



**RABBI
SACKS**

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לעילוי נשמות: פינחס בן יעקב אשר איז ז"ל, עזריאל בן אריה לייב שרטנר ז"ל

The Light of Holiness

The great moment has come. For seven days - beginning on the 23rd of Adar - Moshe had consecrated Aharon and the kohanim. Now, on Rosh Chodesh Nissan, the time has arrived for Aharon to begin his service, ministering to the people on behalf of God:

It came to pass on the eighth day, that Moshe called to Aharon and his sons, and the elders of Israel, and he said to Aharon, take a young bull for a sin offering, and a ram for a burnt offering, without blemish, and offer them before the Lord.

What is the significance of the "eighth day", the phrase that gives our sedra its name? To understand the profound symbolism of the number eight, we have to go back to Creation itself.

In the beginning, when all was "waste and void", God created the universe. Day by day, the world unfolded. First, there were the domains: light and dark, the upper and lower waters, sea and dry land. Then there were the objects that filled the domains: plant life, the sun, moon and stars, then the fish and birds, and finally the land animals, culminating in mankind. Then came Shabbat, the seventh day, the day of limits and of holiness, on which first

God, then His covenantal people, rested in order to show that there are boundaries to Creation ("Why is God's name Shaddai? Because He said to the universe, Enough - she'amar la'olam dai). There is an integrity to nature. Everything has its proper place, its ecological niche, its function and dignity in the totality of being. Holiness consists in respecting boundaries and honouring the natural order.

Thus, the seven days. But what of the eighth day - the day after creation? For this, we have to turn to Torah she-b'al peh, the oral tradition.

On the sixth day, God made His most fateful decision: to create a being who, like Himself, had the capacity to create. Admittedly, there is a fundamental distinction between human creativity ("something from something") and Divine creativity ("something from nothing"). That is why human beings are "the image of God" but not - as Nietzsche argued - gods themselves.

Yet the ability to create goes hand in hand with the ability to destroy. There cannot be one without the other. Every new technology can be used to heal or harm. Every power can be turned to good or evil. That is why, unlike all other elements of Creation, the Torah prefaces the making of man with a reflective statement - "Let us make . . ." -

as if to signal the risk implicit in creating a being with the power of speech, imagination and freewill: the one life form capable of disobeying God and threatening the order and orderliness of nature.

The danger immediately becomes clear. God tells the first man not to eat of the fruit of one tree. The nature of the tree is irrelevant; what matters is its symbolic function. It represents the fact that Creation has boundaries - the most important being the boundary between the permitted and forbidden. That is why there had to be, even in paradise, something that was forbidden. When the first two human beings ate of the forbidden fruit, the essential harmony between man and nature was broken. Humanity lost its innocence. For the first time, nature (the world we find) and culture (the world we make) came into conflict. The result was paradise lost.

The Sages were intrigued by the chronology of the narrative. According to them, the entire drama of the creation and disobedience of Adam and Eve took place on the sixth day. On that day, they were made, they were commanded about the tree, they transgressed the command and were sentenced to exile. Not only were they condemned to leave the garden. Also, as the day reached its close and night began to fall, they experienced darkness for the first time.

In compassion, God allowed them a stay of sentence. They were given an extra day in Eden - namely Shabbat. For

the whole of that day, the sun did not set. As it too came to a close, God showed the first human beings how to make light:

With the going out of Shabbat, the celestial light began to fade. Adam was afraid that the serpent would attack him in the dark. Therefore God illuminated his understanding, and he learned to rub two stones against each other and produce light for his needs.

This, according to the Sages, is the reason we light a havdala candle at the end of Shabbat to inaugurate the new week.

There is, in other words, a fundamental difference between the light of the first day ("And God said, Let there be light...") and that of the eighth day. The light of the first day is the illumination God makes. The light of the eighth day is the illumination God teaches us to make. It symbolises our "partnership with God in the work of Creation". There is no more beautiful image than this of how God empowers us to join Him in bringing light to the world. On Shabbat we remember God's Creation. On the eighth day (motsa'ei Shabbat) we celebrate our creativity as the image and partner of God.

To understand the full depth of what the sages were saying, it is necessary to go back to one of the great myths of the ancient world: the story of Prometheus. To the Greeks, the gods were essentially hostile to mankind. Zeus wanted to keep the art of making fire secret, but Prometheus stole a spark and taught men how to make it.

Once the theft was discovered, Zeus punished him by having him chained to a rock, with an eagle pecking at his liver.

Against this background can we see the revolutionary character of Jewish faith. We believe that God wants human beings to exercise power: responsibly, creatively, and within limits set by the integrity of nature. The rabbinic account of how God taught Adam and Eve the secret of making fire is the precise opposite of the story of Prometheus. God seeks to confer dignity on the beings He made in His image as an act of love. He does not hide the secrets of the universe from us. He does not seek to keep mankind in a state of ignorance or dependence. The creative God empowers us to be creative and begins by teaching us how. He wants us to be guardians of the world He has entrusted to our care. That is the significance of the eighth day. It is the human counterpart of the first day of Creation.

We now understand the symbolic significance of the eighth day in relation to the Mishkan. As we have noted elsewhere, the linguistic parallels in the Torah show that the construction of the Mishkan in the wilderness mirrors the Divine creation of the world. The Mishkan was intended to be a miniature universe, constructed by human beings. Just as God made the earth as a home for mankind, so the Israelites in the wilderness built the Mishkan as a symbolic home for God. It was their act of creation.

