

Transformation and *Tzav*
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Upon learning that we are in the book of Leviticus, you might initially sigh, for this is the book of boring laws and meaningless sacrifices. I thought so too, until last semester when I took an entire course dedicated to Leviticus with my brilliant professor Dr. Tamara Eskenazi, one of the editors of *Torah A Women's Commentary*. As of now, this book has become my favorite book of Torah, for many reasons, one of which is highlighted in our Torah portion today, *Tzav*.

A few verses into the Torah portion, we read, “And this is the ritual of the meal offering: Aaron’s sons shall present it before God, in front of the altar. A handful of the choice flour and oil of the meal offering shall be taken from it, with all the incense that is on the meal offering, and this token portion shall be turned into smoke on the altar as a pleasing odor to God.”¹ I have always been fascinated by this language of “turned into smoke on the altar as a pleasing odor to God.” The phrase, repeated many times in Leviticus, contains the Hebrew word, *hiktir*. Literally, this word in a sacrificial context, means “to make sacrifices smoke.”² Jacob Milgrom, a biblical scholar, says it is important that we distinguish our word *hiktir* from the Hebrew word *olah* or *aysha* which mean “to burn.” Mary Douglas, another biblical scholar, explains through an analysis of the Hebrew that the act of sacrifice is less about killing and more about a transforming of one kind of existence to another. What does sacrifice have to do with transformation and how can transformation have implications on our lives today?

Regarding sacrifice or *korban*, Dr. Eskenazi comments that *transformation of a substance into smoke* that rises into heaven conveys the worshippers’ communication to an invisible God.

¹ Leviticus 6:7-8

² BDB 882

The ephemeral substance visibly travels heavenward to the space often associated with the ineffable God.³ Her idea seems to be rooted in the notion of *korban*, which means to draw near, to come close. In other words, the transformation of the substance to smoke which goes towards an unknowable, invisible God was the ancient Israelites way of speaking to God. Today, we do not do sacrifices. That being said, I think that the principle of transformation still holds true in our communication with God as worshippers. Today, we have transformed our usual worship space. Yes, we are in a different space, but that is not all. We sit in a circle, face to face. This transformation can be understood to facilitate our communication with God as worshippers. In a full circle, we can all see each other, face to face. In Hebrew, that is *panim el panim*. Now, we do not get to look directly into the face of God. In fact, the Torah warns us in Exodus, that one cannot live and see God's face.

While it is true that both Jacob and Moses live to tell the tale of being *panim el panim*, let us not get caught up in these extremities. Instead, let us focus on the importance of *panim el panim*, and how a reorienting of ourselves and the spaces with which we occupy can bring us closer to the Divine. Rabbi Stephanie Kollin of Central Synagogue in New York City teaches that we find a hint in Exodus itself. God instructs Moses to build the lid of the ark with two angels on top, "and their faces will be as a man facing his brother." God then says, "This is where I will meet with you." Thus, in the space between two faces, we meet God, and God meets us.⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, a Jewish and French philosopher, explains how the dimension of the Divine opens from the human face. God is revealed through the face of the other whom the self is commanded to love as one's self. Therefore, in facing others directly, we see the image of God reflected in each person and remember our responsibility to them.

³ Torah A Women's Commentary 573-574

⁴ <https://s3.amazonaws.com/assets.forward.com/downloads/dec2018digitalface-to-face-1543429535.pdf>

When we as worshippers pray, we do not simply look towards God to make miracles. Rather, we seek inspiration to partner with God, to make the world better. To bring healing to the world. To act in ways that bring about *Tikkun Olam*. Through worship, we cannot possibly gain absolute knowledge of God. What we can do is align ourselves more with the Divine will by relating to the other. Transformation allows us to see that which we could not see before. We can certainly make other transformations outside of worship spaces to enable us to be more in touch with others, to get outside of old habits that prevent us from fully doing so.

In our contemporary world, it can become easy to communicate via email and text messaging. With these technologies, though, we miss out on fully understanding the other, their needs and desires. Transforming the ways which we communicate could enhance our relationships with and understanding of others. The covenantal relationship is the foundation of Jewish existence.⁵ When God made a covenant with the Jewish people on Mt. Sinai, it was not with one person alone but with all of Israel. Thus, it is imperative that we continue to honor the covenant with God by being in relationship with the people Israel and all humanity. May we seek new ways to do so, by transforming the spaces we occupy and the ways we communicate, so that we may come closer not to an absolute knowledge of God, but rather to fulfilling God's will to be responsible for and to love each other as ourselves. *Ken Yehi Ratzon*. May this be our will.

⁵ Eugene Borowitz