

Vayikra 5781
Doing Difficult Things
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Imagine that you grew up in a fertile plain in a beautiful part of the world, with a mild climate, rich soil, and lush rivers and streams. Your grandparents had come there against their will some 50 years earlier, taken as captives from their ancestral homeland, but you were raised in this place, under benevolent rule, among a strongly identified community of fellow Jews who had figured out how to thrive in diaspora. You now have a young family of your own. You are settled and happy, even though until last month, the Law forbade you from returning to the land of your ancestors. Now, you are free to leave Babylonia and rebuild your life in Eretz Yisrael. To do so will be a religiously motivated move, with hopes of being part of a rebuilt Temple culture. You believe that if you go, you may feel closer to Torah, your heritage, the Jewish People, and God. But you're not sure it's worth the difficulty.

"You" are exactly the sort of person Isaiah addresses in today's haftarah. Our haftarah has something to say about doing difficult things, especially those sorts of difficult things that we could simply not do, but that have the potential to elevate us spiritually. One might fancy that our ancestors were eager to return from exile, but most chose to remain in Babylonia rather than undertake the difficulties of starting over again and building up from rubble.

Today's haftarah comes to tell us that the difficult road can lead to spiritual fulfillment unachievable by a walk in the park, and what we heard today makes the point not only in substance, through the text itself, but also in form, because of who chanted it and what it meant for him to do so.

In honor of his 64th birthday, Scott chanted a haftarah today for the first time in his life. When he became a bar mitzvah, his shul had so many kids that three b'nei mitzvah would share one Shabbat morning service. His parents chose, instead, the option of a Mincha service, but we don't normally read a haftarah at Mincha. As an adult, Scott always wished he could chant a haftarah but didn't think he could take on a whole one. He saw an opportunity when we changed to shorter versions during the pandemic.

It was very difficult. Scott is really smart in areas where I am completely lost. And, there are skills that come easily to me that are more challenging for him. Decoding Hebrew, singing a melody, and reciting anything in public fall in that second category. He practiced for months, with patience, resolve, and many hours of drill, with a recording

and with me, to prepare for today. Our entire family respects his effort, and we are very proud of him.

There are difficult tasks that are not worth doing, and there are difficult tasks that inspire others, precisely because they were difficult. Here's an example from our tradition of something hard that was not worth doing: getting the gold to make the Golden Calf. Our midrashic sages reflect on how that happens. The Torah states: "Aaron said unto them (the men): *Break off the golden rings, which are in the ears of your wives.*" That sounds like a strange way to get to the gold, an odd phrasing about which our sages conjecture: Aaron told them to do this difficult thing because (he was aware that) the women would not agree to it. They had seen the miracles and the deeds that the Holy Blessed One had wrought for them in Egypt, and what had transpired at the Reed Sea and at Sinai, and they went to the men and said: God forbid that we should renounce the Holy Blessed One, who has performed all these miracles and mighty deeds on our behalf, in order to fashion an idol! The men, however, contrary to Aaron's hopes, refused to listen to their wives: "*And all the people broke off the golden rings which were in their ears,*" the Torah says. It does not say "in their wives' ears" but rather "*in their ears*" (Tanchuma Ki Tissa 19:3); in other words, the men broke off their own earrings for the Golden Calf, but the women would not do that difficult thing because they understood that whatever good might come of it would come at too great a cost. Some hard things are better not attempted.

One could argue that a worthy but difficult task should be given to someone who can do it easily. Why waste time when someone else can get the job done efficiently, and perhaps better? But when it comes to *mitzvot*, I would argue the opposite. We discover our religious vitality precisely in the space between what is difficult and what is impossible.

Today we began to read from the Book of *Vayikra*, otherwise known as "Torat Kohanim," the "Instructions for the Priests." It orders the sacrificial cult so that the Israelite nation can express its loyalty to God and draw close to the Divine, with offerings pertinent to the events of their lives and their emotional reactions to those events. The Torah prescribes different kinds of offerings to meet different circumstances. The Torah also understands that a range of options must be provided for people to offer as sacrifices, so that regardless of a person's resources, equal access will be possible. Some will bring cattle, others will bring a bird, and some will bring grain. Some of those who bring grain will bring it in a deep pan filled with oil, or as cakes, and others will offer grits in a shallow pan. I am struck by the Torah's equal validation of every type of offering. The Torah makes clear that the Priests are to await all gifts with equal eagerness, receive them with equal reverence, and imbibe them with equal honor and mercy.

But the human ego gets in the way, and our sages miss the point. They attach value to more expensive offerings and infer intentions and even qualities of character based on the offerings--meat versus grain, grain that's gritty, or the likes of sacrificial donuts. They imply that those who bring grits in a pan lack commitment.

We, too, often miss the point, glorifying expert offerings and undervaluing more modest ones--be they school work, monetary gifts, or ritual offerings. In doing so, we risk disempowering and disenfranchising people with less developed resources, depriving them of the growth and inspiration that only find people in the space between what is difficult and what is impossible.

Rabbi Simcha Bunem of Przychucha taught that when we bring an offering, our intention is to draw near to the core of *kedushah--sanctity--at* the root of our soul. In his view, it makes no difference how much one gives or how easy or how difficult it might have been to give it. The point is that at the point of arrival, one draws near to the divinity within them. We should stand back with reverence, he says, for each person who seeks that closeness through the offering they do their honest best to bring.