Thus it had to begin on the eighth day, just as Adam and Eve began their creative endeavour on the eighth day. Just as God showed them how to make light so, many centuries later, He taught the Israelites how to make a space for the Divine presence so that they too would be accompanied by light - God's light, in the form of the fire that consumed the sacrifices, and the light of the Menorah. If the first day represents Divine Creation, the eighth day signifies human creation under the tutelage and sovereignty of God.

We can now also understand the significance of the other major theme of Sh'mini, namely the list of permitted and forbidden foods.

Many explanations have been given of the dietary laws. Some see them as rules of hygiene. Potentially disease-ridden animals are to be avoided. Others see them as a discipline of self restraint. In the words of Rav: "the commandments were given to refine human beings." Yet others see in them a set of laws that have no logic other than the fact that they were given by God. On this view, the holy - our glimpse of the Infinite - inevitably transcends our understanding.

However, the simplest and most profound explanation is the one given, in Sh'mini, by the Torah itself:

I am the Lord your God; hallow yourselves and be holy, because I am holy . . . I am the Lord who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy . . .

You must distinguish [l'havdil] between the unclean and the clean, between living creatures that may be eaten and those that may not be eaten.

A similar statement appears later, in Vayikra 20: 24-26:

"I am the Lord your God, who has set you apart [hivdalti] from the nations. You must therefore make a distinction [v'hivdaltem] between clean and unclean animals and between unclean and clean birds. Do not defile yourselves by any animal or bird or anything that moves along the ground - those which I have set apart [hivdalti] as unclean for you. You are to be holy to Me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart [va-avdil] from the nations to be My own."

The key words are "holy" (which appears seven times in these two passages) and l'havdil, "to distinguish" (which appears five times).

To be holy is to make distinctions, to recognise and honour the Divine order of creation. Originally, according to the Torah, human beings (and animals) were to be vegetarians ("I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it; they will be yours for food"). After the Flood, humanity was permitted to eat meat, with the exception of blood (which represents the sanctity of life itself). A concession was made to the human tendency to violence. It is as if God had said: If you must kill, then kill animals, not human beings.

However, the people of Israel were to serve as role models of a higher ideal. They were permitted to kill animals for food, but only those that best exemplified Divine order. So, amphibians were forbidden because they lack a definite place. Others were forbidden because they lack clear form - sea creatures that lack a shape defined by fins and scales; land animals that are not ruminants with clearly defined cloven hoofs. Creatures that prey on others are also forbidden. The overall logic of the dietary laws - the laws of a people called on to be holy - is to permit only those animals that are paradigm cases, clear examples, of order.

I cannot do better than quote the insightful words of Leon Kass (in his fine book, *The Hungry Soul*):

The Levitical dietary laws fit the human animal in his distinctive uprightnes: Celebrating the principle of rational separation, they celebrate not only man's share in rationality but also his openness to the mystery of intelligible yet embodied form . . . The low is made high - or at least higher - through acknowledgement of its dependence on the high; the high is "brought down", democratised and given concrete expression in the forms that govern ordinary daily life. The humdrum of existence and the passage of time are sanctified when the hallowed separateness of the Seventh Day is brought into human life when it is commemorated as the Shabbat. Likewise the commonness of eating is sanctified through observance of

Divine commandments, whose main principles remind the mindful eaters of the supreme rule of the Holy One.

Human beings become holy when they become distinction-making animals, when they recognise and act so as to honour the boundaries of nature.

We now see an extraordinary and intimate connection between five themes:

1. The creation of the universe
2. The building of the sanctuary
3. The dietary laws
4. The havdala ceremony at the end of Shabbat
5. The number eight.

The story of Creation tells us that nature is not a blind struggle between contending forces, in which the strongest wins and power is the most important gift. To the contrary: the universe is fundamentally good. It is a place of ordered harmony, the intelligible design of a single Creator. That harmony is constantly threatened by mankind. In the covenant with Noah, God establishes a minimum threshold for human civilisation. In the covenant with Israel, he establishes a higher code of holiness. The principle of holiness, as of creation itself, is the maintenance of boundaries, within which every form of life receives its due.

The sanctuary, with its partitions, represents boundary-making in space. The dietary laws, with their divisions of permitted and forbidden, represents

boundary-making in life, in the act of eating, the most natural of human activities. The kohein - the person who most exemplifies holiness - is defined by his ability to make distinctions (the role of the Kohen is "to distinguish [l'havdil] between the holy and the profane, between the unclean and the clean" - note again the key words holy and l'havdil, "to distinguish").

In the ceremony of havdala at the start of the eighth day, we become God's partners in the work of creation. Like Him, we begin by creating light and proceed to make distinctions ("Blessed are you . . . who makes a distinction between sacred and profane, light and darkness . . ."). The eighth day thus becomes the great moment at which God entrusts His creative work to the people He has taken as His covenantal partners. So it was with the Mishkan, and so it is with us.

This vision epitomises the priestly voice within Judaism. It is a vision of great beauty. It sees the world as a place of order in which everything has its place and dignity within the richly differentiated tapestry of creation. To be holy is to be a guardian of that order, a task delegated to us by God. That is both an intellectual and ethical challenge: intellectually to be able to recognise the boundaries and limits of nature, ethically to have the humility to preserve and conserve the world for the sake of generations yet to come. 🕯