


Tetzaveh

Holiness, Ambiguity, the Golden Ark, and Freedom

 In *Purim* we know that we are commanded to drink so much that we mix up the phrase, "Blessed be Mordechai and cursed by Haman." The rabbis are very surprised by this because we all know that Judaism stresses sobriety. Some rabbis explain that this was a refrain from a song and, therefore, it was very easy to trip up our tongues on it and, therefore, it was not difficult to mix up these two phrases. Probably one drink would be enough to confuse our tongues. Other rabbis say that there is deeper meaning behind this. We know that in the Prophet Jeremiah exile is considered drunkenness. The very fact of being in exile is a form of drunkenness. What Jeremiah meant by this is that when a person is drunk, he loses his sense of judgment and when a person is in exile, he, too, is many times forced to do things he would otherwise not do.

Purim is different from *Pesach*. On *Pesach* we could all see G-d's salvation. The miracles were clear. The Jewish people were saved by G-d's outstretched arm and mighty hand. *Purim* is different. G-d's name does not even appear in the *Megillah*, and the way salvation came to the Jewish people was very strange. In exile it is very difficult to tell sometimes whether you are blessing Mordechai and cursing Haman or cursing Mordechai and blessing Haman because the means that are chosen and the people who were chosen to save the Jewish people seem very ambiguous. After all, how were the Jewish people saved on *Purim*? They were saved by a woman who did not proclaim her Jewishness. Are we supposed to hide the fact that we are Jews? Weren't the Jewish people redeemed from Egypt, the rabbis say, because they kept their distinctive dress and language and names? Aren't we Jews supposed to be proud of our Jewishness? What's more, the rabbis say that Esther was not only Mordechai's cousin, but she was really his wife. That's why they say when Esther went to the king willingly, she said, "I am losing my life in this world and my life in the next world," meaning that up to now she could always claim that she was forced to sleep with the king, and no woman who is forced to sleep with the king is guilty of anything, but now when she would be going to the king, she would be going willingly. The rabbis explain that when Esther went before the king, she did not just go for conversation. There are

sexual overtones here. What's more, the Jewish people were saved but with a great deal of bloodshed. It looks here like the means chosen were very murky and ambiguous, not like during the holiday of Passover when we were saved from Egypt in a very clear unambiguously moral way.

In the *Torah* portion *Tetzaveh* we learn about the garments the priests wore and the curtains of the Tabernacle, etc., and at the very end of the *Torah* portion, we learn about the little golden altar. At first glance it seems that we are learning about the golden altar that was in the holy part of the sanctuary in the wrong place. We should have learned about it in last week's *Torah* portion, *Terumah*, where we learn about all the other objects that were in the sanctuary. Why was it left to be taught now at the end of this *Torah* portion? We all know that the objects in the Tabernacle stood for what is necessary in order to lead a Jewish life and have a Jewish home. We know that in order to lead a holy life we have to make the right kind of distinctions. The *menorah* stood for the ability to make the correct distinction between truth and falsehood, the ark and the ark cover for distinctions between the holy and the secular, the table for the ability to make the correct distinctions between Israel and the peoples. The little golden altar stood for the ability to make the correct distinctions between the holy and the holy. It is much easier to distinguish between light and darkness, holy and secular, Israel and the people that to distinguish between holy and holy. That's a very difficult task.

Purim is a holy holiday and so is *Pesach*, but they are very different. In the story of *Purim* we learn how G-d works through people and acts through means which we would normally not think are holy. The Jews had to defend themselves by force. The use of force is not generally considered a holy act in Judaism even in defense. Concealing your identity, going to the king as a married woman are also acts which normally would not be considered holy. G-d acts through many people and through many types of actions. Sometimes we have a *Pesach* and sometimes we have a *Purim*, but we cannot dismiss out of hand people's actions or people as individuals, even if they do not measure up to our religious standards. If these people do good, if they help our people, they should be acclaimed and given respect.

Many of the early Zionist pioneers did not observe the laws of our

religion the way we believe they should be observed, but those early pioneers were dedicated to saving our people. Their whole mission was to save the Jewish people. It is very difficult to distinguish between holy and holy. That's why the incense altar was placed at the very end. Sometimes we can't tell whether certain actions or certain people have really done holy things until all the facts are in. Some people may claim they are doing holy things when really they are not. Not everything can be made holy. We must all always realize that there are different levels of holiness, but it is also true that not everything can be holy. We have to wait sometimes till all the facts are in.

Let us hope and pray that we will be able to recognize holiness even when it is murky and ambiguous, and let us always remember that not everything can be holy. *Purim* and *Pesach* are both holy holidays, even though they are different. *Purim* and *Pesach* allow the Jew to exist both in exile and when he is free. Let's hope that Jews will always be free. Amen.