where we petition for God to restore the Temple and bring back sacrificial worship. This is just one example where the Temple takes primary focus in our prayer. In a time where the Temple service seems so foreign to us, how can the language of sacrifice speak to us today?

First of all, seeing prayer as a replacement for sacrifice changes the direction and purpose that we often associate with prayer. Instead of asking for things from God, we are now offering something of ourselves to the Divine. Prayer then creates a space for praise, thanksgiving, and forgiveness, paralleling the different types of sacrifices offered in the Temple. In addition, it instills in us a sense of commandedness and obligation. Three times a day we stop our normal flow to connect to a higher purpose, no matter how we may be feeling at the moment.

How do you approach prayer? How might a model of sacrifice change that approach?

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