

Parsha Tzav (Drash given at Adas Israel) March 19, 2022

David Goldston

Tzav deals with the minutiae of the sacrifices, and is a hard parsha to approach. When I first read it, I thought the main lesson from it might be that one should always look over the parsha before agreeing to give a d'rash. But of course I found more, once I spent more time with it.

I'm going to focus on Chapter 8, which describes the installation of Aaron and his sons as priests. It's important to recognize that what's happening here is not just the creation of a set of priests, but of the *priesthood* as an institution.

While what's at stake is the creation of an institution, it's easy to get lost in the details. In reading the parsha, I oscillated between being swept away by the grand, cinematic scene – and thinking the whole thing was ridiculous.

I have to say that my mind wandered more than once to the classic scene in “Monty Python and the Holy Grail” where King Arthur gets into a spat with a peasant who can't understand why Arthur claims to be king of the Britons. Arthur describes how the Lady of the Lake gave him Excalibur, and the peasant retorts that kings should have a democratic mandate not be chosen by some “farcical aquatic ceremony.”

But even that scene recognizes that something deeply serious is at issue – the legitimacy of leadership.

The installation of a high priest – or ordinations, or coronations, or inaugurations – are designed both to convey legitimacy and to encapsulate the societal values that are the basis of that legitimacy. What does the investiture of Aaron and his sons tell us about the values of the ancient Israelites, and about our own?

I found several key elements in the ceremony.

First, it's a public ceremony. This may be easy for us to overlook because it seems so natural to us. But the Torah does not always select leaders in this way. Moses is pretty much alone at the burning bush; no one is around when prophets are inspired. Abraham even leaves his servants behind when he heads off to sacrifice Isaac.

But in this case, we are told the whole community is gathered to witness the ceremony. The priests must get their authority from G_d *and* man; they have to be seen as legitimate by the entire community to carry out their role.

Second, the ceremony is not about Aaron or his sons; it's about the priesthood. There is nothing special or individual about those taking on the role. In the ceremony, the individuals effectively disappear, swaddled in the costume and ointments of their role. The community literally watches Aaron and his sons take on the mantle of the priesthood. This is not about

them; they are transformed. It's the role that's important, and someone has to take it on. The role happens to be given to Aaron and his descendants; it's not about them.

Third, there are no words in the ceremony. This is pretty remarkable in a religion as besotted with words as Judaism. But words would make this about the individual. Instead, the ceremony is written in smell and sight – the senses most likely to create a visceral memory. With all the burning sacrifices, the event is almost literally seared into the memory of the Israelites, and into ours. What's to be remembered is the importance of the moment and the institution, not the individual participants.

And all of this is in service to one overriding value – ritual purity. That's why Aaron needs to be washed and anointed. It's the reason for the fire and the oil and the blood. It's why Aaron has to be sequestered for seven days after the ceremony – maybe something we should consider – before he can assume the office. It's why the altar has to be purified as well. Ritual purity is what enables the priest to do his job.

Now we may marvel at the way the Israelites chose to signify and create that purity, but really any method of creating a sense of sanctity or purity or holiness is inherently going to be arbitrary. The distinction itself matters – helps elevate us, keeps chaos at bay. But it's a mental distinction, and there's no inherently logical way to codify it. Indeed, even language makes that clear. The word “profane” literally means “outside the temple” – so the definition itself is circular. What's not sacred is that which is not sacred. There is no way around this.

Finally, the last thing that the narrative of the ceremony indicates, I think, is that this is very hard – it's hard to maintain ritual purity; it's hard to have the priests subsume, as they must, their individual, human nature. We remember – and those in the story would, too – that not so long before, Aaron was part of the debacle of the Golden Calf. And just next week, we read about Nadab and Abihu, their deaths coming right on the heels of this ceremony. The priesthood is a central institution but not one easy to maintain.

So, I think today's parsha does have something to say to us. It should lead us to think about which values we think should grant legitimacy to our secular and religious leaders, and how we choose to convey that. And it should make us think more deeply about what it means to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy people.”