

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

DAVID AND HIS WIFE MICHAL: During the public procession of the holy ark, David danced around it with enthusiasm and abandon (II Samuel 6:14): "Girt with a linen apron, David leaped with all his might before the Lord." Now his wife Michal, daughter of Saul, watching him "twirling and leaping" in front of all, became upset and "despised him in her heart." When David returned to greet his own family, Michal met him and scoffingly scolded him: "What an honor it was for the King of Israel to expose himself to the view of the slave girls of his subjects, just as a lowly commoner might do!" David's retort was no less pungent and even more spirited: "Before the Lord—who preferred me to your father and his entire family to appoint me ruler over the Lord's people—before Him I should make merry! And even more shall I humble myself, being lowly in my own eyes. And as for the slave girls you mentioned, with them I will be honored!" Apparently David's wife did not understand him. A king and a poet, David displayed spontaneity and modesty, not shamelessness or lowliness. But there was no more communication between David and his discontented wife; she remained childless to the day of her death.

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WHO SHALL BUILD THE TEMPLE? In antiquity, warriors and victors were deemed most suitable for erecting temples. This was their reward and glory. Not so in Judaism. King David (10th century B.C.E.), despite his desperate endeavors to build the Temple in Jerusalem, was denied Divine permission. He was a mighty conqueror; he had shed human blood. Killing, even when justified for the sake of survival, is never venerated. War, even if waged in the name of national security, is never consecrated. Execution, although sanctioned by law, is still regrettable; it is never celebrated. From the Judaic point of view, there can be no "saving" element in any killing or crucifixion, and no "grace" connected with it. Nor are there "holy" wars in Judaism. Wars may be authorized, required or obligatory, but never "holy." The Temple, shrine of holiness, is a symbol of life, not of death; it signifies longevity and peace. Solomon, David's son and successor, whose name (Shelomo is related to "shalom") and whose reign was peaceful, was destined to build the Temple.

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THE BURDEN ON THE PRIVILEGED is the theme of a striking message from God (Lev. 10:3): "Through those near to Me, I shall be sanctified; and before the whole people, I shall be glorified!" Awesome is the responsibility inherent in being close to God and elected by Him—as the leaders and the people of Israel are; they become the human vehicle conveying the divine presence. Two aspects of divinity are stressed in this message: The first, relating to those near to God, is His holiness (ekadesh); the second, relating to the whole people, is His impact (ekaved). Those privileged to experience a sense of intimacy with God are charged with an added duty to uphold and manifest His ultimate supremacy, surpassing the limits of the human and material world—His Kedusha. Thus the entire people shall be imbued with the awareness of God's authority and providence within this world—His Kavod. In Judaism, to be close to God, or elected by Him, results not in the absolution but rather in the enhancement of human responsibility. The higher one's religious position, the more advanced must become his philosophic scope and the more refined his moral sensitivity. The price of being privileged is one's persistent drive for excellence.

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TORAH—ORDAINED RITUALS are beyond human comprehension, subject neither to our reason nor our meddling. A classic example of the inherent illogicality of ritual in general is the Para-Aduma law (Red Cow; Nu. 19) which clearly defies rationalization. Such rituals are “hukim” (“engraved” law), as distinguished from “mishpatim” (“judicious” law); they are divinely-imposed rules to be devoutly embraced by us with intellectual surrender. These elements of transcendental authority and suspended rationality lend ritual its sublimity and sanctity, its elevating qualities and religious impact. Genuine ritual reflects Divine mystery and mastery and elicits human marvel and response. In contrast, “autonomous” ritual, based on human discretion and authority, molded by human preference and mood, arranged in conformity to human desiderata, conducted by arbitrary rules and regulations, is by definition mundane, artful, contrived, theatrical and self-serving. It may be externally exquisite, but still internally empty; a “beautiful service,” but not an authentic worship. To be “creative” in worship is not to concoct or manufacture new rituals, but to approach and observe the Divinely ordained old ones with renewed intensity, inventiveness and dedication.

