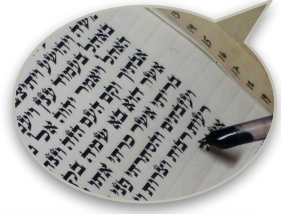




The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Vayikra

Parshat Tzav • Shabbat Hagadol

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The Special Connection

By B. J. Douek

That the Jews are connected with God in a special way and that God does not allow that bond to fail is entirely obvious. - Josef then Cardinal Ratzinger, the late Benedict XVI

It is interesting that a non-Jew, albeit one with a deep sense of spirituality, could see this bond while most Jews do not.

I am reminded of one of the Pesach letters of *Menachem Mendel Schneerson*, the seventh *Lubavitcher Rebbe*. He noted the structure of our Seder and its design to capture the attention of children. So much so that central in the telling, we recount the issue of the four sons to emphasize that different kinds of education are needed by different personalities: wise, wicked, simple, and one who doesn't know how to ask. The *Rebbe* noted that while the four sons differ from one another in reaction to the Seder service, they have one thing in common—they are all present. Unfortunately, the *Rebbe* lamented, there is in our times a fifth child—the one conspicuous by his absence.

Sociologically we shouldn't be surprised. Generations of Jewish immigrants to the United States came to a new and strange land, but one that offered opportunity. They were a minority. And they were different. They suffered for generations from what the modern-day philosopher, Rabbi Motty Berger, termed, "the dislike of the unlike". For them, assimilation was the answer, but this life choice created an internal spiritual conflict. They determined to shield the next generation from this conflict and usher their progeny into a state of freedom. But, in reality, the escape was illusory—and the freedom, a cheap imitation.

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin, founding Chief Rabbi of *Efrat* and founder and *Rosh HaYeshiva* of *Ohr Torah Stone*, speaks of a *Midrash* quoted by *Rabbenu Zadok HaCohen* of Lublin in discussing *Parashat Acharei Mot* (which in a leap year is often read on *Shabbat HaGadol*). An individual is walking on a road (emblematic of life's journey) being summoned by fire to the right and snow to the left. Fire of course is a metaphor for a sin of passion such as that of *Nadav* and *Avihu* (the incident to which the name of the *Parasha* refers). They brought a 'strange fire' into the sanctuary to express their passion for God (albeit for the wrong reasons our sages tell us) and end up being consumed by fire. Interestingly, the *Parasha* opens with God speaking "to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron when they drew near before the Lord and died." (*Vayikra* 16:1) **The key words being: drew near.** They are punished for their zealotry, but, in the end, they were near to God.

The contrast might be the transgression of the tribal chiefs serving as scouts (*Parashat Shelach Lecha*). Their apathy toward the religious and political potential of national sovereignty led them to the path of least resistance, returning to Egypt rather than remaining in the desert with all of its perceived dangers. The spies' report, given on the 9th of Av, resulted in the Jews being suspended in the desert for 40 years. An entire generation was deprived of experiencing nationhood after suffering slavery and the date that became a harbinger of major disasters including the destruction of the 1st and 2nd Temples. **The**

conclusion being that zealotry is not as severe as apathy—not having that connection or bond to the land (as was the case with the spies), to the people (as in the case of the 5th child), and ultimately, as then Cardinal Ratzinger alluded, to God.

According to a 2013 Pew Research study, 70% of American Jews (including those considering themselves atheist or agnostic, but with some roots or lineage) say they participate in a Seder. To put this in context, only 53% of this population claim to fast in whole or in part on *Yom Kippur*. A 2022 study by the Jewish Federations of North America, showed some improvement and upped the number of Jews participating to approximately 80%. In Israel, the numbers are better—being placed at 95—96% who participate in a Seder with no differences between observant, traditional, and secular. (As an interesting aside, though Jews comprise 2-3% of the population, 20% of Americans say they will attend a Seder.) **These statistics underscore a great opportunity. This is the time we show up.**

So here's the question: How do we elevate 'showing up' for a social ritual to 'stepping up' to actualize the special connection? As our late revered Rav, Jacob Rubenstein, *z"l*, was fond of saying, connection with the Almighty is a two-way street. The Almighty has made His commitment known: "And I shall take you unto Me for a people, and I shall be to you God." (*Shemot* 6:7) Now it's our turn. The Seder is our time. Rabbi Nathan Laufer, Past President of the Wexner Heritage Foundation posits that our commitment manifests through the 15 steps of the Seder, consummating at *Nirtzah*, acceptance. Seven instances of the number 15 require understanding and merit our focus.

- There are 15 steps to the Seder (*Kadesh, Urchatz, Karpas*, etc.).
- The Seder is on the 15th day of *Nisan*.
- There are 15 steps (*Ma'alot Tovot*) for which we praise God when we sing *Dayenu*.
- In the Torah scroll, the *Shir Shel Yam* (Song of the Sea) is written in three columns, the center of which appears as an ascending ladder and has 15 steps.
- There were 15 steps on the southern side of the Temple mount that led to the Temple in Jerusalem.
- There are 15 psalms that begin with the words "*Shir HaMa'alot*" (A song of steps) that were sung by the *Levites* as they ascended the Temple Mount.
- Finally, there are 15 words in the priestly blessing, given initially after ascending the Temple Mount.

These 15s share one thing in common — they are all 15s that lead to the direct experience of the divine presence and the bonding which we strive to achieve at our Seder, on the 15th day of *Nisan*, as we recite the 15 steps of the Seder and praise God for the 15 'good steps' in *Dayenu* to celebrate the bond spoken of by the Cardinal between we Jews and God—who, not coincidentally, is named *Y-h = 15*.

B. J. and Bunny have lived in the YIS community for more than 40 years. We are proud to have been builders in the community, but acknowledge that we have received far more than we have given.

This dvar Torah is derived from the introduction I wrote in honor of my mother-in-law, Antoinette Lewin, for the first Seder Bunny and I observed without her.

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