

Dunkin' Dishes

Mattot Mas'ei 5782

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“Rabbi, I have a confession to make.”

This is a sentence I hear with some regularity, and it is usually followed by the recounting of some character failing, sin or indiscretion, so I was prepared for the worst.

“Rabbi, I have a real problem with toiveling dishes. I don't prevent my wife from doing it, but I have a philosophical problem with immersing dishes in a mikvah before using them, as if they are somehow impure.”

As far as confessions go, I've definitely heard worse, but I could understand why he felt he was confessing to a major religious failing. After all, the mitzvah that he was describing is a biblical commandment, recorded in this week's Torah reading, where the Torah describes the protocols the Jewish people were obligated to follow in dealing with the spoils of the battle with the Midianites:

וְכָל-בָּגֶד וְכָל-כְּלֵי-עוֹר וְכָל-מַעֲשֵׂה עֵזִים וְכָל-כְּלֵי-יָצֵץ תִּתְּחַטְּאוּ: {ס}

You shall also purify every cloth, every article of skin, everything made of goats' hair, and every object of wood.”

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן אֶל־אֲנָשֵׁי הַצִּבָּא הַבָּאִים לַמִּלְחָמָה זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת־מֹשֶׁה:

Eleazar the priest said to the troops who had taken part in the fighting, “This is the ritual law that יהוה has enjoined upon Moses:

אֶדָּ אֶת־הַזָּהָב וְאֶת־הַכֶּסֶף אֶת־הַנְּחֹשֶׁת אֶת־הַבַּרְזֶל אֶת־הַבְּדִיל וְאֶת־הַעֲפָרַת:

Gold and silver, copper, iron, tin, and lead—

כֹּל־דָּבָר אֲשֶׁר־יָבֵא בָאֵשׁ תַּעֲבִירוּ בָאֵשׁ וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָבֵא בָאֵשׁ תַּעֲבִירוּ בַּמַּיִם:

any article that can withstand fire—these you shall pass through fire and they shall be pure, except that they must be purified with water of lustration; and anything that cannot withstand fire you must pass through water.

וְכַבְּסֶתֶם בַּגְּדֵיכֶם בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְטַהַרְתֶּם וְאַחַר תָּבֹאוּ אֶל־הַמַּחֲנֶה: {ס}

On the seventh day you shall wash your clothes and be pure, and after that you may enter the camp.”

In short, any flavor absorbed from the Midianites had to be purged in the same way that it entered the vessels that were taken, and all utensils had to be immersed in holy water before use.

I am certain my interlocutor is not alone in his antipathy toward the laws of immersing and kashering dishes. Even if people know the biblical origin of these laws, they may consider them anachronistic and unrelatable. How is it that immersing a dish in a body of water makes it holy? Have you *seen* some of these *keilim mikva'os*? The idea that a cistern of brackish water somehow confers purity on an object you will need to wash right away seems downright laughable, and not particularly worth the inconvenience. And then, even if you do use the *keilim mikvah*, you finally arrive at home with all your stuff, and you realize that there are still stickers on a few of the glasses you thought you had immersed, representing a *chatzitzah*, a barrier, rendering it impermissible for use until it is reimmersed. Even if you accept the need to *toivel* your dishes, the principles behind *kashering* dishes that become non-kosher seem scientifically dubious. You have to keep in mind whether a dish was used in a liquid medium or whether it had been exposed to intense dry heat. You have to keep track of whether the dish had been used in the last 24 hours, because after that timeframe, the taste that is absorbed into the dish is no longer viable or appealing. And you need to know whether the dish is made from the kind of material that can be kashered altogether. For some people, it is not so much the conceptual underpinnings that are difficult to accept; it is their practical ramifications. So what if my housekeeper used a dish once for non-kosher food, or used a dairy dish for a meat entree? Why should I lose out on a family heirloom set of china because my non-observant great-aunt used it for non-kosher

food decades ago? Furthermore, boiling dishes can be dangerous! I recall one year at The Jewish Center, when I ran *hag'alat keilim* before Pesach. Someone presented me with a bag of kiddush cups to kasher, and I lightly scalded myself. Providentially, the person whose kiddush cups I was kashering was a member of Hatzalah, and had Silverdine handy to rub on the affected area. So why do we go through this whole process just to be able to use a pot?

