

Tzav 5783
Free to Be
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If only you could be fully free to be your authentic self, would you be exactly as you are now? Would you follow the same schedule? Would you eat the same foods? Would you go to the same places, and talk to the same people? Would you read more, sing more, dance more, sleep more, play more?

We place a high value on authenticity, much more than when I was younger. Where we used to talk about speakers, leaders, and teachers “putting on a show up there,” we now talk about “getting real with people” and “being vulnerable,” even in public. We talk a lot about being “out” or closeted about parts of ourselves. I often ask myself: what is the actual work of being genuine, or authentic? What is reasonable, what is expected, why is it better, and are there limits?

On this Shabbat HaGadol, rabbis traditionally would give the main Shabbat sermon of the entire year, in order to help people prepare for Pesach. That was before email, websites, and Zoom. We have held three online Pesach prep classes, sent emails, posted probably more than you need to know on our website, and I’ve held office hours for you to come in and arrange for me to sell your chametz (it’s not too late!). Still, this Shabbat is meant to lead us into Pesach. So, with today’s parashah ringing in our ears, I’m thinking about how these questions of identity that emerge from our parashah may resonate for us and how they offer a springboard into the liberation of Pesach.

In today’s parashah we read how the kohanim are ordained into service, apparently with no training or qualifications outside of tribal identity. They then seclude themselves before initiating the sacrificial cult. They must be ready to facilitate connections between individual people and the Divine. On any given day, they will encounter people who are seeking Divine closeness as they process any of the range of human experiences and emotions. People will approach them with offerings in hand or in tow, and the priests holding that liminal space will wield tremendous power over those experiences. Imagine how nervous and unprepared they might have felt to be invested with such awesome responsibility. Nonetheless, they dress for their task and out they go.

A close reading is instructive. The Torah text says: “The priest will wear his linen cloak and he shall wear linen pants upon his body...” (Vayikra 6:3). Rather than speaking generically of the priest’s clothing, the priest’s tunic, which the Torah typically calls by its

proper name, “*K’tonet*,” here is called “*middo*,” *his* cloak. The Sifra, an early rabbinic source, reads into this that the priest’s cloak conforms to his precise measurements. Whereas we might have expected the tunic to be a garment any Kohen could take off the rack when needed, here we find that it is specifically the outer garment that needs to be sewn to size, made specifically for the one who will wear it. It seems that the fit of the outer garment is meant to inform the Kohen’s own self-perception as well as how others perceive him, in a highly individualized way: he is a man, with a body of specific proportions, rather than an arbitrary agent of the cult. His clothing is “intrinsically bound up not only with his priestly duties, but also with his priestly identity” (Dena Weiss on Sifra Tzav, Chapter 2, Section 1).

The Talmud reinforces this idea, saying that the moment when the *kohen* puts on his garments is, itself, significant and transitional. The act of dressing the part allows the *kohen* to play the role that he is called to play and also uniquely equipped to perform. His appointment may be an accident of birth, but he is nonetheless expected to live into the role, investing it with his own sense of self based on his own sensibilities and experiences. I find that very interesting.

We use the Pesach seder in a similar way, as we act out a highly ordered set of rituals that link us heritage and community and to our own lives as unique individuals. Is the real priest the man when he is in the privacy of his home, or the kohen in his public role? Are we the same people and just as genuine as individuals with our own constraints and needs, or the liberated people we appear to be, scooping up charoset and singing Hallel at the Seder?

As I have shared with you before, my training for the rabbinate highlights this question. Since much of my preparation for the rabbinate took place without my leaving home, my mentors and I had to figure out how I would become a Rav, with the internal qualities and presence of a Rav, without going off on an island? How would I become a person invested of a rabbinic presence, and not simply a person who had learned more Torah?

The truth is that there is no pixie dust, no magic in making oneself real. We learn to become ourselves by mindfully practicing and doing. We mind the roles we play and come to inhabit them. The real me, and the real you, is everything we are, past experiences and hopes for what we might yet be wrapped into every encounter. We are all that we have and all that we lack, all that is public and all that is private, all that glimmers and all that does not, all the time. When you see me as your Rabbi, you see a lot about what makes me the person I am. When I see you in your joy or distress, I also feel what is alive beneath the surface.

A rabbinic story says that if, after our lives are over, the Eternal One asks us why we did wrong, the soul will want to blame the body, saying something like, “it was my body that did it, while I, a pure soul, was like a poor bird flying in the air.” And the body will want to blame the soul, saying something like “I was at the mercy of my inner driver; I couldn’t help myself. Now that my soul has left my body and flown away, I cannot be held responsible.” But the Eternal One will judge the two as one, because the human being is a united whole, a soul and a body together, with all of the memories and hopes and feelings attached to our experiences. (adapted from Rabbi Mordecai Silverstein’s online adaptation of Vayikra Rabbah 4:5, Margulies ed. pp. 87-90).

Understanding that we are always the real thing means that our personal power is only limited by our fears or constraints that may be imposed on us. We do not need to fear being discovered to be anything other than who we are, or worried that we don’t have what it takes to face the challenges our lives offer.

We do not need to worry about being real. What we do need to be concerned about is what keeps us from accessing the fullness of who we are. It takes courage not to be afraid of our own power. We must be brave to trust that we will be received with enough grace, curiosity, and love to bring ourselves fully to every encounter. It takes vision and a leap of faith to make space that invites others to feel comfortable being real with us. Like the middle matzah, the real you is hidden and revealed and infinitely redeemable. These are the opportunities of Pesach.

Pesach is our most embodied holiday. We clean our homes and burn our chametz. At the seder we recline and drink, point and see, eat specific foods at specific times, and we sing. Some of us even act out plays. We are asked to inhabit the story of the Exodus, not simply tell it. We taste it and let the liberation of our ancestors spark our own liberation and our own gratitude for the eternal call of freedom.

“בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים” - In each and every generation, each person must see themselves as if they personally left Egypt. We make ourselves protagonists in our communal story of leaving Egypt, a place on a map, not far from a Sea of Reeds, so that we can also find the wherewithal to leave what holds us back from our genuine, authentic flourishing and purpose as unique individuals, here and now. Each cup of wine we drink during the Seder carries us further down the road to redemption—in the Torah narrative and in the Torah of our own lives.

This is why we prepare, why we rid ourselves of chametz and set a table full of props. As Rebbi Nachman of Brestlov taught, the physical removal of chametz prompts a spiritual house cleaning. We empty our heads of the narishkeit that keeps us trapped,

sours our wisdom and makes us crave what does not help us, in order that we can bring forth our true voices and let them hit us over the head with the reality of our freedom to become all that we are meant to be (Likutei Moharan 5:4).

We do this not for our own aggrandizement but because we understand that it is a privilege to serve in this world, to take responsibility and to extend the blessings of freedom beyond ourselves. It may not be easy becoming free to be you and me, but on Pesach, we celebrate it as the most joyful opportunity and most beautiful return we can offer in response to the great gift of being alive.

I wish you all a חג שמח וכשר, a joyful and meaningful Pesach.