

Parashat Tzav – Shabbat Hagadol, 5781, 2021:

Rabbi David Etengoff

Drawing Closer to Hashem

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechezkel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The term, “*tzav*,” (command), the namesake of our *parasha*, is stated by Hashem to Moshe in reference to Aharon and his sons. Rashi (1040-1105), based upon *Midrash Sifra*, explains it is an expression of alacrity and eternity that urges swift fulfillment of commandments by present and future generations. As such, our *parasha* prompts us to reflect upon our relationship to the *mitzvot*. Each time we are *mekayam* a *mitzvah* (fulfill a commandment), we demonstrate our loyalty to Hashem. Moreover, we declare that the relationship He forged with our forebears continues until our own historical moment.

During the periods of the Tannaim (Mishnah) and the Amoraim (Talmud), *Chazal* developed at least three over-arching approaches as to how we should approach the *mitzvot*: *l'zakot et Yisrael* (to confer merit upon the Jewish people), *l'tzrofe et Yisrael* (to purify the Jewish people), and *l'kadash et Yisrael* (to sanctify the Jewish people). One of the most celebrated expressions, of *l'zakot et Yisrael* given voice by Rabbi Chanania ben Akashia, is recited at the end of each chapter of *Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers*):

Rabbi Chanania ben Akashia says: “The Holy One, Blessed is He, wished to confer merit upon Israel; therefore He gave them Torah and *mitzvot* in abundance, as it is said: ‘Hashem desired for the sake of its [Israel’s] righteousness, that the Torah be made great and glorious.’” (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 60:21, translation, *ArtScroll Siddur*)

This teaching emphasizes that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One, Blessed is He) gave us His holy Torah to make us even more worthy in His eyes. Rashi underscores this idea in his comment entitled “*l’zakot*” on *Talmud Bavli, Makkot 23b*:

The Torah had no need to command many of the mitzvot and the admonitions (prohibitions) regarding crawling bugs and improperly slaughtered animals, since there is no one who naturally does not pull back from them [in disgust]. The only reason why they were commanded was to [enable one] to receive reward by separating [oneself] from them. (Translation, my own)

Rav, one of the major disciples of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, champions the idea of *l’tzrofe et Yisrael* as the rationale underlying the mitzvot in the following pivotal Midrashic statement:

Rav said: “The commandments were only given to purify His creations through [performing] them. Do you really think that *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* cares if a person slaughters an animal on the underside of its neck or on the back of its neck? [No!] The entire purpose of the mitzvot is to purify His creations.” (*Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 44:1*, translation, my own)

It is important to note that this source contains the Hebrew words *l’tzrofe et Yisrael*, and not *l’tahare et Yisrael*. Although often translated in the same manner, these expressions have entirely different connotations. *L’tahare* refers to taking something or someone from a state of ritual impurity and, through one of several means, changing that status to one of ritual purity. In contrast, *l’tzrofe* means to purify, in the sense of purifying a metal, such as gold. Through the metallurgy process, the gold smelter is able to remove the dross and produce nearly pure gold. When Rav explains the commandments as having the purpose of *l’tzrofe et Yisrael*, he is metaphorically teaching us that Hashem wants us to be “as good as gold,” as pure as the finest gold that we can produce.

Rabbi Isi ben Yehudah enhances our understanding of the concept of *l'kadash et Yisrael*: “When the Omnipresent (*HaMakom*) gave a new *mitzvah* to the Jewish people, He added to their holiness.” (*Mechilta d’Rabbi Yishmael, Mishpatim, Parasha 20*) A second source for the idea of holiness achieved through *mitzvot* observance is found in *Midrash Sifrei Bamidbar*:

“And you shall be holy to your G-d.” Is this referring to the holiness that is brought about through the commandments in general or is it referring to the holiness that is brought about specifically through the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit*? As it is said, this is referencing the idea of the holiness of **all** of the *mitzvot*.” (*Piska 115, translation, my own*)

This notion is also underscored by *Chazal*’s formulation of the first part of every *birkat hamitzvah* (blessing prior to performing a commandment): “... *asher kiddashanu b’mitzvotov vitzivanu*” (“[He] who makes us holy through His *mitzvot* and commands us.”) *Chazal* clearly are teaching us that one of the reasons Hashem gifted us the commandments was to make us holy.

The great and eternal treasure of the *mitzvot* is a blessing to the Jewish people. May their fulfillment continue to bring us merit and may the purity and holiness we achieve help us draw ever closer to Hashem. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

May Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag Sameach*.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdb718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:
<http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.