Rabbi Bunem's point is that in the realm of Judaism, the most important thing is the religious spark at the moment we perform the mitzvah. I agree that doing mitzvot strengthens our spiritual core, but I would favor the approach of the Sfat Emet and others, who hold that *kavannah--the* intention we bring within our specific context, serves a critically important role in the performance of a mitzvah.

In my experience, in the realm of Torah study and ritual observance, the process that leads to the mitzvah informs and gives shape to the moment of its accomplishment. Let's go back to the bringing of sacrificial offerings. Imagine a woman struggling to feed herself who wants to draw close to God and community. Aware that others bring delicacies to the Temple, she takes from the little grain she has, and puts it in a pan. She can't really afford the minimum amount of olive oil needed to mix into the grain, but she goes ahead and adds it, hoping the spiritual closeness she anticipates will be worth the sacrifice. The woman carries her pan up the hill to the Temple and hands it over to the Priest. He lifts her pan from her hand, scoops up the required portion, and offers it on the altar. Later, the priests sit down to eat their portion of the day's offerings, and that woman's gritty grain is placed alongside whatever else was brought by others on that day. The priest who received her offering remembers her simple garb, her hopeful face, and her trembling hand with tender concern and gratitude. At her home, the woman knows that the priests are sitting in the sacred precinct, eating their portion of her humble gift. Her heart draws closer to God and to the House of Israel. She whispers a prayer that her offering will bring them some measure of pleasure. As they eat the grain

from her pan, gritty though it is, the priests draw closer to her, knowing that her effort bore a particular preciousness.

A lamb, a bird, a cake, or grits in a pan; learning a *sugya* of Talmud, or chanting a haftarah for the first time: a grand offering or a modest one--whatever the offering, the process that brings us to the moment of fulfillment yields its own, unique rewards. That is why, when we praise God upon reaching a milestone, we say "*shehecheyanu v'kiy'manu v'higianu lazman hazeh*"--acknowledging that we have lived the days that led to this one and we have *arrived* to this time. Celebrating arrival at the moment of mitzvah must include gratitude for the journey.

To be sure, *simcha shel mitzvah*, joy in a mitzvah, is worth celebrating when the one who performs it is experienced and can deliver it easily. When we know our way around synagogue rituals and perform them with self-confidence, we experience a certain kind of joyful connection that is worthy of respect.

It is human nature to build on our strengths, but many of us rarely put ourselves in the position of being a novice. That is unfortunate, because a penetrating *simcha shel mitzvah* can occur when one undertakes a mitzvah with the humility of a novice, investing in each detail with respect and effort. Such an offering honors the mitzvah and the entire structure that supports it in a way that brings a particular kind of blessing to the one who undertakes it.

When I learned Talmud at Svara, my teacher and friend, the Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Benay Lappe, demanded that I memorize each section I studied. Plumbing the nuances of each word and scouring every commentary did not suffice. I had to present the text orally, by rote, and that was hard. I have always struggled with memorization. At least Talmud is words, not numbers, but still, I spent hours and hours memorizing. And do you know what happened? I began to walk around with our sages' chatter in my head, their thoughts ready on my tongue. I owned a bit of text, then the next bit and the one after that, and that is how I became a player in our tradition, a modern Jew who can sit down and talk with our ancient sages and hold my own. I brought that methodology to my teaching and it worked magic for some of my students. They offered similar reflections. It was not the particular, quirky words that made the difference, although for me, now, there is professional value in having those words in my head. But it was the effort of learning a text inside out that drew me, my colleagues, and my students closer to Torah, to the Jewish People, and to the Source of all that is right and good.

You may know that in the Torah scroll, the first word of the Book of Vayikra, which we began reading today, ends with a letter Aleph that is always written smaller than the other letters in the scroll. Many commentators draw interpretations from that Aleph. Rav Kook taught that the letter Aleph represents all of the Hebrew letters, and as such, it also represents a soul on fire, glowing with the the spirit of all that is good and holy in the world. When we offer whatever we offer to God and our kahal, our own souls have a chance to experience that divine illumination when we hear the call to offer it and when we internalize the importance of our gift. In the case of today's haftarah, that internalization happened from the moment of choosing to offer this gift, through the painstaking process of sounding out each word and applying its cantillation, to the deep breath before the opening brachah. Why, then, should the Aleph in God's call for closeness be small, and not large? The answer is that we are called to bring our own, small bits of sacred light humbly into communion with the great light that flows through and unites all past, present, and future experience.

The small Aleph beckons each one of us, though we are but tiny specks in a vast universe, to draw closer to the realm of the greatest possible good--not because somewhere deep inside we believe we're more spectacular than we are, but precisely because we know we are not. From a point of humility we bring what can, hoping to connect more strongly with what we value. In the synagogue, that means connecting with God, or Torah, or the kahal, or perhaps all three.

Every year, when we open the Book of Vayikra and encounter that little Aleph, we have a new opportunity to inhabit its depth, to seek our greatness by living into our smallness, to risk doing difficult things for the hope of drawing closer to our heritage.

I wish for all of us the joy that comes from doing *mitzvot* with ease and finesse. Perhaps more importantly, I hope we can all find spiritual flourishing that only grows in the space between what is difficult and what is impossible. I hope and pray that we will all be inspired when what grows in that space is brought here, to our sacred, communal space, and that we will respond with a grateful and joyful Amen.