

Parshat Tzav
The Resource of Liminality
Rabba Dr. Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz
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The world seems turned upside down. Our lives have changed radically, constricted now to the few square metres of our homes, for the most part. Our familiar landmarks of shul, school, work, friends, shopping, have disappeared, to be replaced by a range of emerging virtual realities and adaptations. What on earth could a *parashah* like 'Tsav', full of minutiae about ancient sacrifices, have to say to us at such a time?

So much depends on our point of view. Faced with the same facts, we can panic or act rationally, seize on every rumour or rely on carefully researched information; we can stockpile food selfishly or find ways of helping others. And we also have the choice of dismissing the *parashah* as irrelevant to our current crazy reality, or of digging deeper to find something that speaks to us, that offers us a word from God. Perhaps surprisingly, I've found that my anthropological education has suggested a path into the *parashah*, a way of listening attentively in order to hear a response.

After presenting a 'how to' manual of sacrifices, 'Tsav' focuses on the ritual that transforms Aharon and his sons into priests, people dedicated to the service of both God and the community. It turns out to be a classic 'rite of passage', a type of ritual first studied by Arnold van Gennep, a German-Dutch-French anthropologist, back in 1909. Common in all times and cultures, rites of passage mark the moment or period when people leave one status and enter another---think of weddings, bar mitzvahs, or indeed, funerals. Van Gennep noted that they are usually divided into three stages:

1. Separation, when the person making the transition to the new status leaves behind their former self. This is often marked by rituals such as cutting off hair or shaving, moving to a special place, removing previous clothing, bathing, etc.
2. A period of liminality, when the person is neither one thing nor the other, which may last a few seconds to some months. There may be special clothing or activities for this stage, which are not worn in any other context and mark the person out as temporarily removed from mainstream society and any clear role or status.
3. Integration, when the person returns to society in their new role, often marked by new clothing, presentation of certificates, or of symbols such as knots and things that indicate unity and connection (think of rings, crowns, belts).

The induction ceremony for Aharon and his sons, called *miluim*, or 'filling in', is a classic example of a rite of passage, transforming the five chosen individuals from ordinary people into sacred specialists with awe-inspiring responsibilities and roles, mediating between the holy and pure realm of the divine, and the fallible, contaminated, human people of Israel. We can clearly see the three stages of separation, liminality, and integration.

In the separation rite Aharon and his sons are brought to the Mishkan, washed, dressed in special clothes, and anointed with sacred oil. Moshe, the master of ceremonies, offers three

sacrifices and puts some of the sacrificial blood on the right ears, right thumbs, and right big toes of Aharon and his sons, then sprinkles more blood on them and their priestly clothes. The blood marks them out as undergoing transformation, since it comes from a sacrifice---an animal that is given to God and thereby acquires holiness. The whole ceremony takes place in the Mishkan, itself a place 'outside' normal life.

In the liminal period, Aharon and his sons sit for seven days outside the Tent of Meeting, eating food from the sacrifices, living outside normal time and space, in isolation from the everyday, cut off from their ordinary lives.

The grand finale comes on the eighth day, with the integration rite: Aharon performs three sacrifices in the Mishkan---he 'enters' his new role as a *kohen* by performing it. One of the sacrifices he offers is on behalf of all the people of Israel, demonstrating to everyone that Aharon now has a new and special status, acting for the welfare of the entire people. The ceremony has transformed Aharon and his sons into more than they were, into individuals who now have a national and holy role.

We too have been removed from our ordinary lives---in our case, not by a ritual but by an all too real pandemic--and are currently in a state of liminality. Eventually, we hope, we will emerge and reintegrate into our usual lives. But it is important to realize that those lives will not be the same as our old lives, and that we, like Aharon and his sons, will have been changed by our experience. If, like the *kohanim* of old, we are to grow into new roles in a new world, serving God and our communities---perhaps even becoming that 'kingdom of *kohanim* and holy nation' that God commands us to be---we need to use this liminal period to think about how we will have to act to change our old reality into a better one.

This year, *Parashat Tzav* coincides with Shabbat haGadol and so the haftarah is the special reading from Malachi. The regular *haftarah* for Tzav though, is from Jeremiah, and it pulls us back to God's priorities for human beings:

'Thus said the Lord: Let the wise man not boast of his wisdom, nor the warrior boast of his might. Let the rich man not boast of his riches. But in this may he who boasts boast: understanding and knowing Me, for I am the Lord doing kindness, justice, and righteousness in the land, for in these I delight, said the Lord.'

Our challenge is to transform an unwanted period of isolation into a time for developing our moral awareness and ethical responsibility. This crisis has shown up the cracks in society and the unsustainable nature of the way we used to live. Let us use this enforced liminality to learn, to reflect, to reconnect to families and friends (even if virtually), to plan, and to emerge transformed and energized to transform our world into a place of kindness, justice, and righteousness.



Rabba Dr. Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz studied at Cambridge University, the Hebrew University, and University College London, and has recently published Challenge and Conformity: The Religious Lives of Orthodox Jewish Women (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2021). Rabba Lindsey is a Research Fellow at Manchester University and London School of Jewish Studies, and has lectured at the universities of Cambridge, Oxford, King's College London, and Vassar College, NY. Active in interfaith, she has led Scriptural Reasoning groups and completed the Senior Faith in Leadership Programme. She helped to found Hendon Partnership Minyan, and teaches leyning to women, in addition to teaching regularly at Limmud.