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INTOXICATION by alcohol is forbidden during worship and study (Lev. 10:9): "Neither wine nor liquor may you (Aaron, the kohen, and his descendants) drink when you enter the Tent of Meeting." While engaged in his duty of inspiring and guiding, the spiritual leader—the kohen as well as the rabbi—must remain sober, keeping his reason keen and alert (10-11): "In order to distinguish between the holy and the ordinary, the foul and the clean, and to teach the Israelites all the laws spoken to them by the Lord through Moses." The experience of devotion to God and comprehension of His Torah must be contained within the normalcy of man's life and the stability of his faculties. "Worship the Lord with restraint of holiness!" (Psalms 96:9). There is no provision in Jewish worship for escapism, impulsiveness, or suppression of decent inhibitions; nor for ecstasies and frenzies induced from the outside. True joy and enthusiasm in worship must come from within. Thus was King David's overflowing jubilation (II Samuel 6:14), "dancing with all his might before the Lord."

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DRUNKENNESS is strictly forbidden for a religious leader while on duty. When he conducts ritual or teaches Torah, the leader in Jewish life—kohen, rabbi, hazzan, teacher—must remain sober. So was Aaron, father of priesthood, instructed (Leviticus 10:8-11): “Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you and your descendants, when you are about to enter the place of worship. You must retain a clear mind to distinguish between the holy and the common, the unclean and clean, and teach the people of Israel all the Divine laws given to them through Moses.” The Talmud (Ker. 13b) is explicit: A rabbi may not render a legal decision when he is under the influence of alcohol. The fervor of sacred worship, as well as the erudition of Torah scholarship, must stem from a person’s natural state of mind, not be induced by drink or drugs. Leading people in religion require full sobriety.

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SHEMINI

March 27, 1992

A BLESSING OVER HUMAN WORK, practiced in Jewish tradition, is modeled after Moses' Psalm (90:17), which is related to the *Mishkan* dedication (*Sifra*, Lev. 9:23):

Moses' Blessing:

*May it be God's will to reveal His Presence upon your handiwork!
May the God of your ancestors increase your numbers a thousandfold, and bless you as you were promised.*

People's Response:

*May the sweetness of our God be upon us!
Let all our handiwork prosper!
Let it be firm and established!
Let all the work we do succeed!*

Yes, there is a blessing for everything in Judaism. Especially for human work and effort, which constantly depends on and needs God's help and blessing.

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ENTHUSIASM: *"Hitlahavut" — emotional fire, like physical, must be controlled. Integrated into man's total experience, it is nourishing. But if it ignores or rejects reality, it is destructive. Within one's normative system, it is productive; outside - it is consuming. The "foreign fire" (eish zara, Lev. 10:1) offered by Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, symbolizes deviate and misused enthusiasm; the "constant fire" (eish tamid, 6:6) of the Temple symbolizes genuine and enriching enthusiasm. David's devotional dancing (haftara: II Samuel 6:14-16) is a positive example. Escapism through drugs or mystic trips is today's "eish zara" — fire of alienation; insightful elation through study, worship and deed is the "eish tamid" — fire of persistence.*

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JOY AND FRIVOLITY are worlds apart; divided, however, by a very thin borderline. In Judaism, joy is the core of religious devotion, essence of earnest worship, source of human strength, backbone of good living. To serve God "with joyfulness and gladness of heart" (Deut. 28:47) is a high goal; to fail to do so, a sorrowful shame. To "rejoice before the Lord (ibid. 12:12) is a sacred duty; to celebrate the marvel of life, the most valued mode of clinging to God. True joy is revealed in dignity, composed with serenity and sobriety, tempered with awe and reverence; remaining far from hilarity and vulgarity. The fence, however, separating sincere joy from base gaiety and trivial joviality is fragile indeed. The holy flame of enthusiasm may descend into an unholy, "alien fire" (Lev. 10:1). Also, ecstatic joy may appear as coarse clownishness: David's gestures of joyous exhilaration, when he "leaped and danced before the Lord" with consummate abandon and vigor, were not appreciated at all by his wife Michal who deemed them an embarrassing exhibition (II Sam.6:16). The thin line between the sublime and the grotesque in human joy must neither be trespassed nor misunderstood.