These are pretty compelling arguments *against* the observance of these commandments, but I think there is a powerful argument in *favor* of them. The great Chassidic master, Rav Nosson of Breslov, the foremost student of the Rebbe Rav Nachman, writes that since food comes to us from God, the utensils in which it is served can either serve as to connect food to its source of holiness, or sever it. When our forefather Yitzchak asked Esav to prepare a meal for him, he said¹

וַעֲמֵל שְׂאֵנָא כְּלִיָּהּ תְּלִיָּהּ וּמִשְׁתַּדֵּה וְצֵא הַשְּׂדֵה וְצוּדָה לִי (צידה) [ציד]:

Take your gear, your quiver and bow, and go out into the open and hunt me some game.

The language used in this verse also could mean “to elevate” your utensils. In commanding the Jewish people to immerse their vessels and purge their utensils, the Torah wanted the Jews to take drastic measures to separate themselves from

¹ Bereishit 27:3

the environment around them, so that the vessels they used would be vehicles for divine connection. **It was imperative that the Jews not be spoiled by their spoils.**

They needed to learn that we all have the potential to absorb negative influences from our environment, especially in the realms we consider insignificant, because it is precisely these areas that can change the way we think, and influence the way we look at the world. Morality, our sense of right and wrong- these are shaped by the kind of entertainment we consume, the literature we read and the avenues we use for gathering information. It's true in regard to politics, too. The issues that divide our country are not at all inconsequential. But all too often, the way we view these issues- be they abortion, gun control, immigration, the environment or a host of others- is based on whatever we define as our interest. We tell ourselves that our Jewish values dictate the way we vote, and that may be true. But often, being politically doctrinaire leaves precious little room for being Jewishly nuanced- and the Jewish perspective is formulated after we decide who we vote for. I assure you that this is true on both sides of the aisle. I regularly receive emails from politically active members on both ends of the political spectrum, demanding that I speak immediately in favor of some political development, or equally vociferously that I speak against it. In essence, they are insistent upon hearing the political views they already hold be "blessed by a Rabbi." In fact, for every one of these issues, a Torah viewpoint grounded in classical sources from our rich tradition does not readily align with any political position. A good rule of thumb is that **if anyone's religious**

worldview completely overlaps with the platform of the party they enthusiastically vote for, it is a sign they have “absorbed taste” from the world around them without even realizing it. In order to ensure that we are living lives of holiness, we must take great care that vessels we use to engage with the world are initiated into holiness, and purged from any sense of impurity. Perhaps we may not “buy” the science behind the absorption of taste in our vessels, but there are many ways in which we apply this notion in the moral and ethical choices we make. If you refuse to buy German cars, if you will only purchase conflict free diamonds, if you are concerned about the ethics of the labor that goes into making the phone you use, if you only consume organic or cruelty free products, you are concerned about “absorption.” .

More broadly, the laws of *hechsher keilim* remind us not only of the dangers of external influence, but of its far-reaching potential. There are things which we observe outside of the confines of a Torah Judaism which inspire us and serve as motivation for our own internal growth. When that happens, we must take a page from the world and filter it through the prism of our tradition and values – undergoing a process of *kashering*.

A story is told² of the Yid haKodesh, Rav Yaakov Yitzchak of Przhyzucha. As a newlywed, he had been boarding in the home of his father-in-law, as was

² Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, vol 2, pg. 225

customary. His next-door neighbor was a smith who would rise early in the morning, striking a hammer on an anvil, causing the sound to roar like thunder in the ears of the young *tzadik*. Reb Yaakov Yitzchak woke up and thought: “if this man tears himself away from sleep so early for worldly work and worldly profit, shall I not be able to do the same for the service of the eternal God?”

The following morning, he rose before the smith, who, as he entered his workshop, heard the young man reading in a low tone. This irritated him: “How can he be at work already? He doesn't even need to be doing what he is doing! It's entirely discretionary!” I certainly won't allow a fellow like that to get ahead of me!”

On the following night he got up before the *Yid haKodesh*, which prompted the young scholar to take up the challenge to the next level, besting his neighbor. In later years he used to say: “Whatever I have attained I owe first and foremost to a smith.”

This is the lesson of *tevilat keilim*, and *hagalat Keilim*. Let us keep dunking and boiling our dishes- and living lives that are expressions of our loftiest Jewish values