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Getting Dirty for Pesach

Cleaning my apartment on Friday mornings was a highlight of mine while living in Jerusalem during my first year of rabbinic school. I actually looked forward to taking out the trash, placing bottles next to the garbage cans, sweeping off all the dust from the bookshelf and hanging my clothes and sheets to dry on the laundry line outside my kitchen. Okay, I did have help. But, Nicole and I enjoyed doing these ordinarily mundane and oftentimes tedious chores. Any other day of the week I would have jumped at the opportunity to hire a cleaning crew to do all those unpleasant tasks had I the funds, yet Friday's were different. Doing these house chores was part of the holiness of Shabbat. Preparation for Shabbat, at least to me, was just as sacred as reciting Kiddush, motzi and Lecha Dodi. For in the menial tasks, we not only made our home ready for Shabbat, but we also spiritually prepared ourselves as well. When the Shabbat siren would blare through the city, we knew our preparation was complete and it was then time to welcome the Sabbath bride.

In this Torah portion, Tzav, we read about those who had to take out the trash and get filthy dirty every single day. These lowly garbage men were in fact, the priests. God told Moses to command the priests (Aaron and his sons) regarding the rituals of the daily burnt offerings. God explained that the offerings were to burn on the alter all through the night. First thing in the morning, the priests were to dress in fine garments and pick up the ashes of the burnt offering that have been burning all night and place them beside the alter. Then they were to take off their fine priestly clothes, put on new work clothes, and carry the ashes outside of camp to a pure place. At no time was the fire to burn out, thus the priests needed to tend to the fire all day.

When many of us think of the *kohenim*, there might be a sense of reverence that we associate with them. They were the experts in rituals and through them, the Israelites experienced holiness. What is most surprising about the mitzvah of *terumat hadeshen* is that the priests had to perform it first thing in the morning. This chore was not relegated to a servant class or even the Levites. Rabbi Claire Magidovitch Green writes in *The Women's Torah Commentary*, "Clearly, and classically, this is a lesson in humility. Lest the exalted priest get too big for his linen britches, he must do some sort of common, dirty labor. He should know something of the life for those who he ministers. He should be reminded that his function, even when robed in precious fabrics, is a dual servitude: serving God, serving Israel... (Thus), Humility is a component of the service of God."

According to Rashi, the priest did not just walk up to the side of the huge heap of ashes and scoop some up. He was in fact to rake a full pan of ashes from the innermost consumed mass of ashes and deposit them at the east side of the ramp leading up to the alter. In the innermost part of ashes was believed to be where the completely consumed offerings were. In other words, in his fine priestly attire, the priest was to engulf himself in the mass of dead animal ashes, scoop some up and dump the pan-full next to the alter. To properly follow Gods command, the priest had to get really dirty.

The 13th century Sefer haHinukh, explains that it was a "a positive commandment" for the priest to remove the ashes daily from the alter. By tending to the alter in this capacity, the priests were able to keep the fire burning longer and brighter. So the work of the priest was not just to take away what had been used up, but rather to improve what remained. Humbling himself, he caused a brighter flame upon the alter.¹

In just a couple days from now many of us will be preparing for our Pesach seders. Perhaps some of us have already begun. Pesach is another time when we find ourselves spending

¹ Rabbi Claire Green from the Women's Torah Commentary.

hours cleaning our homes so that our own seder table will be a *mikdash m'at*, a miniature sanctuary. We all know how arduous the preparations can be, from shopping, scrubbing, vacuuming, and removing *chameitz*. There are almost myriad details in preparing for Pesach and it can seem overwhelming. Yet, I wonder if we would rather hire a cleaning crew to do the chores for us. The experience of laboring over Pesach can be a very spiritual and sacred act. Similarly to Shabbat, these preparations can connect us more deeply to Pesach.

Performing a menial task can produce positive results such as instilling in us a sense of humility. God also dwells in these daily chores. By taking out the ashes, the priests made the fire burn even brighter. By cleaning my apartment before Shabbat, I made Shabbat more holy. And by removing all the bread and crumbs from our homes, Passover can be that much more meaningful. So this weekend, take out the feather and candle, get a little dirty and humble yourselves before God.