TAKING OUT THE GARBAGE
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First let me just say again how lovely it is to be with Our Cantorial Soloist Emerita, Naomi on the bema again. With the start of the pandemic nearly 2 years ago to the day, we have only done a handful of services together over the past 2 years and its wonderfully familiar and comforting in all the upheaval in our lives these days to share the Shabbat with you again this weekend. Welcome home.

I am also grateful that both Rabbi Brown and Cantor Cohen were able to take this shabbat off, next weekend of course is the Bat Mitzvah of Yael Gardner, Rabbi Brown and Gregg Gardner's daughter – I know first-hand, as many of you do how stressful these last few days before such an important family and community event can be and I glad they can have this time to prepare.

In two weeks, I will begin my rabbinical sabbatical and be away from the shul for three months. As I think you know, being a clergy person even pre-pandemic is 24/7 – and has felt like more than that over these last two years. It has for many, in all lines of work and service. I truly think that everyone needs a sabbatical; and I am deeply grateful to our congregation for providing me some time to study and refresh my soul. One shabbat off will not compensate Cantor Cohen or Rabbi Brown for the extra burden they will bare while I am away, but again, thank you to Cantor Taussig for making this weekend possible for Cantor Cohen and Kylynn; a calm before the storm kinda thing.

Tomorrow morning, we will make the 100th anniversary of Judy Kaplan's Bat Mitzvah, the first Bat Mitzvah in recorded Jewish history. We have invited all of those who celebrated a Bat Mitzvah as an adult to join us for the service and a few special torah blessings. I will talk in detail about the significance and transformative impact of that historic moment in Jewish communal life tomorrow and I hope you will join us or tune in.

This evening I want to share a simple insight from this week's Torah Portion, Parashat Tzav. Simple, not because the parasha doesn't contain deep and complex teaching, but simple in the very nature of what the parasha is instructing us to do; complex in actually having the character and humility to follow the commandment that is being proscribed.

In the reading for tomorrow we are told in intricate and at times nauseating detail about all of the steps and rituals involved in the sacrifices performed by the Aaron, the High Priest — the Kohen Gadol.

So important was this role that it is second only to Moses in the hierarchy of Jewish leadership at the time of the biblical exodus. The High Priest is responsible for all of the holiest of spiritual matters of the People. He wears special garments — beautiful robes and accouterments that no one else is allowed to wear. He convenes and officiates over all the religious gatherings. So

important and elevate in status above the k'hal, the community is the Kohen Gadol that he is the only one who is permitted entry to the Holy of Holies, and then only on Yom Kippur, where he carries the prayers of the People and beseeches God directly on their behalf.

The High Priest is the one who directs the sacrifices, distributes the wealth of the Mishkan. He is, more integral than even Moses to spiritual and ritual life of the Jewish people.

In a word, he is a big shot, in another word he is a macher!

So it might come as a surprise, that in tomorrow's reading we learn that the High Priest — not one of the junior Kohanim, not one of the Levites, not anyone else but only the High Priest is instructed to change out of his royal priestly clothes and take out the garbage!

Specifically, the torah commands him to scoop up the ashes and leftovers from the Sacrifices — the gross and smelly, slimy and dirty remnants of what is left after thousands of sheep, bulls, goats, grain, and everything is slaughtered and burned up on the alter. The high priest is commanded clean it up and take it all out of the Mishkan, the tent of meeting. Presumably to the biblical equivalent of the compost bin.

Moreover, the High Priest has to do it HIMSELF. He cannot delegate the responsibility.

Our sages are unanimous that this was a deliberately humbling experience for the person who is supposed to be the "Holiest" person in the whole Nation; and they reason that it was deliberately humbling so that the High Priest never becomes arrogant — so that can understand that he is really a human being like everyone else. (Jerusalem Talmud, Mesechte Shabbat).

Even though he has an important job, maybe THE most important job, he is still a human being and a member of the community. The only difference is that he has a special Mitzvah, just like we all have mitzvot. But he is commanded to take out the trash to remind him that his special robs and role does not make him anything different. The Kohen Gadol, and perhaps more importantly, the rest of the community that watches him perform this odious task, realize that all human beings regardless of social station or import are created B'tzelem Elohim, in the image of God, and it is therefore to God that ultimate respect and allegiance is due. The Kohen Gadol is but the messenger, a servant. His role is important, but he as a person is no more or less than anyone else.

There undoubtably many explanations for the many ruptures civility and decency in our society; and as I student of history I am well aware that every age thinks that the way people treat each other has only gotten worse, or never been worse than what they themselves see and experience. I am not convinced that our discourse and disrespect for each other is worse now than it was back then, whenever then was. But I am fairly certain that whenever there is a lack of menschlekite at its root is a hyper inflated sense of self-importance.

In fact our rabbis drawing from this lesson of never be to self-important to take out the garbage make exactly this point in one of the most important teaching in the Mishnah. The great sage Hillel taught, “b’makom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l’hiot ish.” (Pirkei Avot 2:6) Which means: in a place where no one behaves like a human being, we must strive to be human.

You might think that striving to be human is to set the bar too low. That when people are behaving badly we should strive to be a superhero, a saint, a symbolic example of all that is good and right with humanity. But Hillel doesn’t say that, he says, hishtadel l’hiot ish. Literally, strive to be a person. Not more than everyone around, and not degenerate to the level of those that are acting without humanity; but rather be a person.

In many languages, when we say “well, he’s only human” it bespeaks frailty and weakness. But in Yiddish, when we say she’s a mensch, it is the best thing we can say. The word mensch, as its German root teaches, simply means "human." To be fully human is a quality for which we aspire. For to be true to our humanity means to be civil, thoughtful and treat others as we would like to be treated. Be a human being; no more, no less.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim another great Talmudic sage taught, and I have shared with you many times before that a person should carrying two verses in your pockets every day. On one should be written the verse, “For my sake the world was created,” while on the other should be written the verse, “I am but dust and ashes.”

When I teach that verse, I often focus on the challenge of finding the balance between the two, when to reach into one pocket, when to reach into the other; how to hold both. But what gets lost in that search for balance is the power of being reminded that organically we are but dust and ashes; what we do; the contributions we make are elevating, even celebratory but we are still no more, no less than human.

Not only is it not beneath the Kohen Gadol to take out the garbage, its actually spiritually elevating. A line of argument I might suggest the next time someone asks you to do the same. Or better yet, the internal voice in our head we need to say to ourselves upon seeing the garbage can full, the sink over flowing or the laundry piling up.

Take out the trash – it’s a mitzvah!