

PARSHAS TZAV: MEMORIES AND DREAMS

by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz

Parshas Tzav begins with a discussion of two mitzvos related to the removal of the ashes that accumulated on the mizbayach (altar).

The first was the mitzvah of terumas hadeshen, the 'separation of the ashes' from the fire that was burning on the mizbayach. Each day, the kohen began the avodah by taking a shovelful of the ashes and placing them on the floor of the chatzer (outer courtyard) near the mizbayach.

The second mitzvah related to the removal of the ashes was hotza'as hadeshen, the 'removal of the ashes'. This was a more comprehensive removal of the ashes that accumulated on the mizbayach. Since this was a more involved effort, the kohen changed into older, used bigdei kehunah, and removed all of the excess ashes which were carried outside the camp of the b'nei Yisroel.

Rashi and the Rambam offer differing views regarding the performance of the removal of the ashes, the second avodah mentioned. Rashi notes that this avodah was not done on a daily basis, only when the ashes accumulated to the point that they cluttered the mizbayach and needed to be removed. The Rambam (Hilchos Temidin Umusafin 2:12) disagrees, and maintains that the ash-removal service was performed each day.

Upon reflection, several questions come to mind:

First of all, why would the removal of the ashes constitute one mitzvah, let alone two? The removal of the ashes would seem to be part of the necessary housekeeping of the mizbayach, not a sacred act. Surely much care was needed to maintain the cleanliness of the Mishkan with so many people and korbonos coming to the Mishkan on a daily basis. There is little mention if any of the other myriad tasks necessary to accomplish this. Why is the removal of the ashes given such significance as opposed to any of the other components of the maintenance of the Mishkan?

Secondly, why was the removal of the ashes divided into two distinct services, terumas hadeshen and hotzoa'as hadeshen? Why were the ashes simply not all taken out at once? (This question is more pronounced according to the interpretation of the Rambam who maintains that both mitzvos were performed on a daily basis.)

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch zt"l offers a profound and moving illumination into these two mitzvos that addresses the questions raised above.

He explains that we must begin the avodah of each day with the knowledge and understanding that

we are building upon the service of the previous day. As our chazal (sages) teach us, we are compared to midgets upon the shoulders of giants. Our actions and mindsets are predicated on our mesorah (tradition) as we look to the past for direction and guidance. We perform terumas hadeshen as a symbolic gesture to publicly declare that yesterday's service is of utmost and everlasting holiness, as we set out to commence today's avodah. I would like to add that this might explain the placement of the small pile of the terumas hadeshen ashes near the ramp leading up to the mizbayach - within the view of each kohen who would be mounting the ramp to serve Hashem.

After this public display of reverence for tradition, says Rav Hirsch z'tl, it was time to cleanse the Mizbayach of yesterday's ashes. We must build on - and have respect for - the past, but we cannot spend most of our time and energy looking in the rear-view mirror. We cannot and should not rely on our previous accomplishments, or the deeds and yichus of our ancestors. Each day brings its new challenges, obligations and opportunities.

The kohein therefore removed all of the ashes that had accumulated and took them outside of the living area of the Jews where they could no longer be seen. This was not an act of housekeeping, but a sacred and public display of our eternal values.

"WHEN MEMORIES EXCEED DREAMS, THE END IS NEAR"

This was one of the favorite sayings of the dynamic President and leader of Agudath Israel for nearly fifty years, Rabbi Moshe Sherer z'tl. He personified this blend of memories and dreams. He had the utmost respect for tradition and humbly deferred to Gedolei Yisroel at every turn. However, day after day, he set aside his monumental past accomplishments and addressed the issues of the day with burning passion and boundless energy.

One week after the previous Siyum Hashas, in Elul 5757/September 1997, I faxed Rabbi Sherer a memo requesting a meeting with him to discuss the issue of at-risk teens. This topic was just coming to the public consciousness and there were few avenues to which parents and mechanchim could turn. I pleaded with him to harness the resources of Agudath Israel to address this pressing issue.

At that time, he was well past retirement age, and silently battling with the ravages of the illness that would take his life in the not-too-distant future. He must have been basking in the glow of the beautiful Siyum Hashas one week earlier, when he spoke to 70,000 Jews in 35 cities across the country on a video-hookup, the first time this technology had been used for k'vod shamayim on this scale. He would have been well within his rights to take a two-week vacation and disconnect his phone.

But his dreams - and the responsibilities of leadership - would not be put on hold. I am forever grateful for the time he took to meet with me that week, and for his involvement in the founding and growth of Project Y.E.S. over the following months - almost until the week of his petirah. (Please visit my website, www.rabbihorowitz.com, under "Published Articles," for my tribute to Rabbi Sherer, "Basic Training," published in the Jewish Observer in 1998).

Thank you Rabbi Sherer. It is seven-and-a-half years since our first meeting, and nearly seven years since your passing. I still miss your wisdom and guidance; your encouragement and support. May we, your talmidim, be worthy of standing on your shoulders - and continuing to dream.

Best wishes for a Gutten Shabbos

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Rabbi Horowitz is the founder and dean of Yeshiva Darchei Noam in Monsey, NY, as well as the founder and Program Director of Agudath Israel's Project Y.E.S. (Youth Enrichment Services), which helps at-risk teens and their parents. He is a popular lecturer on teaching and parenting topics in communities around the world, and is the author of several best-selling parenting tape and CD sets. For more information on Rabbi Horowitz's parenting tapes, visit <http://www.rabbihorowitz.com/> or call 845-352-7100 X 133.