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ENTHUSIASM, *HITLAHAVUT*, is emotional "fire"--*esh*. Like physical fire, it must be contained and controlled. Integrated into a person's total experience, while he is fully cognizant of reality and duty, this "fire" is constructive and enriching. Otherwise, if he ignores the limits and rules of nature and society, his unleashed "fire" may become destructive and consuming.

The "foreign fire," *esh-zara*, offered by Aaron's sons (Leviticus 10:1), symbolizes deviant and misused enthusiasm. The "constant fire," *esh-tamid*, burning in the Temple (6:6), symbolizes disciplined and enriching enthusiasm. Emotional fervor induced from without—either by drugs or by mystic experience—is a form of "*esh-zara*," fire of alienation and escapism. Genuine, constant, and normative fervor—kindled by Torah study, worship and good deeds—is the sacred "*esh-tamid*," fire of enlightenment and persistence.

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ENTHUSIASM (*hitlahavut*), emotional "fire" (*esh*), must be contained and controlled. Integrated into a person's total experience, while he remains involved in and cognizant of reality and duty, this "fire" is constructive and enriching. It provides light and heat.

Otherwise, when it is unleashed; when it leads to the violation of the rules of nature and society, this "fire" is destructive and consuming. The former "fire" is symbolized by the "foreign fire" (*esh-zara*) of Aaron's sons (Leviticus 10:1); the latter by the "constant fire" (*esh-tamid*) in the Temple (6:6).

Induced from without (chemically or psychologically) emotional fervor becomes "*esh-zara*"—fire of alienation and escapism. But emerging from within, kindled by study, worship and good deeds, it becomes "*esh-tamid*"—fire of stability and endurance.

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK: *The topic of kashrut (rules of proper food) is handled in the sidra in much detail. The core of kashrut is the Torah's concept of Kedusha (holiness). Each person is called to sublimate and elevate his thoughts and behavior to a level of significance and distinction. All aspects of human experience are within the realm of true worship to God. Only through the real needs and concerns of man can the real service to God be expressed. In Judaism, to eat in order to keep the body in good health is in itself a mitzva, following the ways of God (Maimonides, De'ot 4:1).*

All functions of human physiology are, in Torah's view, holy elements in man's way to God. "Man's home is as a temple; his table — as an altar," says the Talmud. The details of kashrut are given as "hok," an order without apparent reason. By adhering to kashrut, man elevates the act of eating from a natural way of sustaining his body and gratifying his appetite to a religious gesture of cleavage to God. Thus, an act of nourishment becomes a deed of worship, a human response to the mystery and glory of Divine design.

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KASHRUT is rooted in Torah's concept of kedusha (holiness). Man is called to sublimate and elevate his thoughts and behavior to a level of significance and sanctity. All aspects of man's experience, his needs and concerns, are within the realm of worship to God. In Torah's view, all functions of human physiology are holy elements in man's way to God: "Man's home is as a temple; his table, as an altar" (Talmud). To eat in order to keep the body in good health is in itself a mitzvah, following the ways of God (Maimonides). The details of kashrut are given as hok, an order without apparent reason. By adhering to kashrut, man elevates the act of eating from a natural way of sustaining his body and gratifying his appetite to a religious gesture of cleavage to God. An act of nourishment becomes a deed of worship--a human response to the mystery and glory of Divine design.

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KASHRUT (Jewish dietary law) is rooted not in human notions of hygiene, but in Torah's concept of *Kedusha* (holiness)—that the Jew must sanctify his life and distinguish himself even as he is involved in mundane and physical pursuits. This idea is poignantly pointed out by the Sages: "What does it matter to God if the animal is slaughtered one way or another?" But the rules of Kashrut, as all other Torah precepts, primarily aim to refine and enhance human personality and conduct. From a purely natural-biological point of view, so emphasize our Sages, there is nothing inherently wrong in non-kosher foods. A Jew is ordained to reject them not because they are detestable or unhealthy but because the divine law is supreme: "Don't say 'I can't stand pork!' for even if you can, you still must not eat it, in adherence to the supernal laws of Torah." Nonetheless, the Sages insist that eating non-kosher food is spiritually detrimental to a Jew's well-being. Not because of the flawed food as such, but because of the individual's disregard. A Jew is taught to eat with a sense of his unique sanctity and distinction.